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DETAILED NEWS

Bangladesh arrest underlines continued jihadist threat

PRAVEEN SWAMI

Little evidence exists to support claims that a Bangladeshi jihadist held in Dhaka on Monday was involved in the 1999 hijacking of an Indian Airlines flight to Kandahar, highly placed police sources told The Hindu. But the sources said Jamaat ul-Mujahideen-linked Belal Hosain's arrest underlined concerns over the regrouping of jihadist groups, despite suffering losses due to a determined joint offensive by India and Bangladesh.

Hosain was held, along with Bangladesh nationals Mohammad Imazuddin, Sadek Hossain and Abu Naser Munshi, on the charge of plotting terror attacks under the leadership of Karachi-based Jaish-e-Mohammad operative Rizwan Ahmad. Few details were made available on the plot, but intelligence sources told The Hindu the five men were at an advanced stage of planning strikes in India.

Bangladesh's crack counter-terrorist Rapid Action Battalion says Hosain claimed, during interrogation that he had inside knowledge of the plot to hijack Indian Airlines flight IC814 — an operation carried out to secure the freedom of jailed jihadist leader Maulana Masood Azhar Alvi, then held in a Jammu prison.

Documents filed by the Central Bureau of Investigations in a New Delhi court in 2000, however, show that while Dhaka was used as a staging post by the hijackers, no Bangladeshi was involved in the hijacking.

In September 1999, the CBI said the hijackers finalised their plans at a flat in Dhaka's Subzi Mandi area. There, Ibrahim Athar Alvi, Masood Azhar's brother, briefed the team about their plans to use loose security at the Kathmandu airport to stage the hijacking. From Dhaka, members of the team travelled to India, where they arranged for the fake Indian documentation they used to board the Kathmandu-Delhi flight.

Unclear Link to IC814

Hosain, intelligence sources told The Hindu, first claimed he had knowledge of the IC814 hijacking when he was questioned by the police in Guwahati days after the hijacking. Hosain was held by the police in West Bengal in the late 1999, on the charge of trafficking weapons and explosives across the India-Bangladesh border. He was then transferred to the custody of Guwahati's Pan Bazaar police station, where he was wanted in connection with similar, but separate, charges.

The police were unable to find any corroboration for Hosain's claims at the time. The Bangladeshi jihadist was then tried on multiple criminal charges, and began serving an eight-year sentence in 2000. He returned to Bangladesh at the end of his sentence. Hosain, police sources said, made multiple attempts to make contact with local intelligence officers through 2009, but his offerings were deemed unreliable.

Resurgent Jihad

Key to the future of the jihadist movement in Bangladesh is the Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen, or JMB, which seeks to establish an Islamic state in the country.

Ever since August 2004, when the JMB staged 500 simultaneous bombings in all but one of Bangladesh's 64 districts, hundreds of JMB cadre were arrested and their original leadership council executed. But the JMB's links to the Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish remain robust.

Saudi Arabia-educated seminarian Sheikh Abdur Rahman founded the JMB in 1998. Son of a prominent Islamist cleric, Rahman began his political career in the Jamaat-e-Islami, but lost faith in its claims to be working for a revolution through democratic means.

In 1995, he joined the Harkat ul-Jihad-e-Islami Bangladesh, a group formed by jihadists, who fought against the erstwhile Soviet Union in Afghanistan. Soon, though, he fell out with the HuJI on theological grounds.

Early in 1998, Rahman was introduced to Abdul Karim 'Tunda,' a Pilkhuwa, Haryana-origin Unani doctor, who was among the co-founders of the jihadist movement in India. Karim arranged for Rahman to meet with the top leadership of the Lashkar in Pakistan, including its chief Hafiz Mohammad Saeed. Rahman was trained at Lashkar camps in Pakistan, before he returned home to found the JMB in 1998.

Political patronage from supporters linked to the former Bangladesh Prime Minister, Khalida Zia's Bangladesh National Party gave the JMB access to substantial resources. More funds were made available by Islamist sympathisers in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Brunei, Sudan and Pakistan. The United Kingdom-based group al-Muhajiroun — linked to the men who bombed the London underground train system in July, 2005 — is believed to have provided the JMB £10,000.

Interestingly, Hosain is thought to have been involved in raising funds for the JMB by running weapons between Malda and Bangladesh — the enterprise, which led to his arrest.

JMB operatives bombed cinema halls and folk theatre performances in 2002, killing 30 people in attacks intended to cripple the secular cultural expression.

It attempted to assassinate progressive writer Humayun Azad two years later and planned to kill Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus and writer Taslima Nasreen.

Many members of the JMB's current shura, or leadership council — among them, Dhaka area chief Mohammad Mahfouz, military chief Najmul Shahid and information technology head Mohammad Sayem — are now thought to be working closely with the Lashkar and Jaish. Late last year, the police in Bangladesh disrupted a Lashkar-led plan to attack the diplomatic missions of the United States and India in Dhaka.

Correction

The JMB staged 500 simultaneous bombings in all but one of Bangladesh's 64 districts in August 2005. The tenth paragraph of the above report "Bangladesh arrest underlines continued jihadist threat" (March 3, 2010) gave the year as August 2004.

Dhaka: Bangladesh on Wednesday launched a massive Rs 232 crore project to construct 45 high-rise buildings to rehabilitate thousands of "stranded Pakistanis" living in squalid refugee camps for nearly four decades.

Under the project, 38,667 stranded Pakistani families residing at the city's Mohammadpur area would get permanent housing as decades of negotiations yielded little results for their repatriation, the private 'Bdnews24' reported.

Quoting officials, the report said the Taka 350 crore (Rs 231.8 crore) Dhaka City Corporation project is aimed at building the accommodations over 15 acres of land in six camps at Mohammadpur refugee area widely called 'Geneva Camp'.

Local Government Minister Syed Ashraful Islam gave various directives for speedy finalisation of the project, which was recently approved by the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (ECNEC).

Each flat will have two bedrooms, a toilet, a dining room, a kitchen, a veranda and a corridor. Each building will have two elevators and two staircases.

The ground floor will be left vacant for use as education institutions, mosques, markets or community spaces, the report said.

After years of negotiations, several thousand refugees were repatriated, but the rest multiplied, living mostly in shanties at different parts of the country while Dhaka constantly asked Islamabad to take them back. PM reiterates Govt stand on talks

NEW DELHI, March 5 – Reiterating the Centre's stand, Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh said that the Government is ready to talk to any group that abjures violence unconditionally and agrees to abide by the due Constitutional process.

The Prime Minister's statement that came while replying to the President's address in the Lok Sabha, assumes significance in face of the ongoing peace dialogue with several militant outfits including NSCN (I-M), which are demanding sovereignty.

The Naga militant outfit has come under attack of rival militant outfits for allegedly dropping the prime demand. Interestingly, in the President's debate a Congress MP from Manipur opposed the demand of the I-M for integration of Naga inhabited areas.

“The security forces have achieved several notable successes of late. While we are determined to take firm action, we are ready to talk to any group that abjures violence unconditionally and agrees to abide by the due constitutional process,” said Dr Singh.

The reiteration of the known stand of the Centre that it was willing to talk to any group that abjures violence may also be a signal to a section of ULFA leaders, who are currently in government custody. Dr Singh though did not name any outfit but merely stated Centre’s position.

Significantly the Prime Minister praised Dhaka’s action to end the activities of the militants. “The Government of Bangladesh has reassured us that they will not allow their territory to be used for activities inimical to India. We have welcomed some of the steps they have recently taken in this direction,” he said.

On Bangladesh, the Prime Minister said India has taken several steps to diversify and broad base its relations with Dhaka.

A major milestone was the visit of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to India in January. “During that visit we put in place a comprehensive framework of cooperation for development of our ties, which includes a renewed commitment by both sides to actively cooperate on security issues,” he said.

“We have provided a line of credit of US dollars 1 billion for a range of projects in Bangladesh, which we intend to follow up vigorously.

Without referring to the controversies surrounding China, Dr Singh said the country is an important neighbour, with whom India has a comprehensive and multi-sectoral relationship. But Dr Singh observed that resolution of the boundary issue might take time.

“We are both committed at the highest level to maintain peace and tranquillity on the border, pending the resolution of the border question. This is a complex matter, which will take time to resolve,” he opined.

“We wish to build upon the achievements so far so as to create a partnership that is mutually beneficial. We are convinced that good relations with China are in the interests of both countries and will contribute to the peace, security and stability not only of the Asia-Pacific region but also of the world,” he said.

Meanwhile, Dr Thokchom Meinya MP representing Inner Manipur participating in the discussion in Lok Sabha said that while they encourage the on-going effort of the Union Government to find a negotiated settlement of the vexed Naga issues,

Hasina for speedy implementation of Delhi meeting decisions

Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has asked top bureaucrats to expedite implementation of the decisions reached at the meeting with her Indian counterpart Manmohan Singh during her visit to Delhi in January this year.

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The New Age newspaper quoting officials at the Prime Minister's Office said the directive came at a meeting of the secretaries of the relevant ministries in which the top bureaucrats were also asked to prepare progress reports on implementation status.

Improving road connectivity with India, allowing water transit through Ashuganj port, power trade, providing loans pledged by New Delhi and duty-free access of Bangladeshi commodities to Indian market were the key areas covered by the joint communique issued by Hasina and Singh.

The Prime Minister's economic affairs adviser Mashiur Rahman chaired the meeting during which he conveyed to them Hasina's directives, asking the bureaucrats to undertake maximum efforts to implement the decisions and sit with each other to work out ways to remove hurdles.

Official familiar with the meeting said a tripartite or four-party meeting involving Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Bhutan was likely to be organised to make arrangement for direct transport services.

"Such a meeting can pave the way for understanding and working out a modality for introduction of something like direct bus services. Bangladesh or Bhutan can convince India to agree to transit for the land-locked Himalayan state," said an official.

The official said that the economic relations division had been asked to contact the Indian side about how Bangladesh could receive a \$100 million loan pledged by India.

The Shipping Ministry has been asked to prepare its report on use of Ashuganj port for transport of Indian goods as per the communique.

Currently, a joint team is assessing the state of infrastructure on the spot for transport of 'over dimensional cargo' from Ashuganj to Agartala.

The meeting could not give any directives on duty-free access of 47 Bangladeshi items to Indian market.

However, denying having any such list, a source in the Commerce Ministry said Dhaka would now focus on reduction in the number

China to provide support in building digital Bangladesh

China will provide all out support for communication and socio economic development to build a digital Bangladesh.

The assurance came while visiting Vice Minister of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Liu Jieyi paid a courtesy call on Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at her official residence Jamuna here yesterday.

After the meeting, PM's Press Secretary Abul Kalam Azad told journalists that, apart from different issues related to trade and commerce and mutual interests of the two countries, the two leaders also discussed various issues related to the upcoming China visit of Hasina.

The PM is scheduled to visit China on March 17, he said.

Appreciating the scheduled visit, the CPC leader said the people of his country are waiting to welcome the Bangladesh premier.

Expressing his gratitude, the Chinese leader lauded the role of Hasina in further strengthening the friendly and economic relations between the two countries.

Liu also lauded Bangladesh PM's programmes for building digital Bangladesh.

During the meeting, the PM sought expertise and technical support to build digital Bangladesh and the CPC vice minister responded positively to Hasina's call.

Hasina praised the Chinese contribution to the development of road and railway communication in Bangladesh and requested the communist party leader to continue the support.

The issue of road links between Bangladesh and China via Myanmar figured prominently during the discussion.

Recalling the China visit of the Father of Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Bangladesh visit of former Chinese premier Chou En Lai, they said foundation of friendship of the two countries was laid in their visits.

The CPC vice minister apprised the PM that China is keen to see the Saarc as a more strong organisation.

Referring to the recent China visit of LGRD and Cooperatives Minister Syed Ashraf Islam, Hasina said the people to people contact between the two countries is very effective in further strengthening the relations between Dhaka and Beijing.

LGRD Minister Syed Ashraf Islam, Communication Minister Syed Abul Hossain, Ambassador-at-large M Ziauddin, PM's Office Secretary Mollah Waheeduzzaman and Chinese Ambassador to Bangladesh Zhang Xianyi were also present

Central Bank Of Bangladesh Seeks \$257 Million From World Bank

Dhaka, Bangladesh (AHN) - The central bank of Bangladesh is seeking US\$257 million from the World Bank to provide re-financing for infrastructure development in six sectors. Bangladesh Bank (BB), the country's central bank, will disburse the fund as an implementing agency through its Investment Promotion and Financing Facility (IPFF) project, officials told AHN Media on Tuesday.

"We're now negotiating with the World Bank for the fund," a BB senior official said, adding that the final negotiation would be held in Dhaka by the third week of March.

The sectors, which have already been identified for financing under the IPFF, are power generation including captive power plant, port development including internal container terminal, environment, highways and expressways, airports and water supply and distribution.

In 2007, the central bank launched the five-year-term IPFF project with a \$50 million fund provided by the World Bank through a public-private participation process.

"Almost 97 percent of the fund has so far been utilized for financing seven power plants, which have been able to add 178 megawatts power to our national gridline," the BB official noted.

PM PLEDGES TO BUILD DIGITAL BANGLADESH BY 2021

DHAKA, March 4 (NNN-BSS) — Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina inaugurated the first-ever Digital Innovation Fair-2010 at Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Novo Theatre this morning with a pledge to build Digital Bangladesh by 2021 when the nation would celebrate golden jubilee of its independence and the birth centenary of the Father of the Nation.

"Once we attain Digital Bangladesh, all utility services like payment of different utility services bill, purchasing rail ticket through mobile phones, taking health services from upazila doctors at villages and providing important information about life and livelihood from the union parishads through internet would be at the door steps of the people", she said.

The Prime Minister said we could attain the objective of building digital nation by developing human resources through modern technologies, implicating people with government activities, reaching services at the door steps of common people and enhancing production by higher technologies. She said the main objective of the fair is to highlight the initiatives undertaken by different ministries and departments to reach the government services to the doorsteps of the people speedily, easily and at a low cost.

Referring to her party's election pledges, Sheikh Hasina said to fulfill our commitments to build a happy and prosperous nation, we have chosen information technology as tools for

bringing the "Charter of Change"

The prime minister said "We want to ensure good governance, transparency and accountability of the government by utilizing information technology".

"We want people would no more move from corridor to corridor of public offices for getting services, rather services would always be available to their doorsteps", she said.

The Prime Minister said for attaining Digital Bangladesh, we need change in our mental make-up first. At the same time we have to find out how best we could make utilization of our limited resources by utilizing IT.

“I shall be happy if such innovation fairs are organized at divisional and district levels”, she said adding that she hopes the private sectors would extend their cooperations in this regard.

Presided over by Principal Secretary to Prime Minister M. Abdul Karim, the inaugural function was also addressed by Minister of State for Science and Information & Communication Technology Architect Yafez Osman, Resident Coordinator of UNDP, Bangladesh Renata Lok Dessallien and National Project Director A2I M Nazrul Isam Khan

The UNDP-funded Access to Information (A2I) Programme under the Prime Minister’s Office and the Science and ICT Ministry are jointly organizing the fair, where 102 stalls — 82 of different ministries and departments and 20 stalls of five non-government organizations were set up.

The fair will remain open for all from 10 am to 8 pm every day.

Besides the fair, seminars on different subjects have been arranged every day. Four awards will also be given for encouraging digital initiatives.

Mentioning her government’s vision to build a digital Bangladesh by 2021, the Prime Minister said her government wants to ensure transparency and accountability at all levels of administration towards building a corruption free society by using information technology.

Sheikh Hasina said four priorities have been identified of the vision of digital Bangladesh. These priorities are to build human resources, involving people in government’s activities, reaching its service to the doorsteps of people and increasing production in industry and farmlands by using the digital technology, she added.

Laying emphasis on changing mentality to adopt the technology in daily lives, she expressed the hope that the fair would play an important role in encouraging people to be familiar with the modern technology. In this context, she asked the authorities concerned to organize such fair in district and upazila levels involving local governments to this end. Listing her government’s endeavors, she said it has taken massive programmes to bring all union parishad offices under fibre optic network for introducing improved communications system in rural Bangladesh.

“Initially, 100 union parishad offices have been selected for connecting those with fibre optic network while more 1,000 union parishads would be brought under the network to this end within the next one year,” she said.

The Prime Minister said under the scheme all hospitals and schools would be brought under computer network to ensure health services of the people as well as making the country’s education system time befitting and modern one to cope with the present IT based world.

She said computer with wave camera and internet facilities has been provided to all upazila hospitals while 1,500 laptops were distributed among the country’s educational institutes so far towards fulfilling the government vision to make a digital Bangladesh by 2021.

Sheikh Hasina said her government will set up computer labs in all educational institutes in phases to this end. Computer labs have so far been set up in 128 upazila across the

country and this would be expanded up to all upazila in phases for connecting people with communications network.

Besides, she said Community E-Centre has been set up in five upazila of the country so far and in phases all upazila would be brought under the programmes gradually.

The Prime Minister said her government has already approved ICT Policy-2009 and formulated ICT Act-2009 to expedite the process in flourishing ICT industry in the country.

Elaborating her government's vision for expansion of IT across the country, she said it has taken a programme to set up "e-Centre for Rural Community" in 8,500 post offices in different nock and corners in Bangladesh.

She said steps have been taken to provide modern video conferencing facilities connecting cabinet, all 64 deputy commissioners, seven divisional commissioners offices with the

Prime Minister's office to facilitate communications among them.

The Prime Minister said necessary infrastructures are being built to set up Hi- Tech Park in Gazipur along with strengthening telecommunications network to bring the entire country into e-Governance.

Later, the Prime Minister inaugurated ticket selling activities of inter-city train of Bangladesh railway through mobile phone and went round of different stalls erected in the fair premises.

Minister, advisers to the Prime Minister, IT experts, representatives of development partners and high civil and military officials were present on the occasion.

Chittagong Hill Tracts group alleges atrocities by Bangladesh Army

he members of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) support group today organised a meeting in the city to protest against the atrocities meted out to them by the Bangladeshi Army.

Around 50 members of the CHT support group, Kolkata, assembled to highlight the plight of the community and garner support for their cause. They demanded withdrawal of Armed forces from the area.

The members said that the mere transfer of army officers Br Commander Gen MM Salehin of Khagarchari Brigade and Baghaihat army zone's commanding officer Lt Col Wasimul Haque for the killings between February 19 and 24, 2010, was not enough. The group claimed that apart from the killings, over 400 houses of the Jummas were burnt down, 200 tribals were displaced and one Buddhist temple and a church were also gutted down.

Mrinal Kanti Chakma, a member of the group, said that they had already submitted a petition to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to intervene in the matter.

"The CHT was certainly one of the side issues that were discussed when Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina visited India but no concrete stand was taken. Stability of the CHT region is not only important for Bangladesh but also for India," he said.

He added that the group would be submitting a petition to Hasina tomorrow on the issue. Their demands include getting proper land rights, implementation of the peace accord and some kind of constitutional provision to safeguard the rights of the accord.

Also present at the meeting along with the members of the CHT were activists Tarun Sanyal, Debabrata Bandopadhy and Sujato Bhadro. "We are thinking of submitting a memorandum to the Bangladesh High Commission regarding the matter so that the provisions of the peace accord can be implemented," said Bhadro.

Arrest warrant against sons of Bangladesh former premier issued

Dhaka - Two Dhaka courts on Monday issued arrest warrants for two exiled sons of Bangladesh's former prime minister Khaleda Zia on separate criminal charges, court officials said. Metropolitan Magistrate Mehedi Hasan Talukdar issued a warrant against Tarique Rahman, Zia's eldest son, in an extortion case filed in April 2007 during a military-backed interim government.

"The arrest warrant was issued as Tarique did not appear before the court as per schedule," a court official said. "No one submitted a petition on his behalf."

Tarique, a senior leader of the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party, has been living in London since September 2008.

Accused in 12 criminal cases, Tarique was arrested in March 2007 and was later released on bail before he left Dhaka.

In Monday's case, he was accused along with co-defendants of seeking to extort money from 2001 to 2003 from a construction company that had won a road-construction contract from the government.

In the case against his brother, senior metropolitan judge ANM Bashirullah issued an arrest warrant for Zia's youngest son, Arafat Rahman, in a tax-evasion case. The National Bureau of Revenue filed the new case against Arafat.

Jailed in corruption cases, Arafat was paroled for medical treatment in July 2008. Since then, he has been living in Bangkok.

Bharti may start tariff war in Bangladesh

Bharti Airtel has entered Bangladesh by buying Warid, the telecom operator with a 5% market share. But Grameenphone, the country's largest telco with about 45% market share, has warned that any attempt by the Indian operator to induce a price war there would have a disastrous impact on Bangladesh's telecom market. Grameenphone, in which Norway's Telenor has a majority stake, said that mobile tariffs in Bangladesh are the lowest in the world — even below that of India's — and further reductions cannot be sustained, especially by the smaller players in that market. Grameenphone's CEO Oddvar Hesjedal spoke to ET at the recently concluded Mobile World Congress in Barcelona. Excerpts:

What do you think of Bharti Airtel's entry into Bangladesh's telecom market?

We welcome competition. My fear is Bharti will attack the market on the price-front and send tariffs plunging as the company is too focused on grabbing market share. It may resort to this move regardless of how much it costs. It (Bharti) did this in Sri Lanka. That is good for subscribers, but not for the sector. Tariffs in Bangladesh are already the lowest in the world. All other factors have remained the same so tariffs cannot come down anymore. Grameenphone is the only

operator in Bangladesh that is profitable so far. If tariffs fall further, it will have a big impact on the profitability of other operators.

Will Grameenphone share infrastructure with Bharti in Bangladesh?

We are getting into infrastructure sharing with other operators. So far, Bharti has not approached us, but indications are that they are knocking on the door now. We are open to sharing our infrastructure with our competitors.

As Bangladesh's largest telco, how do you see the country's communication market, both short term and in the considerable future?

The telecom penetration in Bangladesh is about 33%. But this is SIM penetration and the real numbers will be between 24% and 27%. The total number of mobile users are expected to double in the next five years to 100 million. We are well placed to ride the growth as Grameenphone's networks cover 99% of the country's population and about 90% of the geographical area. Bangladesh is expected to come out with its 3G norms soon and its regulator is closely watching the scene in India. Telecom contributes about 8% of the country's GDP and of this, Grameenphone's contribution is more than 50%.

In Bangladesh, the 3G auction may not be the best option, but, if the upcoming auctions in India fetch huge revenues, there will be sections in Bangladesh, who would demand us to adopt a similar process. The internet penetration through fixed lines is extremely low and is less than 1 million. We have about 2 million customers who use data and internet on their mobiles and about 50% of these are active users. Our market cap is 22% of the total value of all the companies listed on the Bangladesh exchange

Monks call on UN to stop attacks in Bangladesh

A group of Bangladeshi Buddhist monks have called on the United Nations to intervene and halt attacks on Buddhist communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts region of south-eastern Bangladesh, which borders both India and Myanmar.

They say attacks by Bengali Muslims and the Bangladesh military in late February have left at least two people dead, dozens injured, and still more missing after a village was set ablaze.

Speaking at a protest outside the United Nations in Bangkok, a member of the Bangladesh Jumma Buddhist Forum, Monk Arjun Chakma, said the Baghaichari massacre occurred in Chittagong Hill Tracts between February 19 and 23.

"The whole village was burned down by the military and the Bangladeshi Muslim. The illegal Muslim they try to grab our land and since in the long time the Bangladesh government try to clean the indigenous people and Bangladesh government try to make us Muslims but we are Buddhist people, we never want to come back into other religions," he said.

Monk Arjun Chakma showed reporters photographs taken of the scene of the attack. It included the destruction of a Buddha statue given to the community by Thailand.

"They put the fire into the village and all the village destroyed, right, you see. That person was shot by the military but he was taken to the medical treatment and the hospital but he is not alive now.... This is a military truck whom oppress the Jumma Buddhist people and this is the village burning down."

"We would like to request to the United Nations to take the action and to send news to the Bangladesh Prime Minister to end the military operation on Jumma indigenous people, stop the looting, stop the grabbing land, stop the human violence."

Rights group Amnesty international has called on the Bangladesh government to carry out an independent investigation into the attacks.

Amnesty says while government officials confirmed two deaths, local people feared at least six more Jumma indigenous people were killed on 20 February, but their bodies were not recovered.

Bangladesh: PM launches Saturday National Services Pilot Project,

Kurigram (Bangladesh) : Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is expected to launch the epoch-making National Service Pilot Project (NSPP) Saturday from Kurigram to fulfill another pre- election pledge of providing jobs to the country's unemployed youths.

The administration and concerned authorities have completed all preparations to launch the historical programme of providing jobs at the door steps and the people from all walks in the society are eagerly waiting for welcoming Sheikh Hasina in Kurigram.

The Prime Minister will formally launch the NSPP at Kurigram Government College ground in presence of the MPs, beneficiaries, elite, officials and common people and later address a public rally on a podium built on 124 feet long boat there.

As per the pre-election pledges, the present government launches first phase of the NSPP in all nine upazilas of Kurigram and five upazilas of Barguna districts from Saturday by providing jobs to 13,550 unemployed youths including men and women.

Preliminary works for expanding the programme have been continuing in Gopalganj district and the same will be launched throughout the country in the coming years to provide jobs to all unemployed youths with minimum SSC level qualifications.

Youth Development Department (YDD) sources in Kurigram told BSS that 32,554 youths with requisite qualifications in all nine upazilas were preliminarily identified as unemployed and 9,950 of them were selected primarily for the jobs.

The selected youths will be provided with three-month training on 10 trades and subjects, and for this, five- day training courses of 292 Master Trainers have already been completed at 31 venues in the district.

Similarly, after identifying 13,094 unemployed youths in all five upazilas of Barguna, 3,600 of them have been selected primarily for providing jobs after their three-month long training to be conducted by 138 trained Master Trainers.

The selected 13,550 youths of Kurigram and Barguna will get Taka 100 per day during their three-month training courses and later they will get Taka 200 wages after getting jobs primarily for two-year period in these respective districts.

Primary selections of the unemployed youths, aged between 18 and 35 years, have been conducted as per the concerned policies, senior officials in the administration said today.

While selecting the unemployed candidates, special emphasis were given on those who are crossing their age limits for government services, remaining unemployed for a long time and children of the Freedom Fighters or from the distressed families.

Besides, those who were left from the primary selection lists would be able to be enrolled later for getting jobs under the NSPP, the officials said.

The selected unemployed youths will get the three-month trainings on nation and character building activities, disaster management and social welfare works, basic knowledge, health and family planning, education and physical education, forestry and environment, agriculture, public security, law and order and services of the union and upazila parishads.

The training courses will be conducted using ten modules and a curriculum has already been worked out and the District Coordination Committees of the NSPP have been empowered for selecting other training subjects based on the local problems and needs.

After completion of the training courses, the unemployed youths will be appointed and attached to the different government departments, primary schools and other working places, primarily for a two year term.

Kurigram Deputy Commissioner M Asaduzzaman, Deputy Directors Shariful Islam of Kurigram and Mostaq Ahmed of Barguna of the YDD told that all preparations have already been completed for launching the NSPP by the Prime Minister tomorrow.

Kurigram district Awami League secretary and Member of Parliament Jafar Ali told BSS that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has highly honoured the Kurigram people by launching the epoch-making NSPP from Kurigram.

"The Kurigram people will remain grateful for ever to the Prime Minister, daughter of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and will further strengthen her hands in building a developed digital Bangladesh," he said.

Taslima Nasreen: Can She Return To Bangladesh Again

KARNATAKA, INDIA (GaeaTimes.com)- It seems that in the case of firebrand and radical writer **Taslima Nasreen**, there is no country for women. The writer who is known for her brave and straight forward mindset on religion and life has earned the wrath of extremist Muslim leaders who want to ensure that **she** does not return to her motherland, Bangladesh. Recently, the writer has come into spotlight as Karnataka is witnessing widespread protests over the publishing of one of her articles. The article named 'Pardah hai Pardah' has made the conservative lot see red and as a result incidents of sporadic protest and violence have been reported in Karnataka. Going by the way her articles and statements create controversy it remains a question whether the exiled writer **can ever return to Bangladesh.**

Massive communal protests over the publication of **Taslima Nasreen's** article in a newspaper broke out in Shimoga which is the hometown of chief minister BS Yeddyurappa. It has been reported that two people have died owing to the large scale violence and several others have sustained injuries. A lot of vehicles were burnt and many shopkeepers were forced to shut operations. The incident has made her aides and friends wonder **can she ever return to Bangladesh again.**

Karnataka Chief Minister, BS Yeddyurappa has made an appeal to the Muslim community to maintain peace and not resort violence. The controversial writer **Taslima Nasreen** has been staying in India and other countries for the last few years. The recent incident is another reason to make us think if **she can return to Bangladesh ever again.**

Bangladesh police arrest Facebook share tipster

DHAKA — A Dhaka-based Facebook stocks tipster with more than 10,000 followers has been arrested on charges of illegally manipulating Bangladesh's overheated stock exchange, police said Thursday.

Mahbub Sarwar, 26, a prolific blogger who provided online stock tips through the popular social networking site, will be charged with market manipulation, police spokesman Mohammad Sohel told AFP.

"His Facebook account has around 3,000 members and he has a number of blogs. We believe around 10,000 or more people have been acting on his tips for the last few months," Sohel said.

"His tips could trick thousands of people into buying certain shares on certain days," he said, adding that Sarwar would also be charged with providing market advice without a licence.

The self-styled stocks guru faces at least five years in jail as "his illegal tips have proved to have impact on the market and influenced trading," Securities and Exchange Commission spokesman Farhad Ahmed said.

The arrest was part of a crackdown on illegal online share advice.

"We'll arrest anyone found to have influenced trading illegally," Ahmed said, adding the SEC had been investigating Sarwar for months.

On his blog, Sarwar promised potential clients profits more than double the average on the Dhaka Stock Exchange -- which is on a bull run and up some 30 percent over the last two months.

Membership of his Facebook group costs up to 70 dollars a month and 350 dollars a year and he charged extra for individual tips.

He was also accused of running an unauthorised portfolio management services company -- advising clients on which investments to make -- for which he charged 20 percent of profits.

"We have never seen anything on this scale before, we have no idea how much money he has made," SEC executive director A.B.M. Tariqzaman, who led the investigation, told AFP.

Bangladesh's bourse, one of Asia's smallest, is vulnerable to manipulation and regulators have struggled to stop a slew of online scams, publicly warning investors in January of a rogue Facebook group providing bogus tips.

Although nearly 40 percent of Bangladeshis live on less than a dollar a day, Dhaka's share market has been one of the best performers in the world with the main index doubling since the middle of last year.

Experts have described the exchange as a "ticking bomb" as repeated attempts to cool the market's bull run this year failed. Tens of thousands of retail investors have poured in fresh funds every day.

Airtel Bangladesh gets new CEO Dhaka, Mar 1 (bdnews24.com) – Chris Tobit has taken over as the managing director and chief executive officer of Bangladesh operation of Bharti Airtel, which recently acquired 70 percent stake of Warid Telecom.

Tobit has been with the Indian telecom giant for over 11 years and has held several senior positions, including director of sales and operation, says a press release.

It adds Tobit helped Bharti Airtel in establishing its clear market leadership for mobility business in National Capital Region (NCR) of Delhi and Maharashtra areas and developing and consolidating world-class service standards in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka in India.

He represented Bharti at Singtel Alliance Partner taskforces.

Tobit is a strong believer in the fact that people make the vital difference between simple growth and enduring

Bangladesh militants remain dangerous

DHAKA (Reuters) - The militant Islamist group Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) remains active and dangerous, despite government efforts to crush it, an international monitoring group said.

A report from the International Crisis Group warned Bangladesh authorities against complacency after initial success against the militants, who launched a nationwide campaign of deadly bomb attacks in August 2005.

Six JMB leaders were arrested in 2006 and executed in 2007.

"In the past few years Bangladeshi security agencies have been relatively successful in getting at Islamist extremist groups to the extent that organisations like JMB are struggling to survive", said Michael Shaikh, Crisis Group's senior analyst for Asia.

"But JMB's resilience and recent involvement with foreign jihadis indicate that it is still bent on bringing down the state."

The report said JMB continued to recruit, train and raise funds, increasing the possibility of another attack.

A senior police officer told Reuters the authorities were aware of the JMB threat, but did not think the militants had enough strength to challenge the government or security forces.

"We are fully aware and ready to take on them," said the officer, who asked not to be named.

The JMB, which the government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina says is linked to the country's main Islamic political party Jamaat-e-Islami, is one of several militant groups operating in the country. Jamaat-e-Islami denies aiding violent groups.

International military music festival to promote peace begins today

Delhi, Mar 3 (ANI): To promote peace through music, New Delhi is all set to host military musicians and cultural troupes of six armies -- India, UK, Sri Lanka, France, Nepal and Bangladesh.

Buzz up!

Musicians in all world-class armies have played a pivotal role not only in high standards of ceremonial functions, but also in adding vigour to the daily routine of regimental life of a soldier.

The itinerary includes performances by world-class musicians of The Royal EME (UK), The French Army, The Sri Lankan Army, The Bangladesh Army and The Nepalese Army apart from bands of the Indian Army, the Indian Air Force and the Indian Navy.

The performances of these elite bands will commence with concert at the Purana Quila on March 3 followed by functions at Army Parade Ground, Delhi Cantt.

There will be presentations of Kalaipayattu, Khukri Dance, Lezium, Janch pathaka,

Bhangra and traditional dances from Ladakh and North East as well.

The elite 61 Cavalry, which is the only Cavalry Regiment in the world, will also carry out a cavalry display.

President Pratibha Devisingh Patil and Defence Minister AK Antony will grace the occasion while the best of the martial musicians will create symphony to the perfection.

The function will be open to public on March 5-6 at Army Parade Ground, Delhi Cantt.

The occasion is unique as it is for the first time that such a function is being hosted in the country. (ANI)

Bahrain Air to fly from Bangladesh

Budget carrier Bahrain Air is set to start flights from Bangladesh from March 17, officials said.

Initially, the airline will operate three flights from Dhaka and four from Chittagong to Bahrain every week, said Abdul Kader, chairman of Flight Link, the local representative of the carrier.

Bahrain Air, a privately owned national carrier in Bahrain, has decided to start Bangladesh operations as part of its move to net one million passengers by reaching new destinations this year, according to Flight Link.

With the entry of the airline, the number of low-cost carriers will reach four in Bangladesh after Air AsiaX, Air India Express and Air Arabia.

"The cost will be at least 25 percent less than that of other carriers," said Mahmudul Hasan Sohel, manager of Flight Link, the general sales agent of the airline in Bangladesh.

Bahrain Air was incorporated in Bahrain in July 2007. It is the first privately owned national carrier in the Gulf state with affordable fares in both premium and economy classes, and operates from Bahrain to several destinations, using a modern fleet of eight Airbus.

The airline carried some 750,000 passengers in 2009, around 200,000 less than its initial forecast, said Ibrahim Alhamer, the carrier's managing director, during Bahrain air show in January this year.

"Though there is growth, there is a lot of capacity being offered in the markets by start-ups and existing airlines adding more frequencies to protect their market share," Alhamer said.

He said Bahrain Air plans to add Dhaka and Chittagong in Bangladesh, and Istanbul in Turkey as new destinations in 2010, which would help the airline reach its one-million-passenger target.

Bahrain Air is a small regional airline that mostly competes with the country's national carrier, Gulf Air.

Bahrain is an important destination for Bangladeshi expatriate workers who remitted over \$157 million in fiscal 2008-09 and \$85 million in the first six months of the current fiscal year.

Bangladesh to construct houses for 'stranded Pakistanis'

Dhaka: Bangladesh on Wednesday launched a massive Rs 232 crore project to construct 45 high-rise buildings to rehabilitate thousands of "stranded Pakistanis" living in squalid refugee camps for nearly four decades. Under the project, 38,667 stranded Pakistani families residing at the city's Mohammadpur area would get permanent housing as decades of negotiations yielded little results for their repatriation, the private 'Bdnews24' reported. Quoting officials, the report said the Taka 350 crore (Rs 231.8 crore) Dhaka City Corporation project is aimed at building the accommodations over 15 acres of land in six camps at Mohammadpur refugee area widely called 'Geneva Camp'.

Local Government Minister Syed Ashrafur Islam gave various directives for speedy finalisation of the project, which was recently approved by the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (ECNEC).

Each flat will have two bedrooms, a toilet, a dining room, a kitchen, a veranda and a corridor. Each building will have two elevators and two staircases.

The ground floor will be left vacant for use as education institutions, mosques, markets or community spaces, the report said.

After years of negotiations, several thousand refugees were repatriated, but the rest multiplied, living mostly in shanties at different parts of the country while Dhaka constantly asked Islamabad to take them back. Bangladesh returns prisoners to Burmese border guards

Text of report by Bangladeshi privately-owned English newspaper New Age website on 5 Mar

Forty-eight Myanmar [Burmese] citizens were handed over to the Myanmar border guards Nasaka after a flag meeting between battalion commanders of both the countries in the Roads and Highways Department rest house at Teknaf [at Burmese border] Thursday morning.

The people handed over to the Myanmar authorities on the day were waiting for their return after the completion of their punishment in Cox's Bazar jail.

The 42 Rifles Battalion commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Mozammel Hossen, said the flag meeting was held in a friendly atmosphere. They discussed border problems, barbed-wire fencing along the Bangladesh-Myanmar border, influx of Rohingyas, smugglings and others issues.

The Bangladesh Rifles after the flag meeting handed over the Myanmar citizens to Nasaka. Bangladesh also handed over to Nasaka a list of five hundred Myanmar citizens who were pushed backed in six months.

Mozammel led a six-member Bangladesh side while U. Ching Youang, deputy director at the border immigration headquarters at Moundow led a six-member Myanmar side.

A friendly volleyball match was held at the Teknaf High School between the border guards of the two countries. Bangladesh beat Myanmar. **Bangladesh Dec inflation hits 15-month h**

Police banned form harassing unveiled women

BANGLADESH'S High Court has ordered police to stop harassing women who chose not to wear the full-face veil.

The order was in response to police officers who detained nine teenage couples found in "compromising positions" at a zoo in the northern town of Rangpur. The officers allegedly ordered the girls to wear the burqa, or niqab. Wearing the veil is not mandatory in Bangladesh, and the police action drew loud protests from women's rights groups, prompting lawyers to apply to the court for a ruling on the issue.

"The High Court ordered late Tuesday that if a girl or a woman does not wear a burqa, she cannot be harassed or humiliated by anyone," said Mahbub Shafiq, one of the petitioners.

Deputy attorney general Rajik al Jalil confirmed the ruling.

"A girl can only be arrested if there is a criminal case against her, not because of what she is wearing," he said.

A full investigation into the incident was also ordered by the court.

Bangladesh has the world's fourth-largest Muslim population. Islam is the state religion, although only a small - but visible - minority of the country's women wear the burqa.

Rangpur police chief Saleh Tanvir denied that police ordered girls to wear the burqa.

"We picked up nine couples, as they were found in compromising positions," he said.

"We took action after we received numerous complaints from people that they couldn't take their families to the zoo because of these couples."

He said the couples were released to their parents or guardians.

EU says Bangladesh must curb violence against Buddhists and Christians

The European Union has condemned last week's ethnic violence in Bangladesh.

A number of families have been displaced from the Chittagong Hill Tract area, which has a significant Buddhist population.

At least five people were killed and over twenty injured when a number of people from the Buddhist groups were targeted and their houses burned down.

Media reports say the army was called in after houses, a Christian church, and a pagoda were damaged and looted.

The EU has asked the Bangladesh government to investigate after eyewitness reports that the armed forces may have been involved.

Greening of the Bangladesh Prime Minister's Office

An interesting item published in the Independent referred to the setting up of a solar power and biogas plant at the Bangladesh Prime Minister's Office to generate around 20 to 21 kilowatt of power. The government had already made it mandatory to install solar panels on the rooftops of new hi-rise buildings. Obviously the widespread disappointment over the Copenhagen climate summit presents us with a new opportunity to rethink energy policy as the risk of electricity blackouts and gas shortages from the middle of the next decade are a possibility too tangible to ignore. To prevent this catastrophe, initiatives like the Prime Minister's are more important than expensive programmes we cannot afford. As solar energy is one of the cleanest and simplest forms of energy you can hope to find, this is a most laudable effort at encouraging green energy expansion. This renewable, easy to access and readily available source of energy is able to provide you with all of the fuel you need. There is no limit to what this type of energy can do for you. In the generations to come, more families and businesses will turn to solar power than ever before. When most people think about solar energy they think about the type of energy that people can harness. This can be done in many ways. Solar systems can convert your entire home's energy use to solar power. Using solar panels strategically placed to gain as much solar ray as possible, these sheets will store solar power. When you need the energy, such as when you need to heat your water or when you need to turn on your computer, the electricity comes from the stored solar power rather than from the conventional energy. As solar energy becomes more readily used in the home front, you are likely to see it used for just about any need. There are even solar converters available, which allow you to convert virtually any traditional electric system into solar. The Chairman of the parliamentary standing committee on power, energy and mineral resources ministry, Major General Subid Ali Bhuiyan, (Rtd) said (as) "It will never be possible to resolve the existing power crisis in the country using gas and coal. An alternative way has to be followed to overcome the crisis. As part of the search for an alternative way a combined initiative has been taken to generate power using solar energy

and biogas in the Prime Minister's office." Energy security is simply about being able to turn the lights on and keep warm. Given the link between oil prices and gas prices, the dependence on gas for electricity production and hence the link between oil prices and electricity prices, the cost of all forms of energy is likely to rise. This will push people to become more energy efficient. Besides the only way to combat climate change is to produce a clean, free energy and with winter coming to a close, the spectre of power shortage increases as the temperature rises. With the projected generation of power likely to be in the region of 3,800 - 4,000 mw, the generation of power will fluctuate depending on the supply of gas and judging from all the signs, there is little chance of improving the situation. Insiders say the newly installed system would supply electricity to three rooms of the Red Zone of PMO, lightening the burden on PDB's power supply. The move indicates that the government is heading towards promotion of green energy. The move also followed a government decision for establishing solar power units in all public and semi-government offices to promote expansion of renewable energy from the sun, wind, biomass, and biogas, with an aim to meet 5 percent of the country's total power demand by 2015, and 10 percent by 2020. At present, the contribution of renewable energy to overall power generation is less than one percent with solar power home systems installed mainly in off-grid areas, which is the current leading green energy generator in the country. PDB officials said installation of the solar power system at the PMO is only the beginning for a quick expansion of renewable energy technology to other government and semi-government offices. Those in the know said the newly installed system at the Prime Minister's Office would supply electricity to three rooms of the Red Zone of PMO, lightening the burden on PDB's power supply. Munawar Misbah Moin, managing director of Rahimafrooz Renewable Energy Ltd, a concern of Rahimafrooz Group said, we are extremely happy to be a part of the initiative. He said installation of the system has been a landmark in expansion of alternative energy technologies in the country and the move indicates that the government is heading towards promotion of green energy." Two years ago the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations adopted a survey presented in 1978 to the Committee on Science and Technology for Development, listing the on-going research and development in unconventional sources of energy. From the point of view of the developing countries, it is heartening to note that the "use of farm wastes to produce methane" (biogas) was also identified in the United Nations World Plan of Action for the Application of Science and Technology to Development. A biogas plant consists of two components: a digester and a gasholder. The digester is generally a cube-shaped or cylindrical waterproof container with an inlet into which the fermentable mixture is introduced in the form of a liquid slurry. The gasholder is normally an airproof steel container that, by floating like a ball on the fermentation mix, cuts off air to the digester and collects the gas generated. In one of the most widely used designs the gas holder is equipped with a gas outlet, while the digester is provided with an overflow pipe to lead the sludge out into a drainage pit. Raw materials can be obtained from a variety of sources - livestock and poultry waste, night soil, crop residues, food processing and paper waste and materials such as aquatic weeds, water hyacinth, filamentous algae, and seaweed. Residue from the agricultural sector such as spent straw, hay, cane trash, corn and plant stubble, and bagasse need to be shredded in order to facilitate their flow into the digester reactor as well as to increase the efficiency of

bacterial action. Succulent plant material yields more gas than dried matter does, and hence materials like brush and weeds need semi-drying. The storage of raw materials in a damp, confined space for over ten days initiates anaerobic bacterial action that, though causing some gas loss, reduces the time for the digester to become operational. Now that the country's single largest solar power system so far is operating if only on a trial basis, all that is left is its formal inauguration. Energy experts say the installation is indicative of the government's sincere intent to increase power generation through renewable sources at a time when conventional energy sources such as gas and coal are becoming scarce. Following the government's decision to establish solar power units in all public and semi-government offices to promote the expansion of renewable energy from the sun, wind, biomass, and biogas with the aim of meeting 5 percent of the country's total power demand by 2015, and 10 percent by 2020, it seems we are on the right track.

China builds 'international gateway' for trade with India, Bangladesh and Myanmar

BEIJING: China has set out to build what a senior Communist party leader described today as “an international gateway to South Asia”. The grandiose plan involves trade routes connecting India, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Nepal with three Chinese provinces.

Air China has just launched a direct flight between Chengdu in southwestern China with Bangalore. The 5-hour flight will operate twice a week. This is the first non-stop air link between western China and India. Bangalore has become the fourth Indian city after New Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata to have direct air links with China.

Bangladesh agrees to tri-nation gas pipeline

Bangladesh has lifted its opposition to a gas pipeline linking India and Myanmar and running through its territory, paving the way for the establishment of a regional gas grid that will feed India's growing energy hunger.

The approval by Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed's government comes as two other such pipeline projects involving India have become entangled in geopolitical knots.

Bangladesh's change of stance follows the ouster of the Begum Khaleda Zia regime, which has been succeeded by an administration friendlier to India. The neighbouring nation had been stonewalling the 900km pipeline, which will originate in Myanmar and pass through Bangladesh to India.

The assent was communicated to India during power secretary H.S. Brahma's visit to Bangladesh last month, which followed Sheikh Hasina's state visit in January.

“The energy adviser to the prime minister of Bangladesh, Tawfiq-e-Elahi Chowdhury, communicated its (Bangladesh's) willingness to be part of the pipeline project,” Brahma told Mint.

“We have to see what amount of gas reserves we are talking about. I am going to forward our report to MEA (ministry of external affairs),” he added.

Questions emailed to the embassy of Myanmar and Bangladesh’s high commission in New Delhi bounced back, while repeated attempts to contact the embassy and high commission yielded no results.

India has been seeking gas supplies from Myanmar and Bangladesh, both of which have significant reserves of the fuel.

Myanmar has gas reserves of 89.72 trillion cu. ft, of which 18.01 trillion cu. ft can be easily extracted. Bangladesh, on the other hand, has resisted calls until now for the export of natural gas—of which it has substantial reserves of 135.8 billion cu. m—to its larger neighbour, which needs supplies of the fuel for its projects.

India has recoverable natural gas reserves of 119.55 billion cu. m and produced 32,847 million cu. m in 2008-09.

“If the tri-nation pipeline happens, then there is a very strong possibility of the creation of a sub-regional gas grid,” said Anish De, chief executive at Mercados Asia, an energy consulting firm. “This is a huge statement and if carried out, will have massive social, political and economic ramifications.”

While India has been trying to get gas from blocks in Myanmar in which ONGC Videsh Ltd (OVL), the overseas arm of oil and gas explorer Oil and Natural Gas Corp. Ltd, and gas distributor GAIL (India) Ltd together hold a 30% stake, that country has decided to sell the fuel from the areas to China.

India’s cabinet committee on economic affairs in February approved the OVL and GAIL proposal to take stakes of 8.35% and 4.17%, respectively, in the pipeline being constructed by China National Petroleum Corp. (CNPC) to transport gas from the offshore blocks A-1 and A-3 to China.

This comes as Indian state-owned firms such as OVL are locked in fierce competition for energy assets with Chinese rivals including CNPC, Sinopec Corp. and China National Offshore Oil Corp. Ltd.

India was able to conclude several deals with Bangladesh and Myanmar in February.

State-owned NHPC Ltd signed an agreement with India’s ministry of external affairs last month to fund hydrological studies needed to develop the 1,200MW Tamanti hydroelectric power plant and a 642MW project on the Chindwin river, the largest tributary of the Irrawaddy, Myanmar’s key commercial waterway.

The Indian government last December also sanctioned a new 100km highway from Mizoram to the Myanmar border that would provide a road link to the Sittwe port in Myanmar that India is developing.

Bangladesh plans to set up two coal-fuelled power projects of 1,320MW each, one of which requiring an investment of around Rs6,600 crore will be offered to state-owned NTPC Ltd, India's largest power generation utility, to be developed in a joint venture with the Bangladesh Power Development Board. NTPC is also scouting for renovation and modernization and operation and maintenance opportunities in Bangladesh. In addition, a 250MW transmission interconnection between India and Bangladesh is being set up by Power Grid Corp. of India Ltd.

In a bid to facilitate bilateral trade, the commerce secretary level meeting between Nepal and Bangladesh will take place in Dhaka on March 30, according to media reports.

The two-day meet will also be zeroed in on establishing connectivity between the two countries under a proposed transit deal.

Further integration in sub-regional perspectives and mutual recognition of each other's testing and standardization certificates will also surface during the meeting, it is understood.

An official with the Bangladesh's Ministry of Commerce (MoC) was quoted as saying that the commerce secretaries of the two countries are expected to devise a strategy for the implementation of relevant clauses of the joint communiqué, signed by the premiers of India and Bangladesh at New Delhi in January.

A joint communiqué, co-signed by Indian Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh and his Bangladeshi counterpart Sheikh Hasina has assured of giving Nepal and Bhutan access to Mongla and Chittagong ports.

The prime ministers - in the joint communiqué - also agreed that Rohanpur-Singabad broad gauge railway link would be available for transit to Nepal.

"The upcoming secretary level meeting between Dhaka and Kathmandu will pave the way for implementation of commitments made by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina during her recent visit to New Delhi to boost the sub-regional integration on both trade and connectivity fronts," the Bangladesh Ministry of Commerce was quoted as saying.

Likewise, the two countries are likely to seal a deal on mutual recognition of standardization.

The trade talks to be held between the countries will also dwell on problems relating to loading and unloading of goods at zero point of the border.

Currently, Nepali trucks are not allowed to enter Bangladesh and they need to

load/unload at zero point of the border. Most of the traded goods of Nepal are carried via Banglabandha land port.

The volume of bilateral trade between the two countries is insignificant as it stands at \$60 million a year.

Bangladesh exported goods worth \$6.70 million to Nepal in 2008-2009. In a bid to facilitate bilateral trade, the commerce secretary level meeting between Nepal and Bangladesh will take place in Dhaka on March 30, according to media reports.

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The volume of bilateral trade between the two countries is insignificant as it stands at \$60 million a year.

Bangladesh exported goods worth \$6.70 million to Nepal in 2008-2009. In a bid to facilitate bilateral trade, the commerce secretary level meeting between Nepal and Bangladesh will take place in Dhaka on March 30, according to media reports.

The two-day meet will also be zeroed in on establishing connectivity between the two countries under a proposed transit deal.

Further integration in sub-regional perspectives and mutual recognition of each other's testing and standardization certificates will also surface during the meeting, it is understood.

An official with the Bangladesh's Ministry of Commerce (MoC) was quoted as saying that the commerce secretaries of the two countries are expected to devise a strategy for the implementation of relevant clauses of the joint communiqué, signed by the premiers of India and Bangladesh at New Delhi in January.

A joint communiqué, co-signed by Indian Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh and his Bangladeshi counterpart Sheikh Hasina has assured of giving Nepal and Bhutan access to Mongla and Chittagong ports.

The prime ministers - in the joint communiqué - also agreed that Rohanpur-Singabad broad gauge railway link would be available for transit to Nepal.

"The upcoming secretary level meeting between Dhaka and Kathmandu will pave the way for implementation of commitments made by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina during her recent visit to New Delhi to boost the sub-regional integration on both trade and connectivity fronts," the Bangladesh Ministry of Commerce was quoted as saying.

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US unveils \$210m feeding recipe for Bangladesh

The United States will launch a US\$210 million recipe for feeding the poorest and most vulnerable people in Bangladesh under a greater food-security agenda, reports UNB.

US Ambassador James F Moriarty unveiled the plan and the allocation at a national seminar on 'Impact of Food Security Programmes in Bangladesh' at a city hotel Thursday.

"Last July, President Obama (Barrack Obama) committed US\$1.0 billion a year to address global hunger and food security through his new Feed the Future Initiative. This year, through USAID, we will launch a 210 million US dollar programme to address food insecurity among the poorest and most vulnerable people in Bangladesh," he said.

The US envoy further announced that they would expand their investments in agriculture and health to work hand in hand with the government of Bangladesh and other development partners to meet food insecurity head-on and solve this problem once and for all.

Mentioning that Bangladesh has made tremendous progress in improving the food security of its people, he said, "We have witnessed remarkable gains in agriculture productivity, to the point where Bangladesh is now almost self-sufficient in rice."

Despite these successes, the US ambassador thinks that Bangladesh remains vulnerable to a variety of internal and external forces.

"There is still a great deal to be done to improve the economic status and standard of living, especially for the poorest and most disadvantaged," he said.

Jointly organised by the Local Government Division, LGRD Ministry and USAID, the seminar was also addressed by LGRD Minister Syed Ashraf Islam, Food and Disaster Management Minister M Abdur Razzak, Save the Children USA vice-president Diana Myers and Care Chief of Staff Joseph J Larocci. USAID Mission Director Denise Rollins made the welcome address.

Speaking on the occasion as the chief guest, LGRD Minister Ashraf Islam said Shouhardo (CARE) and Jibon-O-Jibika (Save the Children USA) programmes had successfully created significant impact on enhancing food security, serving socio-economic development, empowering women, developing good governance in social system, improving nutritional status and coping with disaster.

He also came up with his government's view that the NGOs, under the country's legal framework would operate independently within its rules and regulations and make objective contribution to socio-economic development of the country through innovative and effective projects and programmes.

The food minister said they needed to invest more to mitigate the plight of the poor. "For this we need support from the development partners."

Bangladesh banking talks commit to fighting poverty

DHAKA (Reuters) - Leaders of a world group on sustainable banking said on Saturday they had committed to building a different and positive financial future for the banking industry across the globe.

"Fighting poverty will remain the first priority for the banking sector in the foreseeable future," Fazle Hasan Abed, co-founder of the Global Alliance for Banking on Values (GABV), told reporters.

As the world grapples with a financial crisis, GABV, an independent network of 11 banks has been meeting in Bangladesh.

The alliance, which says it represents 7 million customers in 20 countries with a combined balance sheet of more than \$14 billion, said it supported the expansion of \$2 billion in lending to communities not served by banks and green projects around the world.

"Climate change is the other growing global threat that the banking industry has to commit itself to," said Abed, who is also chair of the BRAC, the world's largest non-government micro-financing agency.

The Dhaka meeting aims to raise \$250 million in new capital.

Bangladesh agrees for improved trade ties with N-E

Bangladesh has agreed to open its ports and improve trade relation with states of the North Eastern region.

Assam Industry Minister Pradyut Bordoloi today said this was stated by Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina when a delegation of the North East Industries Minister's Forum called on her in Dhaka last month.

Bordoloi, who was part of the team which included Industry ministers of the N E states and Meghalaya Chief Minister D D Lapang, said with the installation of a friendly government in the neighbouring country there were "bright chances of improving trade relations with Bangladesh and other South East Asian states."

Assuring the delegation that her government will consider opening of the Chittagong port to facilitate trade between the N E region and other South Asian countries, Hasina told them that she will take all steps to help movement of goods of the region through her country.

Tata Nano set to drive into Bangladesh, Lanka

Sindhu Bhattacharya / DNA

Wednesday, March 3, 2010 2:20 IST

Geneva: Tata Nano could enter neighbouring countries such as Sri Lanka and Bangladesh either this year or the next.

With trial production already commencing at Sanand (Gujarat), the company is evaluating options to export this model to nearby countries even as it prepares to launch the electric version of the car in Europe by 2013, vice chairman Ravi Kant said after showcasing the electric Nano at the Geneva Motor Show on Tuesday.

He also indicated a possible increase in the price of Nano cars to be sold after December.

"We are currently making the Nano at Uttarakhand where as such there is no impact of excise increase from the Budget. But margins have been impacted because parts supplies largely come from outside... We will take a call (on price hike). Our commitment to keep the Rs 1 lakh price was for the first lot (deliveries under which end in December) and we have kept that promise," Kant said.

He also pointed out that the company was considering both options — taking the allotment route for the second batch of Nano cars, which will roll out of Sanand or selling them (like any other car) in the open market.

The first car is expected to roll out of Sanand next month.

Bangladesh Invites Cooperation In Investment From Iran

Geneva, Switzerland (AHN) - Bangladesh Foreign Minister Dipu Moni met with Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki Monday to seek enhanced cooperation in the fields of trade, investment, energy, tourism, agriculture and transport. Moni mentioned the long traditional relationship between Bangladesh and Iran, especially in international organizations including the United Nations, Organization of the Islamic Conference, Non-Aligned Movement and Developing Eight Countries, a foreign ministry statement said.

She requested that Mottaki stop expulsions of Bangladeshi expatriate workers through the Iran-Pakistan border. Moni also asked that Iran declare amnesty for distressed workers so they could legalize their stay in Iran.

Both Bangladesh and Iran have been continuously supporting Palestinian statehood with Jerusalem as its capital, she added.

Power Tariff Goes up in Bangladesh

The domestic power tariff of four distribution companies—PDB, DPDC, DESCO and WZPDC—has been increased by 6.03, 6.99, 6.29 and 5.98 per cent respectively, effective from March 1.

The Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission (ERC) announced the new power tariff Tuesday at a press conference held at its headquarters—TCB Bhaban. ERC chairman Syed Yusuf Hossain addressed the press conference in presence of all members of the ERC.

The demand charge has also been increased from Tk 10 to Tk 12. The new service charge would be at Tk 6.0 for 1 phase in place of existing Tk 5.0 and it would be Tk 27 for the 3 phase, which was Tk 25. Except the agriculture sector, all other sectors including the industry would have new power tariff. The agriculture sector would continue to enjoy the special rate of Tk 1.93 per unit.

The domestic consumers of all four distribution companies would have to pay Tk 2.60 per unit in place of Tk 2.50 for consuming 1-100 Kwh power, which would be Tk 3.30 for the slab of 101-400 Kwh, which was Tk 3.15. For the above 400 Kwh slab the rate would be Tk 5.65 per unit in place Tk 5.25

The non-residential customers will not come under the new power regime. They will be charged on the basis of existing Tk 3.35 per unit.

The flat rate of the commercial enterprises would be Tk 5.58 per unit in place of Tk 5.30.

The off-peak power tariff for the commercial organisation would Tk 4.05 in place of Tk 3.80. During the peak hours the power tariff would be Tk 8.45 in place of Tk 8.20

The ERC chairman while announcing the new power tariff said that the cost factor of all distribution companies and the affordable capacity of the power consumers were

considered while recommending the tariff regime. He, however, admitted that the impact on the market was not considered while deciding in favour power tariff hike. He also said that analyzing the market situation was not within their domain. The entrusted government organisation would per form this responsibility.

ERC member Mokhlesur Rahman Khandaker, however, said that there would be impact on the market situation due to increase of the power tariff but that impact should have to be little.

The financial strength of the distribution companies would be consolidated with the increase of the power tariff. The PDB would earn additional Tk 114 crore per year, which would be Tk 132 crore for the Dhaka Power Supply Company (DPDC). The additional earning of the Dhaka Electric Supply Company would be Tk 57 crore per year and it would be Tk 26 crore for the West Zone Power Distribution Company (WZPDC). The ERC chairman hoped that the distribution companies would utilized their additional for offering better services to the power cutomers

Income tax in Bangladesh and global trend

TO encourage investment and employment creation China has reduced corporate income tax rate at 25%-20% for smaller companies and 15% for high tech companies. India followed suit, proposing 25% tax rate on corporate income in its proposed new tax code, which is due to be effective from 211 subject to approval. Many countries are using income tax as an incentive to allure investment; both by reducing tax rate and simplifying the taxation laws.

In Bangladesh, tax rates on company profits are 45% to 42.5% for bank, insurance, mobile phone, financial companies. It is 37.7% for all other companies. The tax rate is 27.5% for publicly traded companies other than bank, insurance, mobile phone, financial companies.

Bangladesh company income is taxed twice, once tax is paid by the company on its profit, and then again it is slapped on the shareholders who receive dividends out of such profits at rates applicable on them. Companies are required to deduct income tax at 10% on dividends paid to its shareholders. Bangladesh tax rates rank among the highest in the world.

Some of the countries having low corporate income tax rates are as follows: Albania-10%, Brazil- 15%, Cambodia- 20%, Chile- 17%, China- 25%, Egypt- 20%, Germany-15%, India- proposed 25%, Indonesia- 28%, Iran- 25%, Ireland- 12.5%, Malaysia- 20% to 25% (20% small co.), Mexico- 28%, Pakistan- 20% for companies with turnover upto Rs. 250 million; above that 35%, the Philippines - 30%, Russian Federation- 20%, South Africa- 28%, Sri Lanka- 15% to 35%, Thailand- listed 20% - 25%, non-listed 20% - 30%, Turkey- 20%, the United Kingdom- 28%, small co. 21%, the United States- income upto \$50,000 at 15%, maximum tax slab for income above \$18,333,333 at 35%, Vietnam- 25%.

Most countries including India & Pakistan are no longer taxing the corporate income twice; instead they impose additional dividend distribution tax on the company and keep dividends exempted for the shareholders.

Tax Incentive

Bangladesh exempts agriculture and worker remittance from income tax. And export incomes are either exempted or taxed at a lower rate. The situation is same in other developing countries including India & Pakistan.

Simplification of tax laws

Most common tax law simplification is done through imposing a fixed percentage of income tax on sale (turnover) of goods or services and relieving the tax payers from the burden of filing of tax returns and from proving his declared profit or loss by producing books and records and involving in dispute and disagreement with tax department.

Traders, manufacturers and service providers deposit a fixed amount or a percentage of sales turnover, which is deemed final tax. It eliminates possibility of protracted legal battle between the tax department and tax payers. This is a great hardship on tax payers in terms of time & cost. It also increases government's cost of tax collection.

Presumptive fixed tax and no filing of tax return

Relevant tax laws require a predetermined percentage as tax at source from payment by the payer. This is effective for every conceivable area, such as salary to employees, rent to landlords, payment to contractors, import/ sale of goods & services, payment of interest and/or dividends, business of a particular type or payment for a particular goods or services so on. When such tax is already deducted and paid and the person has no other untaxed income, he is no longer required to file a tax return and go through tax assessment process. The return of deduction filed by tax deducting entity and deposit of tax is deemed sufficient; if the person from whom it is deducted has no other earning.

Bangladesh tax laws have wide provision for such tax withholding at source and in many cases to deem the same as final payment of tax.

Argentina, Egypt, Japan, Korea, Pakistan and many others do not require tax return filing for salary income where tax has been withheld at source and employee has no other income. Also people whose entire income has been subjected to tax deduction at source do not require tax return filing; which is voluntary and not mandatory.

Minimum Alternate Tax (MAT)

Another way to overcome tax dispute is to impose a minimum tax. When a loss or very low income is shown, the taxpayer is required to pay a certain percentage of sale or assets

deployed. India in its new code proposed 0.25% on assets of banks and 2% on assets of other companies. Pakistan tax code has the rate of 1.25% on sale. For small business and profession having turnover of less than ten million Indian Rupees, the new Indian Tax Code proposes a final income tax of 8% of the turnover.

All the above rules as to final tax keep no relation to profit or loss in the business; but an amount is collected based on assumed income. No doubt such procedure compromises with the principles of equity; for the sake of convenience. Pakistan tax law has the same provision as Bangladesh, to pay income tax while registering car and as well every year while renewing it.

Tax year

Our tax law creates confusion in tagging assessment year (on which tax rate shall apply) for a particular income year. This is because businesses can choose their own accounting year. This confusion has been eliminated elsewhere by mandating only one income year. Both proposed Indian & Pakistan tax law provides financial year as the tax year removing confusions.

Tax treaty and Vietnam

Tax Treaties are signed between countries to provide a lower tax rate to businesses and person's income in the countries bound by treaty. Some countries are now lowering their own rates even lower than the treaties they signed, making treaties redundant. For instance, Vietnam has treaty with 49 countries. In its treaty with Bangladesh, tax rate on both interest and royalties is 15%. While the tax rate with most other treaty countries with Vietnam for both interest and royalties is 10% (5% in some cases). But Vietnam in its own tax law has reduced its tax rate on both interest and dividends to 5%, and tax on income from franchising/ royalties to 5% making all its tax treaties to scrap in this area. If treaty rates are higher than country rate, then the country rate prevail. Vietnam has made great strides towards attracting local and foreign investments.

New Indian Tax Code

India recently responded to the global trend. To simplify its tax laws and put tax rates with rest of the world India has proposed a new tax code. New Tax Code of India has the following features:

Corporate Tax Rate will be 25% for all companies.

Dividend distribution tax @10% is paid by the company on dividend paid and shareholders need not pay any further tax on dividends received by them. Companies will be able to write off entire capital investment in the first year. Losses can be carried forward for set off indefinitely.

Individual Tax: from Indian Rupees 1.6 lac to 10 lacs (US\$20,752) 10%, above Rupees

10 lacs to 25 lacs 20%, above Rupees 25 lacs 30%. New Indian tax code provides for straight deduction up to Rupees three lacs per year for long term saving (retirement provision) from income (no tax when invested). The principle is similar to the United States tax code provision for 401K scheme. Savings/ Investment for future (like retirement) are not taxed. Accruals of earning on them are also not taxed. But when the savings is withdrawn, it is taxed (EET principle). Although taxed on withdrawal, there will be little or no tax when one has no other income and survives by drawing on past savings.

In addition, Indian new tax code allows further deduction of specified amount for following expense from income (incurred for self and dependents):

Interest on loan taken for higher education; health insurance premium; actual medical treatment expense; maintenance of disabled dependant and certain charitable expenses.

Some present tax benefits like house rent, conveyance, leave travel has been deleted; but they have been compensated by reduced tax rates.

Auto acceptance

Proposed new Indian tax code has provision for acceptance of all tax returns as filed by taxpayers and to pick up a few for scrutiny based on risk; similar to the provisions Pakistan new tax code introduced from 2002.

Pakistan Tax Code

Pakistan has introduced new tax code since July 2002. Main feature of this tax code is that taxpayer himself declares his income and determines tax liability. The income tax return is accepted without any conditions. Filing of income tax return itself is an assessment order and is eligible for tax refund. A certain percentage of returns filed are selected for tax audit on the basis of risk. Pakistan tax law and its universal self-assessment system take away the discretionary powers of the tax collectors and place great responsibility and obligation on taxpayer. The law prescribes only bare minimum books of account; documents and records (that are generally maintained to run that business).

Pakistan has 20% highest tax slab rate on salary for income above Rupees 86.5 lacs of yearly income. There are no tax upto Rs. 2 lacs of annual salary (for women 2.6 lacs).

Tax above that salary is slapped under various slabs (maximum 20%). The income tax is Rs 90,000 for taxable annual salary of Rs. 1,000,000 and Rs. 179,000 for the salary of Rs. 1,500,000. In Bangladesh the tax rate for first Tk 165,000/- nil, next Tk 275,000/- 10%, next Tk 325,000/- 15%, next Tk 375,000/- 20% and for rest amount 25%. Simple, transparent tax law and low tax rates ensure compliance while ambiguity, discretion & high tax rate promotes evasion and corruption. India has proposed & Pakistan has introduced new tax laws adopting mostly global best practices; and it is high

time that Bangladesh should overhaul its tax policy, procedure and rates in line with the countries that are competing to encourage local and foreign investment. This will help create jobs, provide social security and produce more goods and services as most developing countries are in the league.

India-Bangladesh border coordination conference from Monday

New Delhi, Mar 6 (ANI): The border coordination conference between the Border Security Force (BSF) and the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) would commence in New Delhi from Monday.

According to the BSF, the 19-member -Bangladesh delegation is led by the BDR chief Major General Md Mainul Islam, while the Indian delegation is headed by the BSF Director General Raman Srivastava. The conference is likely to discuss the developments related to the Joint Border Management Plan and issues related to maintenance of boundary pillars along Indo-Bangladesh border. The conference is also likely to discuss measures to be adopted to develop force-to-force relation. The nearly 4,096 kilometres long India-Bangladesh border is one of the most difficult to patrol owing to reasons of topography, riverine patches, dense forested hills, agricultural lands and human settlements. The porous nature of the border has led to numerous transborder problems including infiltration, smuggling, of arms and drugs, contraband goods, illegal movement of persons, and crimes such as kidnapping for ransom, cattle lifting, extortion etc. The bilateral mechanism to coordinate between forces of both the side would help to counter such problems. (ANI)

BHUTAN

Nu 300 million plus as annual carbon trading revenue

The 114 MW Dagachu project has been accepted as a clean development mechanism (CDM) project by the United Nations framework for climate change.

The acceptance, which came in February, means that the Nu 8 bn project would earn CDM revenues of more than Nu 300 mn a year, in addition to the Nu 1 bn in electricity revenues.

“Dagachu will generate 500 mn units of power annually, which will lead to 500,000 metric tonnes (MT) of certified emission reduction (CER) or saving that much MT of carbon from being emitted by thermal power plants in India,” said the managing director of Druk Green Power corporation, Dasho Chhewang Rinzin. Each MT of CER is currently worth around 10 euros.

“We’ve committed to selling the first year’s CER to an agency of the Austrian government, which we can use to pay back the Asian development bank loans on the project,” said Dasho Chhewang Rinzin. “A few registration formalities need to be completed for Dagachu to become a CDM project.”

This success comes after an initial attempt failed, after some requirements over baseline and monitoring methodologies could not be met.

Economic affairs secretary Dasho Sonam Tshering, who initiated the CDM process, said that Dagachu's acceptance was a first even for UNFCCC, which is more used to smaller CDM-based agricultural, industrial and micro hydel projects from India, China and Brazil.

"This could make it easier for the 10,000 MW projects to become CDM projects themselves," said Dasho Sonam Tshering. "The Punatsangchu I project has already hired consultants to work on it."

Bhutan and India have an umbrella agreement on the 10,000 MW that includes an article on achieving CDM status for the projects.

Bhutan can also use the Indian baseline for emissions, which means that Bhutan can earn CDM for preventing carbon emissions in India.

The DGPC MD said that, for a project to qualify as a CDM, it had to fulfill two basic criteria of preventing pollution and proving that, without CDM money, the project's viability would be affected, which is the case for Dagachu that is being built with loans. He also said that, for a better chance of success, the project from its inception must apply for CDM status.

The secretary explained that, after Austrian assistance in the Basochu project, the two governments decided to look at doing a medium sized hydroproject as a CDM project. Dagachu was selected from the power master plan, due to its closeness to the border and nearby pre-existing infrastructure.

"A PIN or project idea note was made to conceive Dagachu as a CDM project, followed by a project design document that looked at details of how much carbon emission it would save," said Dasho Sonam Tshering. After that the designated national authorities of the national environment commission in Bhutan and the environment ministry in India approved the project.

It was finally submitted to the executive board of UNFCCC, who had asked for changes based on CDM mechanisms.

Chendebji a 70 kilowatt micro hydel near Pelela, was Bhutan's first CDM.

According to both the DGPC MD and MoEA secretary, the only concern now is that the CDM mechanism comes under the Kyoto Protocol, which expires by 2012, and with a deadlock in the Copenhagen 15 climate summit, it is uncertain what will happen in the follow-up meeting in Mexico this year.

The criticism of CDM has been that most of the least developed countries (LDCs), including Bhutan, could not obtain CDM projects because of its complex procedures and

technical difficulties **7,000 new jobs in 2010**

The construction of two more hydropower projects, scheduled to begin this year, will create more than 7,000 new jobs in 2010, according to a preliminary study carried out by water and power consultancy services ltd., India, (WAPCOS). Of the total 6,094 are in the construction sector and 580 in the management category. In the construction sector, 2,507 skilled and 3,587 unskilled workers are required.

The construction of the 1,200 MW Punatsangchhu I is already underway and the construction of the 990 MW Punatsangchhu II and 720 MW Mangdechhu are to begin this year.

Although no details were available on how many slots will be filled by Bhutanese, labour ministry officials said they will try to fulfill a 40-60 model. This means 40 percent of the available jobs will go to Bhutanese, with the rest taken up by international workers.

Despite Bhutanese being reluctant to take up blue-collar jobs, especially in the unskilled category, the labour officials said that they would try to achieve this ratio this year.

Currently, 1,800 Bhutanese are employed by the Punatsangchhu (I) hydroelectric project authority, which equals to 36 percent of the total workforce. Labour director, Jamyang Geley, said that by 2010, “we expect to reach this 60-40 ratio, if not more, and maintain it.”

But to achieve such aims, Bhutan will need more skilled workers willing to do manual work. In July, last year, Indian companies involved in the construction of the Punatsangchhu I dam, agreed to prioritise employing more Bhutanese, but only after they upgraded or acquired the necessary skills.

Jamyang Geley said the ministry is working towards this objective. He pointed out that “various programs” are already in place to increase the level of skills required by the hydroelectric projects. These include improving the existing capacities of the six vocational training institutes (VTIs), providing training opportunities abroad, and apprenticeships with the companies already involved in construction.

The labour director added that, by 2013, the country’s VTIs would have produced 50,000 graduates. Currently, 1,085 students are registered in the six VTIs and two zorig chusums.

He said that this would mean the labour ministry would be able to achieve the target of providing enough skilled labour to achieve the 60-40 model. The WAPCOS study shows that, by 2013, 59,932 workers will be required. Construction activities will peak with a total employment at 62,309 in 2014, which will then level off at 5,176 in 2023, says the study.

The study also points out that several other employment opportunities will be generated indirectly, such as in the service, manufacturing, and mining sectors that will result from

the hydroelectric projects. It also says that the hydroelectric projects will necessitate the establishment or extension and upgradation of the social services or government sector in the construction areas.

The government plans to produce more than 10,000 MW by 2020 through the construction of 10 hydroelectric projects, in addition to Chukha and Tala.

What's our happiness level? High

A report about happiness created disbelief — and a plan from a council member to measure happiness itself — after Telluriders read that Boulder was named the happiest city in America.

Boulder!? many said. They just think they're happy. So what city did Telluriders think was happier than Boulder?

Well.

Here, actually.

The survey didn't measure towns this small, so there's no way to gauge. But after talking with locals and psychologists, and having lived in both towns, it seems apparent that, compared to Telluride, Boulder is basically the Pit of Despair. And so it can be said — definitively, finally, declaratively — that Telluride — not Boulder, not Disneyland — is the happiest place in America.

Right, two psychologists in town?

“Well ...” said Jonette Bronson.

“Um ...” said Marshall Whiting.

OK, so these two psychologists in town wouldn't go that far. But they did say that, on average, Telluriders are often happier than people in bigger cities.

“We know happiness relates to certain factors, and one of them is aerobic exercise,” said Bronson. “And we know people here are pretty active.” Whiting used to work in Fairbanks, Alaska, where the lack of sun saddened people. Here? More than 300 days of sun to play in.

The survey, the Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index, shows a strong correlation between natural beauty and happiness. In general, the places where there are mountains — primarily the Mountain West — are the places where people are happiest. This is true for fairly rich mountain states, like Colorado, and also fairly poor mountain states, like Montana.

(In the flat South, people aren't all that happy.)

So it would make sense that Telluride, at 8,750 feet, with four 14,000 foot peaks within a few miles, would be ecstatic.

Telluride is also rich. And, according to the University of Leicester's World Map of Happiness, there is a strong correlation between economic health and personal well-being. In America, Australia and even the rich Middle Eastern theocracies, people are satisfied with their lives. Meanwhile, the poorest places are the least satisfied — African countries, mostly.

But it's not a perfect correlation. Happiness studies have long shown that money and material possessions bring you some satisfaction — but only some, and only for a short while. Meanwhile, family and exercise and a sense of purpose bring long-term well-being.

And there are lots of exceptions to the money-equals-satisfaction rule of thumb. Russia is less happy than its GDP says it should be. And in Bhutan, people report that they're very happy, even though Bhutan is a relatively poor country. The Bhutanese have strong social cohesion, strong religious affiliations, lots of festivals. And mountains. Lots of Himalayan mountains.

But the Bhutanese government also knows exactly how happy their people are because it asks them, every year, with a survey of 290 questions. The questions are about health and family and church and community and civic engagement. Then Bhutan quantifies, every year, its Gross National Happiness.

So why couldn't Telluride do a similar thing?

Town council member Chris Myers wondered that. After all, the town measures nearly everything else — taxes, real estate prices, skier days, tourist visits, hotel occupancy — but not how happy people are.

“The yardsticks by which we measure success in this country — the barometer that is used is monetary,” Myers says. “And I don't know that that's necessarily reflective of how good a community is doing or feeling.”

He isn't sure how the town could administer a survey for what he suggests calling the Telluride Happiness Index — Telluride HI. But Myers would love to see HI be a regular thing, so that Telluride could do periodic happiness reports. Imagine the headlines:

“Deep snow sends happiness through the roof.”

“Happiness sags as concert tickets prove bogus.”

And government could address our Gross Community Happiness and decide on

what would make us more happy.

So what would?

“I’d like to see a little more gliding on the front side,” said Josh Williams.

That’s a sentence that means absolutely nothing to most of the world. But it means everything to ski bums, and it’s a reminder that physical activity and natural beauty is what brings people here, and what makes them happy.

One of our psychologists added a note of caution. It might not be that Telluride makes people happy. It might be that happy people move to Telluride.

“It’s only correlational,” said Bronson. “You can’t move here and get happy.”

But everyone we talked to here said: it didn’t hurt.

Said Travis Young of Macon, Georgia: “People are happier here.”

Said Kristen Kull: “This is far better than Western New York.”

Said Pamela Guillory of North Texas: “I still feel like I’ve died and gone to heaven.”

So, today’s headline: “HI index: gaining.”
Industries continue to violate pollution laws

Despite numerous warnings, promises of action by authorities, some fines and criticism in the media, a national environment commission (NEC) report shows that industries continue to pollute as usual.

The NEC report for 2009 says that a lot still needs to be done, even though control measures do not ‘require much resources and manpower’.

With most industries employing between 600 to 100 nationals, there were no measures in place to protect them from fumes and dust at the work place despite existing rules. The few pollution equipments in place were found to be leaking, generating more fumes at and around the work place.

The industries also did not have the required environmental budgets for an environmental management plan. It was also found that some voluminous waste like slag generated from industries still did not have proper management.

All the factories were also found to be violating multiple clauses of the environmental clearances with issues like sanitation and cleanliness of area. Hazardous waste and raw material still lay out in the open.

The polluters monitored are the cement industries, ferro alloys and carbide, powdering plants, steel industries, food and drink industries and wood based industries.

‘The pollution load of the cement industries is extremely high far exceeding the emission standards’ says the report. Emission from VSK Druk in Sampheling, Chukha, and Yangzom cement in Tashigong, Samtse, was directly let into the environment without any pollution control.

The existing pollution control system in Penden was inefficient and failed to meet emission standards. The addition of a mobile crushing unit between Gomtu town and the plant had further aggravated dust pollution in the area.

Lhaki cement also could not fulfill environmental clearance conditions like spraying of water, dumping of plastic and maintaining an environment budget.

Six ferro alloy and carbide industries were monitored which showed that air pollution was being caused by fugitive emissions generated from open furnace gates, improper handling of raw materials, micro silica dust and smoke from the stacks.

BCCL also exceeded emission levels. Noise pollution was also a major problem. BFAL had no control measures to control fugitive emissions.

Bhutan ferro industries, Druk ferro alloys, Druk Wang alloys and Ugyen ferro alloys had no control measures in around 80 to 90 percent of their fugitive emissions.

Another major source of pollution was were seven industries monitored for powdering of dolomite and talc like Jigme industries, Pagli stone quarry, Chundu dolomite, Kenpa pvt ltd, Damchen dolomite and Lhhachen mineral industry. Though the powdering process itself generated a high amount of dust, what made it worse was open conveyor belts, open transfer points and manual handling of products. Most did not have any control measures.

Although all steel industries had promised proper management of slag in their project profile, they had failed to do so, according to the report. Of the four monitored, two failed the emission tests, while all failed in terms of controlling fugitive emissions.

Among the three monitored wood industries, Bhutan Board products ltd failed to meet emission standards, though all had fugitive emissions.

NEC director general, Sonam Yanglay said, “We’ve written to all the concerned industries and asked them to comply, otherwise they could face fines.” He said NEC would be conducting more checks and had recently fined some industries.

Observers says that the pollution from these factories not only spoil the environment but also affects the health of the predominantly Bhutanese workers and also the residents of nearby towns and villages.

Technical and possible financial help from Norway Travel time within the country could be reduced from days to hours and even minutes if a government plan to build tunnels through mountains connecting major valleys is implemented.

The department of geology and mines (DGM) has already identified three potential sites for tunnels. The first and most probable is a tunnel from Thimphu to either Punakha or Wangduephodrang.

The second is a 12 km tunnel between Bumthang and Mongar bypassing the Thrimshingla pass, which is expected to cut 30 km of travelling distance on the East-West highway. The third is from Khasadrapchu in Thimphu to Shaba in Paro, with a tunnel length of nine kilometers, reducing travel time from 45 to 20 minutes.

Pre-feasibility studies have already been done by DGM, indicating that they can be done.

“The Wangdue/Punakha tunnels can decongest Thimphu and allow people to settle in these two valleys and also reduce the travel distance and time by around 40 km,” said DGM chief geologist, Ugyen Wangda.

DGM is considering the Norwegian geotechnical institute (NGI), regarded as one of the international pioneers in tunneling as its partner. NGI already has some ongoing projects with Bhutan that have to do with landslides and stabilisation of surfaces.

A NGI team is expected to visit Bhutan again on March 16 to carry out feasibility studies on the tunnels, especially on the Thimphu-Punakha/Wangdue route.

“NGI has the technical expertise to guide the construction of tunnels and is also looking for funding for these tunnels from the Norwegian government, which could be given as grant,” said Ugyen Wangda. He said that funding would make the difference from changing these concepts into reality.

According a department of roads engineer, the Norwegian government in 2005 had already assured NGI of fund to construct a one-kilometre tunnel to bypass the Jumja slide site, but the government did not take up the offer.

The DOR engineer said, “Dantak came forward and said they would take up the project, so the project money and technical assistance from Norway went back.”

Dantak officials, however, told Kuensel that there is currently no plan to build any tunnel at Jumja and that the project had been shelved.

A major challenge, according to DGM, will be the cost, as each km of tunnel would cost above Nu 200 mn.

Ugyen Wangda said that a priority for government is also in reducing the distance between north and south Bhutan like Thimphu-Phuentsholing.

A concept is a tunnel from Damchu near Chuzom till Ganalakha, which could reduce the 170 km distance between Thimphu and Phuntsholing to just 80 km, which in time is down from six to two hours.

“Though the costs will be huge, it’s economically worth it as marble deposits are running out in the south for cement industry but mountains of it are available in the north,” said Ugyen Wangda. The Transport Master plan till 2027 also identifies 12 tunnels to reduce distances.

Ugyen Wangda said that tunnels would be easier to build in the north and west of the country due to the hard and more stable rock face.

Explaining the technology behind tunnels, Ugyen Wangda, who did his thesis on Norwegian tunnels, said that, after the surveys, tunnel-boring machines would first bore the mountain. It would then be lined with heavy steel frames, concrete support and also rock bolting in required places.

“Unlike a hydropower tunnel, people will be travelling through the tunnels, so it’ll have to have very high safety standards” he said.

Farmers’ cooperative for financing

As potato-farming season warms up in Bumthang, many farmers across the valley are seeking loans from financial institutions or borrowing from moneylenders.

A handful of farmers from Sumthrang, Ura, however, remain unperturbed.

They are already in town shopping for necessary farming tools, pesticides, manure and, with a little additional loan from the Bhutan development finance corporation, they intend to hire power tillers.

That was possible because Sumthrang villagers, comprising 17 households, had formed a committee – Sumthrang Ngomen (herbal) tshogpa – since early 2008, with a seed money grant of Nu 50,000 from Semthokha mushroom centre.

The gewog agriculture extension office offered an additional Nu 20,000 from its training budget, while the members contributed more than Nu 16,000.

“We add Nu 20 from every member’s sale of a kilogram of mushroom and herbal plants,” the committee chairman Tenzinla said.

That is how, every time a Sumthrang farmer needs a loan, they can avail it from their committee's account maintained with the Bank of Bhutan branch in Bumthang.

Yesterday, the committee withdrew about Nu 85,000 from its total of Nu 177,000 to be divided among its members at an annual 10 percent interest.

With hard cash hard to come by in times of needs, especially during farming season when other farmers around the valley are also looking for finance, Sumthrang villagers hope their initiative will bring better returns in future.

“Every year, as crop plantation begins, we have to struggle, looking for money to buy seeds, pesticides and other farm material,” a committee member Rinchen said. “Like today, if we can loan our own money secured in the bank, it turns out to be a major boon.”

BPCL's plan to modify industrial tariff

The aim is to ensure equitable distribution of power and penalise those that underutilise their quota. The Bhutan Power Corporation Limited (BPCL) is planning to modify the tariff structure for industries so that they pay a higher charge for the unused electricity quota booked by them.

The tariff for industries is Nu 1.65 per unit, Nu 1.51 as the normal power charge and 0.14 cheltrums for the power booked by them, known as the energy demand charge.

“Companies pay 0.14 ch a unit for up to 75 percent of their power allocation, even if they don't use the power, since it's understood that factories should be using a minimum of 75 percent of their allocated power. This comes to around Nu 85,000 for every MW of unused power.

“Without increasing the tariff of 1.65, what we propose to do this year is to increase the energy demand charge 0.14 to 0.45 and decrease the normal power charge from 1.51 to 1.20,” said BPCL's managing director, Dasho Bharat Tamang.

He said that this would ensure that companies not using their allocation would be paying more for the unused power and thus encourage them to give up their excess power to BPCL, which can then give it to industries on the waiting list.

According to Dasho Bharat Tamang, the problem right now is that many new industries are not able to come up due to a shortage of power; at the same time; many existing industries are underutilising their allocated amounts.

Of the current 243 MW allocated to 46 factories, only 53 percent was used in 2009. It was 62 percent for January 2010. There are 15 factories under construction, which have

already been allocated an additional 67.5 MW, taking the total allocated power to 310 MW.

There is also an additional 50 MW demand from mainly small and medium industries that are currently on hold since all power has been allocated, according to BPCL.

Power allocated to existing industries is based on a contract agreement, therefore used power cannot be sanctioned to other factories, but goes back to the Druk Green power corporation, which is exported to India.

“Companies like BFAL, BCCL, Penden cement, SD Eastern ferro silicon are drawing above 75 percent, but others like steel factories are underutilising,” said Sunil, senior manager of BPCL. “There are industries that had been sanctioned around 20 MW, but are currently using only 2 MW.”

“Around Nu 1.7 bn has been spent on infrastructure for providing power to the Pasakha industrial area and every year BPCL has to pay Nu 80 mn as loan repayment from 2008 to 2019, but this infrastructure is underutilised,” said Dasho Bharat Tamang. “The cost of this underutilised infrastructure is indirectly being borne by domestic users, as tariffs rates are decided based on the operating costs of BPCL.”

Dasho Bharat Tamang said that he would monitor the electricity usage of factories for three months and companies would be consulted to give up their unused sanctioned power voluntarily, but if they did not agree the new rates would have to be applied.

BCCI president Tobgay Wangchuk said, “BPCL should first consult with the stakeholders like industries on this before taking any decision since the energy demand charges are already quite high”. He said that BPCL should find out why industries are unable to use their full quota as factors like recession, volatile markets, equipment failure and plants under construction would be influencing low usage.

Streamlining

statistics

Cabinet approves proposal to make NSB lead agency on all national data

5 March, 2010 - In a bid to strengthen the country’s statistical system, the cabinet has approved a proposal to pool scarce resources, create a common processing system and establish uniform standards so that data generated is consistent and reliable.

“The idea is to avoid duplication and inconsistency,” said Kinga Tshering, the director of the national statistical bureau (NSB), which will now be the lead agency on all data generated within the country. “Almost every survey in the country repeats the same questions with differing definitions and standards at times.”

Kinga Tshering said the approved proposal would also address the problem of coordination – one of the biggest weaknesses facing the country’s statistical system today. “Given that we’re a small country we shouldn’t be having such a problem,” he

added. Even though a lot more statistics are available today, users are often confused about its accuracy because of inconsistencies.

The proposal seeks to create a statistical services system, where all statistically trained personnel in the country are brought under NSB. This is to ensure that statisticians in different ministries are accountable to NSB in generating data that is timely, relevant and reliable. Such an arrangement is also aimed at developing a professional cadre of statisticians in the country.

According to the proposal it will make carrying out multi-sectoral surveys more cost effective, help in creating a national data repository and generate data that supports planning and decision making.

A shortage of trained and qualified manpower, lack of internationally accepted standards and methods, which have led to delays in publication and poor quality data, are some of the issues facing the statistical system, according to NSB officials. NSB has 59 staff, including 20 district statistical offices. There are only 13 statistically personnel in other organisations.

According to Kinga Tshering, even as there was an increase in data demand, both nationally and internationally, NSB had limited control over field statistical personnel, and statisticians in other organisations were given responsibilities other than statistics.

These were some of the reasons that why the erstwhile central statistical organisation (CSO) had remained weak and incapable of meeting the country's statistical data needs.

Kinga Tshering said that, in the past, efforts to strengthen the statistical system came from outside the system. "This time the proposal is from us, the people who've worked in the system for several years and understand its problems and weaknesses," he said.

During the cabinet meeting on March 2 that approved the proposal, the prime minister, Lyonchhoen Jigmi Y Thinley urged NSB "to explore ways to also generate data beyond the conventional method to reflect Bhutan's more holistic GNH model of development, using the latter's four pillars, nine domains and 72 indicators. "We'll be meeting with the GNH commission and the centre for Bhutan studies later this year to review the indicators and plan for a survey," said Kinga Tshering. "Perhaps we can correlate the living standard survey to GNH indicators."

He said that NSB was also thinking of 'Greening GDP', which means including all environmental issues, from disasters to air quality, in the measure of GDP.

Fuel hike

Petrol, diesel and Indian-made cars to be dearer- The price of petrol has increased by Nu 2.44 and diesel by Nu 2.45 with effect from Sunday in the capital. With the increase, a litre of petrol now costs Nu 44.35 and diesel Nu 35.17. The prices of kerosene and liquid

petroleum gas (LPG) have not changed.

The fuel price was revised, following a price revision in India, from where Bhutan imports all its petroleum needs, according to petroleum oil and lubricants (POL) in-charge of the trade ministry, Cheki Tshewang.

However, price of fuel will differ from location to location of oil distributors around the country, depending on its proximity to southern border towns. Bhutan has three private firms with 38 outlets engaged in the distribution of petroleum, oil and lubricants (POL) across the country. Petroleum products are procured from two major petroleum companies in India – Indian Oil corporation and the Bharat Petroleum corporation limited.

In India, the increase in fuel price came within an hour after the finance minister, Pranab Mukherjee, on Friday imposed an excise duty of one rupee per litre of petrol and diesel and restored a basic customs duty of 5 percent on crude oil, 7.5 percent on petrol and diesel and 10 percent on other refined products to come into effect from April 1.

Meanwhile, the prices of Indian cars sold in Bhutan are poised for a hike with the Indian government announcing an increase in its central excise duty.

Indian media reported that cars manufactured by India's largest car manufacturer, Maruti, will see a 2 percent price hike, while the popular Hyundai cars will get costlier by Rs 6,500-25,000.

Obtaining sustained growth

The two-day meeting of the Bangladesh Development Forum (BDF) ended in Dhaka few days ago with the development partners expressing concern about the confrontational politics of the country and waning and-graft policies. While Bangladesh presented its vision of being a middle-income country by the year 2021, the donors said that resource mobilization has to be geared up for the purpose. In practical terms this would mean that more taxes would be imposed and the price of natural gas and electricity will go up.

Bangladesh apprised the development partners of its need for funds for the implementation of the revised Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP-II) and other development programmes including climate change adaptation, ICT and development of rail, water and air routes. Bangladesh is in urgent need for US\$ 9.5 billion for generation of 7,000 megawatts of electricity by 2013. The government sought substantial amount of funds from the donors for timely implementation of power projects.

In the energy and power session of Bangladesh Development Forum (BDF) meeting the government presented an investment requirement of \$9.5 billion for the sector and the donors made the suggestions.

According to the official who were present at the session, the development partners said the biggest obstacle in the power sector was slow implementation. A bidding takes much

time and the donors urged the government to expedite the process.

Power Division Secretary Abul Kalam Azad presented a detailed plan on strategy, priorities and next steps for the energy and power sector. On behalf of the development partners, ADB Director General Sultan Hafiz Rahman and German representative Christiane Hieronymus spoke at the session.

The Prime Minister's Energy Adviser Towfiq-e-Elahi Chowdhury and State Minister for Power and Energy Brig Gen (ret'd) Md Enamul Haq replied to different queries from the development partners.

They told the development partners that the government would require \$9.5 billion for generating around 7,000 megawatt power, and transmission and distribution in the next six years.

The government also presented detailed plans on financing the projects and focused on the plan for cross-border cooperation in the power sector.

The development partners were told that the government initiated move to address the power crisis by importing electricity from the neighbouring countries. Recently, India and Bangladesh have reached understanding on power trade. It is expected that power trade with India in the range of 250 MW to 500 MW will be possible in the next 24 months.

Chris Austin, country director of UK Department for International Development (DFID) and co-chair of Local Consultative Groups, told journalists that various institutions are working for development of power and energy sector.

Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission should be strengthened, he said.

Austin hailed the government move to produce power through public-private partnership. Grid connectivity with Nepal, Bhutan and India is a welcome move, he added.

He also said the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, Islamic Development Bank and Japan would invest in the PPP initiative for power projects. The government plans to form an energy and power fund for investment in the sector.

The development partners suggested the government conduct a detailed audit to detect the huge wastage of power, energy and gas. The gas used by Power Development Board for electricity generation is almost double than the requirement.

The development partners of Bangladesh called upon the government to diversify exports and ensure regular supply of energy and good infrastructure for the industries to expedite development.

"The dominance of apparels in Bangladesh's export sector makes it vulnerable. Export

diversification is needed. And the more labour intensive the new industries are, the better they can address the challenges of employment generation and poverty reduction" said Benata Dessallien, UN resident coordinator in Bangladesh.

Frozen foods, jute, leather and shipbuilding have shown potential, she said adding the other industries should also expand.

These industries need access to working capital at affordable interest rates, skilled workers and lower costs of doing business, Dessallien said.

Ellen Goldstein, World Bank (WB) country director for Bangladesh mentioned-

Bangladesh can increase private investment by redoubling efforts to simplify the regulatory framework and create environment conducive to doing business.

The other solution is to increase public investment from its current low level.

The government must overcome persistent weakness in revenue generation

"By global and regional standards, Bangladesh just doesn't collect enough taxes-and if you don't have revenues, you cannot spend then on priority development object This is also a main reason for Bangladesh's continued reliance on foreign aid."

Later, at a media briefing on the topic of the first session, the finance minister said the development partners wanted to know about raising revenue, strengthen the local government, implementation efficiency, civil services reforms and population control steps.

Muhith said the development, partners also wanted to know about the weak statistical data, gender development, nutrition and maternal mortality rate, domestic violence and reduction in corruption.

"The development partners have seriously discussed all these issues, especially civil service reforms, reduction in corruption, malnutrition and maternal mortality rate for assisting Bangladesh."

Prime Minister's Economic Affairs Adviser Dr Mashiur Rahman said the government would set up information centre in every Union Parishad to help local people know about Bangladesh and their own Union Parishad.

"The government will do so to ensure accountability and transparency."

Chris Austin, co-char of Local Consultative Group, said the development partners have promised record-level resources for Bangladesh. He said they have urged the government to reduce poverty, integrate their proposals in the next five-years plans, and work for civil service reforms act and a joint collaboration strategy between the government and

development

partners.

The government sought strings-free assistance to increase farm production in an effort to ensure food security. The appeal was made at a session on agriculture, food security and water resources, where the government sought help to speed up efforts to put a surface water irrigation system in place, control population growth in the backdrop of declining arable land. Much of the focus was on how to meet growing demand for food. Policymakers also called for support to strengthen agricultural research, including biotechnology, to develop seeds for increased production.

In response, development partners advised the government to shore up interministerial coordination and set priorities in areas for technical support

The development partners pointed to weaknesses in water resource management,

"The context has changed. Once we had called them donors. They are now development partners. For agriculture, we want assistance, not conditionality, from them," said Matia Chowdhury.

The appeal for assistance without strings underlines the past pressure on the government from the World Bank and other multilateral lenders to withdraw subsidy on agricultural input, fast-track privatisation and wean Bangladesh Agricultural Development Corporation off support

Chris Austin of DFID said, "Development support we provide is a partnership. It's not something that is provided in return for something."

Begum Matia Chowdhury said the government wanted development partners to extend assistance in developing a surface water irrigation system in a big shift from underground water irrigation.

"Now it is time to move away from underground water to surface water for irrigation as declining underground water will create a disaster," a rise in population means a decline in land even if Bangladesh triples its food production through an effective delivery of inputs and practises modern agriculture.

The Forum endorsed the PRSP-II and promised to continue their current assistance and increase the same, however, without mentioning any specific amount. The development partners underscored the need for public-private-partnership in project implementation. They also urged the government to adjust the prices of power, gas and coal to attract foreign investment. In spite of a better macro-economic and food security situation, Bangladesh urgently needs support for implementing the development programmes, especially to cope with climate change, and is in urgent need for quick disbursement of promised funds.

The development partners are reported to have pleased some conditions and expressed

concern over confrontational politics. They underlined the need for strengthening basic democratic institutions like the parliamentary standing committees, the Anti-Corruption Commission and the judiciary to improve governance and combat corruption. Bangladesh is reported to have taken the suggestions but disagreed to receive the climate change funds through the World Bank. While Bangladesh' concern over WB conditionalities is appreciable, there is no denial of the need for guarding against corruption for proper utilisation of foreign funds. Corruption, deep-rooted in bureaucracy, is still rampant and needs to be addressed seriously. Strict vigilance against corruption, as demanded by donors, is likely to help bring down misappropriation of funds. Political stability and transparency and accountability in projects implementation and fund utilisation are the minimum prerequisites of sustained growth.

Bhutanese refugees end 20-year journey

By: Adam Wazny

It may have only been five days of travel for the group of people from Bhutan, but their journey that ended in Winnipeg late Wednesday night has been a lifetime in the making. More than 30 Bhutanese refugees have taken up residence at the Manitoba Interfaith Immigration Council's Welcome Place housing facility as they get used to a new city, a new country and a new beginning.

The unfamiliar surroundings have the group excited for the future.

"My friends are here, we travelled a long way together, and I hope to make many new friends in Canada," said Tulashi Ram Siwakoti, who is looking forward to learning more about Canada.

The group, ranging in ages from eight months to 79 years, has actually been out of their native Bhutan for nearly 20 years. Resigned to find lives in a refugee camp in Nepal after being forced out of southern Bhutan through what Chitra Pradhan "social blackmail," the group has come a long way to get to Manitoba.

Pradhan has been assisting the mass move, and shakes his head when describing the situation in Bhutan. There are three groups of people in the Asian country (bordered by the India to the south, east and west, and by China to the north), with the northern Bhutanese using fear and intimidation to force out southern peoples.

"I don't want to call it a social cleansing, but it's like that," said Pradhan, who came to Winnipeg in 1992. "These people have been through more than you can imagine. They've been forced to leave Bhutan without any possessions."

As expected, the journey to Canada was no weekend trip.

The group left camp in Nepal on Feb. 27 headed for the country's capital, Kathmandu. From there, they caught a flight to Abu Dhabi. After stops in London and Toronto, they landed at Winnipeg at 10:30 p.m. Wednesday.

"It was my first time flying," Dilli Ram Mahat said through a translator. "I had no problem eating the food. I ate everything they gave me."

Mahat, one of the elders of the group at 65 years old, said the biggest thing for him in coming to Canada was getting a chance to reconnect with family members.

"I'm excited to be in Canada because my daughter and son-in-law have been living here," he said. "Coming together to live with the family is a greater excitement."

The Bhutanese community in Winnipeg now stands at around 150 people. Canada will welcome 5,000 refugees from Bhutan this year.

MALDIVES

Analysis & Opinion: DRP's double whammy: Can the party live up to its pledges?

Barely over a month after the DRP's new leadership took reins, pledging to bring the party

back to power, it has been dealt with twin blows.

The party lost majority status in Parliament with the number of parliamentarians coming down to 27 whilst the ruling Maldivian Democratic Party's number hit 30.

It was closely followed by the MDP recording the highest number of members registered in the party, outnumbering the DRP.

The Elections chief last month said that the Opposition Dhivehi Rayyithunge Party (DRP) is no more the largest political party in the Maldives, in terms of the number of members registered.

And this double whammy for the party came just a month after the party's third annual congress was held where a new leadership took over, amidst pledges of coming back to power.

Lost status When the DRP presidential candidate and former President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom lost the 2008 election, the party's morale hit the rock bottom.

Far too long it remained dormant, being undecided as to who should lead the party at the 2013 presidential election.

In the meantime criticism mounted over the party's lethargy and critics said it is high time Gayoom quit politics gracefully, than holding on to the leadership.

The party had new life injected back to its veins, when it won the parliamentary elections in May 2009, becoming the majority party in the House.

With the new Constitution vesting much powers in parliament, the DRP oozing with confidence knew it could effectively apply brakes on the executive.

A pact between the DRP (28 seats) and the PA (7 seats) brought the number of parliamentarians to 35 altogether, giving them a bigger say in the 77 member House, following the parliamentary elections.

The ruling MDP then had only 25 seats, falling short of the opposition number of members.

The DRP and MDP apart, the Qaumi party has 2 member, Republican Party 1 and 10 independent members, presently in Parliament.

Last month, the DRP lost majority status in the House, when former DRP Parliamentarian Alhan Fahmy and Independent Parliamentarian Abdul Ghafoor joined the MDP.

DRP's newly appointed Deputy Leaders however expressed mixed reaction over the matter.

Ibrahim Shareef speaking to the Asian Tribune last week played down the lost majority status, whilst another Deputy Leader of the DRP, Umar Naseer called it "sad" for the party, urging the leader to "bring pride back to DRP."

Making matters worse, relations between the DRP's new leader, Thasmeen Ali and PA Leader Abdullah Yamin has soured after the latter sued the former over unpaid loans amounting to US\$ 100,000.

It has now put the DRP, PA pact in Parliament in the balance, apart from the fact both Thameen and Yamin are set to contest the 2013 presidential election.

No more "largest" tag

Last month, the Elections Commission announced that the Opposition DRP was no more the largest political party.

In the Maldives, it is required for the people to register with the political party of their choice.

According to the latest statistics released by the Commission, the MDP has 31,171 members, narrowly outnumbering the DRP's figure of 30,775.

However, the DRP responded that its number is poised to go past the MDP, when the new 2000 applications are processed by the Elections Commission.

Yet the Elections Commission has said people often register with a new party while still remaining members of another party, making it impossible for the commission to register them. Yet the Elections Commission has said people often register with a new party while still remaining members of another party, making it impossible for the commission to register them.

Arguments and counter arguments apart, it is surely a wake up call for the party to capitalize on its waning grassroots support.

As DRP Deputy Leader Shareef noted once it may be the "norm for people to join the ruling party of the day to win political favours."

But it is no reason for the DRP to be complacent about its declining grassroots supporters.

Checkmated competition & strained relations

Gayoom bowed out of politics in January this year, saying in a lighter vein he is “not young any more” leaving the door open for the young to take over.

Yet Gayoom handpicked his favourite Thasmeen, endorsing him ahead of the crucial party election at its national congress last month, tilting the balance in favour of Thasmeen.

When Gayoom’s blessings showered on Thasmeen, who was his running mate at the 2008 presidential election, it effectively barred any other contestants from running for the party’s top post. **Sri Lanka part of larger Oman Air Asian strategy: official**

Feb 27, 2010 (LBO) - Oman Air's new service to Sri Lanka and the Maldives is the first of a series of new routes to South Asia and part of the Middle Eastern carrier's strategy to become a bigger player in the Asian air travel market, a top official said.

"This year Oman Air will be commencing operation to Kathmandu (in Nepal), Dhaka (in Bangladesh), Lahore and Islamabad (in Pakistan)," chief executive Peter Hill said in Colombo.

Oman Air is already flying to Mumbai, Chennai, Kochi, Thiruvananthapuram, Hyderabad, Delhi, Lucknow, Bangalore, Kozhikode and Jaipur (in India), Karachi (in Pakistan) and Chittagong (in Bangladesh).

The airline will also open routes to Dar es Salaam in Africa and Milan in Italy this year to broaden its network in Africa and Europe.

Oman Air started its Muscat-Colombo-Male service in November catering to the holiday market in the Maldives and Sri Lanka as well as the migrant labour traffic to the Middle East.

Hill says Oman Air is enjoying cabin factors, or the share of seats sold against the available capacity of 70 to 80 percent flying to Colombo via Maldives and expects business to grow.

"Many Sri Lankans are working there and are a major part of our economy and travel up and down many times. We want to benefit from that," Hill said.

"We are expecting a substantial amount of revenue to come from cargo, mostly exports from Sri Lanka and Male."

Oman Air four operates weekly frequencies to Colombo on Airbus A330-300 series wide bodied aircraft in economy and business class configurations.

"Into Sri Lanka Oman Air has a two class product, normally it's a three class product," Hill said.

Currently Oman Air fleet consists of 15 Boeing 737-800 aircrafts, two A330-200 aircrafts and two A330-300 aircrafts.

In 2010 and 2011 three A330-300 series aircraft are to be delivered.

Oman Air has ordered five Embraer 175 aircraft with purchasing rights for additional five and seven Boeing 787 aircraft to be delivered in 2014, the airline said.

Hill said they don't want to grow too fast.

"Oman Air is a commercial airline, sure we got some money from the government but we paid it back," Hill said.

"I'm no stranger to paying back loans and getting into profitability."

Hill headed SriLankan airlines after Emirates took management control in 1998 with a 40 percent equity stake.

Under him the airline re-fleeted and also opened several routes from Colombo via Maldives playing surrogate carrier to the archipelago when tourist traffic to the island plummeted following a Tamil Tiger separate assault on the main airport in 2001.

But he left airline following a breakdown in relations with the Sri Lanka government, which was the majority shareholder.

If given the opportunity Oman Air would like to form an alliance with SriLankan airlines, Hill said on the sidelines of the media conference.

"It's always good to form an alliance with a national carrier," Hill said.

"Get ready for presidential polls but don't obstruct governance," warns President Nasheed

President Mohamed Nasheed Addressing the Parliament

President Mohamed Nasheed has said that getting ready for the 2013 presidential elections does not mean "obstructing governance" and, if not, it could "trigger a chain reaction causing great damage" to the entire political system.

President Nasheed's warning came on Monday, in a strongly worded address to Parliament at its official opening of sessions for the year 2010.

"Elections are to be held in 2013. I am not saying that it is any less important for political parties to prepare for them. However, if getting prepared means obstructing governance, the Government and many other parties would come out in the defence of such actions with great passion," Nasheed told Parliamentarians.

“If that [obstructing governance] happens, it would certainly trigger chain reactions, causing great damage – not only to individuals, but to the entire political system.”

“I am sure none of us would wish such a disastrous situation. Therefore, our nation greatly needs the support of this esteemed Majlis (Parliament),” he noted.

Nasheed said when he delivered his first address to Parliament last year in March, his government that came into power in November 2008, was “in its infancy.”

“Perhaps that day, some of us may have thought that the new Government would not last its lawful term of office.”

However, he added: “fate paved its way in accordance to our plans.”

In a detailed speech, touching on each and every sector, the President spoke on the work he has done so far to improve the economy, health care, his decision for pay cuts for civil servants whilst also listing out plans to develop the country.

Following is the full version of the unofficial translation of the “Presidential Address 2010” issued by the president’s office.

Honourable Speaker of the People’s Majlis:

It is a great pleasure and honour for me to present the Presidential Address at the first sitting of the first term of the People’s Majlis this year, as stipulated in the Constitution.

When I presented the first Presidential Address of this administration, the Government was in its infancy. Perhaps that day, some of us may have thought that the new Government would not last its lawful term of office. However, fate paved its way in accordance to our plans.

In my view, it would be everyone’s wish to sustain this competitive political system, which we all worked so hard to establish.

The consequences of measures that the Government may have to take to safeguard this system against actions based on unrealistic hopes would be borne not only by the Government, but also by the opposition. I don’t believe that anyone of us would want that to happen. The sensible way would indeed be to set aside such personal rivalry, to build national foundations.

Elections are to be held in 2013. I am not saying that it is any less important for political parties to prepare for them. However, if getting prepared means obstructing governance, the Government and many other parties would come out in the defence of such actions with great passion. If that happens, it would certainly trigger chain reactions, causing great damage – not only to individuals, but to the entire political system. I am sure none

of us would wish such a disastrous situation. Therefore, our nation greatly needs the support of this esteemed Majlis.

The leaders of the strongest four to five political parties in the Maldives are members of this esteemed Majlis. I am confident that they would make genuine contributions of expertise, advice and participation at the very forefront in matters of state.

I assure you that this administration will do everything possible to maintain political collaboration. To achieve this cooperation, I also assure you that, with the grace of God, we will extend our full support, or move away from any position that may be necessary in the larger interests of the nation.

In my address at this esteemed Majlis last year, I stated that my administration was prepared to provide equitable services to all citizens and to be accountable to the people. As the new administration is passing a year and four months, I note that we have made satisfactory progress in these endeavours.

When the budget was submitted to the sixteenth session of People's Majlis on December of 2008, the estimated deficit for 2009 was Rf 5.7 billion. But, when the supplementary budget was submitted in March, the deficit was reduced to Rf 2.2 billion. However, due to the global financial crisis of 2009 which also affected the Maldives, the estimated revenue of Rf 10.2 billion fell to Rf 6.2 billion. As a result, with the many austerity measures taken, the deficit stood at Rf 5.9 billion at the end of the year.

Debts in 2009 to foreign financial agencies and banks stood at 553.8 million dollars. This amount is 37.6% of our GDP.

Recurrent expenditure of Government as estimated in 2008 was Rf 8.7 billion. The 2009 supplementary (mid- term budget) estimated recurrent expenditure as Rf8.6 billion. However, expenditure at the end of 2009 was Rf7.9 billion, indicating successful achievement of efforts to reduce Government expenditure. The recurrent expenditure for 2010 was estimated at Rf8.3 billion. The Majlis approved Rf9.1 billion as estimated expenditure.

Addressing this esteemed Majlis last year, I assured you that our Government would strive continuously to find solutions to address the problem of dollar shortages faced by the country.

I am happy to note that the Government had taken significant steps to address this issue. In this regard, assistance from the United Nations was sought; the Government embraced the advice of international financial agencies and began the implementation of some of the measures suggested by these agencies. We have started enjoying the benefits of these measures. The rate of increase of the value of the dollar is presently at check and the Government hopes to eliminate dollar shortages, and normalise the value of the dollar by the middle of this year.

An important facet of accepting advice of international agencies I highlighted earlier is linked with reducing payroll expenditure, as well as general Government expenditure. The measures also included processes to increase revenues of the state. Government policies to free our nation from the current economic downturn, has now been made public. This has been explained to the Civil Service Commission through various interactions. I strongly believe that viewing such crises from a national perspective should be the responsibility of every individual citizen.

I make note of and thank the large number of Government and civil service employees who continue to bear with these difficulties with patience, in the interest of the nation. I appeal to them to implement Government policies to address the economic downturn, in a patient, strategic and intelligent manner. I assure all of you in this Majlis that the Government will continue to make every possible effort to bring about a positive change to the salaries of civil servants and Government employees.

Most of the State revenue from taxes in the Maldives is through indirect taxation. This creates problems in managing finances and the economy, in line with international standards. This esteemed Majlis has also continuously highlighted this issue and the Government has submitted two Bills last year to reform the tax system. They are the Bill on Administration of Taxation and the Bill on Business Profit Tax. I am confident that this Majlis will work to ensure that these two bills are passed as soon as possible. In addition to the two bills mentioned above, the Government has submitted the Bill on Taxing from Sales of Tourism Service Providers. Also, the Government will submit a bill proposing amendments to the Tourism Act – Act number 2/99. If income from tourism is taxed in accordance with the proposed bill, current taxing on tourism will change to island rent; and there will be a change in lease period of islands allocated for tourism.

These changes proposed by the Government have been discussed with all stakeholders. The advice of international financial agencies has also been sought. The Government is confident that these changes will positively impact on the tourism industry.

In order to generate solutions for the lack of financial resources, which is the greatest challenge faced by small and medium enterprises, work of establishing a bank specialized in granting loans for small and medium enterprises has been initiated. The business plan for this venture as well as related administrative work has been completed and it is planned to establish this bank by mid 2010. The Ministry of Economic Development conducted a Rf18.8 million Fund to issue soft loans for small and medium enterprises. I am happy to announce that this scheme allocated 40% of loans specifically for women. The Ministry of Economic Development plans to issue additional loans in 2010.

The Government is making great efforts within and outside the country, to expand trade and investment, and create a business environment that facilitates exports. 18 approvals for foreign investments were granted in 2009, and 11 of these investments have been registered. The total amount of registered foreign investment in 2009 was US Dollar 22 million.

An important measure implemented in 2009, with regard to developing the education system was the formulation of reliable school indicators, and implementation of new standards for the assessment of schools. 101 schools were changed to single session schools. 1817 teachers were trained. School boards have been established and schools are being managed with direct input from the people. As a result of the efforts to improve the quality of education in 2009, the number of school leavers who obtained passes in 5 subjects increased from 27 percent to 32 percent.

The main target of 2010 is to increase the number of school leavers who obtain passes in 5 subjects from the 32 percent achieved last year to 41 percent; and minimise the U grades to a total of 5%. The Government will continue its efforts to change schools with higher student populations into single session schools.

Loan-schemes for students facing financial difficulties to continue their higher studies have been formulated. Including loan assistance provided for students as accommodation stipends, the Government has introduced three main loan schemes.

Ensuring affordable and quality healthcare, services offered through the Madhana insurance scheme have been expanded from covering only government employees to include all citizens. Those without the means to participate in the scheme will be subsidised by the Government. In addition, Madhana Plus has been introduced to facilitate medical treatments abroad for those illnesses for which the Maldives currently do not have facilities. As a result, a quarter of the Maldivian population now enjoy some form of health insurance scheme.

More than 29000 people obtained services from Madhana in 2009. This amounts to over Rf78 million in healthcare expenses.

The Government signed an agreement with Apollo Group of India to develop and broaden the services offered by the Indira Gandhi Memorial Hospital. Up to 20 million dollars will be invested in the hospital, according to the agreement. This investment includes infrastructure development, investment in machinery and training of Maldivians.

The Dhivehi Red Crescent has been established, by law, as an organization that will respond to natural disasters and medical emergencies.

In collaboration with Khalifa Foundation of Abu Dhabi, the Ministry of Health will commence a program to upgrade 38 island health centres to the highest quality standards. As a result of this project the quality of services of some island health centres may be better than some of the existing hospitals. Despite this progress, the Government does not plan to elevate the categorization of these centres from health centres to hospitals.

Health service corporations will be formed in Male' and all the provinces within this year; and opportunities to manage additional hospitals as public private partnerships (PPP) with the Government will be opened.

Establishment of Health and Family Directorates and signing of contracts between the Province Offices and the Ministry of Health will take place in the near future. This will enable decentralization of services of the Ministry, and to enable closer access to these services for the people.

Bills will be drafted and submitted to this Majlis to establish a system for health insurance; and ensure easy access to basic healthcare by the citizens.

I stated last year that my Government would work tirelessly to solve problems faced due to the lengthy waiting period to obtain justice, even after arrests and investigations. Our efforts in this regard have increased the proportion of people who were sentenced and their sentences executed by 69.7% last year, as compared to 2008. The percentage of people prosecuted increased by 88.2%.

The Government has achieved notable progress in fulfilling its pledge of preventing entry of illicit drugs to the country. There was an increase of 41.4% in the number of people arrested for drug abuse, when compared with 2008 figures.

I assure you, that this Government will continue and strengthen its efforts to free our families from the grief resulting from drug abuse, and to protect youth and future generations from the addiction to drugs.

I stated last year that the Government will make great efforts to provide affordable housing, and strengthen family ties.

Affordable housing for the people is the most important of the Government's five key pledges. Projects to construct 10,000 housing units have now been formulated and the Government decided, in 2008, that 7000 of these units will be constructed in the seven provinces.

Under these housing projects, several islands have been identified to build 1000 housing units in each of the seven provinces. Since submission of expression of interest to undertake this project was opened on 18 March 2009, three international companies have started negotiations with the Government. Out of the three companies, two are Indian companies while the other is a Thai company. Through these three companies, we will be able to build 4000 housing units, and out of which, the Government estimates 800 units to be completed within this year.

Under the programme to assist tsunami affected families, 309 houses that have been built in Thaa Villifushi, have now been occupied; 240 houses have been constructed in Laamu Gan; tender process is underway for the houses to be built in Meem Kolhufushi; work has begun for the houses that will be built in Thaa Madifushi; construction work of 45 houses in Laam Maabaidhoo is underway; work for 298 houses in Gaaf Alif Villingili, Nilandhoo, Maamendhoo and Dhaandhoo is going on; 78% work has been completed for the 134 houses in Haa Dhaal Nolvivaranfaru, while building of 47 houses is underway; 59 houses for the people of Dhaal Rinbudhoo who were relocated to Kaaf Thulusdhoo

have now completed; and, construction work of 27 houses are soon to be completed in Gaaf Alif Gemanafushi.

The Government has taken several measures to reduce the cost for producing electricity and to run powerhouses through their own revenue. In this regard, last year, STELCO was corporatized. The Government is providing subsidies to the households whose standard of living has been affected and whose life might have become much harder because of corporatizing STELCO.

Other projects are being planned and implemented, to reduce electricity tariffs for the common people in the future. In this regard, last November, STELCO signed an agreement with an overseas company, who has already begun survey work, to establish a 75MW wind energy project. In addition, Upper-South Utilities Company is doing feasibility studies with two investors. Last November, the Southern Utilities Company signed an MoU with Suzlon of India to undertake a 25MW wind energy project, and micro-sighting for this project has begun already. Besides these two projects, the Government believes that more such energy projects could begin this year.

Last year, I stated that the people of the Maldives were in need of basic utilities such as water, sewerages, harbours, electricity and roads, and that those services would be provided in an affordable and sustainable manner through corporatisation.

To improve the sewerage systems, sewer systems have been established in 13 islands. Out of those 13 islands, sewerage systems in 6 islands were completed after November 2008. Ground work is underway in 11 islands. Bidding stage is complete for the construction work in two islands.

In 27 islands, designing work of sewerage systems is complete and opened for expression of interest. Submission for expression of interest to design and build sewerage and water system has been opened for 10 islands. Further, MWSC has been selected to provide safe drinking water for the people of Haa Dhaal Kulhudhuffushi and Gaaf Dhaal Thinadhoo.

In 2009, 20 harbours were completed and groundwork is underway in 22 islands. Agreements have been signed for land reclamation in 4 islands. In addition, in M. Maduvvari and Naalaafushi where erosion is a major problem, embankments and revetments have been built.

Last year in my address to this esteemed Majlis, I mentioned that the worry-free life aspired to by the people was based on the fulfilment of all necessary conditions of decentralized administration of the regions.

Today I note with pleasure that the Government, over the past year, undertook very satisfactory work to achieve those targets.

To facilitate decentralized administration, the Government abolished the Ministry of Atolls Administration and its work was transferred to the Ministry of Home Affairs. And,

the work that was transferred to the Ministry of Home Affairs has been re-assigned under the State Ministers appointed to the seven regions.

Last January, the positions of State Ministers were re-designated in line with their respective provinces.

Last year, three separate MNDF area commands were established and MNDF personnel transferred their living quarters or homes to their respective areas of service.

Under management contracts signed between the Ministry of Education and the seven province offices this January, some of the functions of the Ministry have been transferred to province offices.

Utilities Boards have now been established in each of the seven provinces. To speed up the judicial process, desks of the Prosecutor General's Office are placed at the islands. In this regard, functions of the Prosecutor General's Office have started in Seenu Hithadhoo, Haa Dhaal Kulhudhuffushi, Gaaf Dhaal Thinadhoo, Gaaf Alif Villingili and Fuamulah.

Appealing for positive consideration and support from Honourable members, I would like to state that the Government will resubmit the Decentralisation Bill that was submitted to the Majlis last year, with some amendments made after consultations with political parties and others sources.

As I said earlier, the support of this esteemed Majlis is paramount for the Government. The Government desires to advance the principle of resolving matters through dialogue and deliberation with all political parties. At the moment, we must embark on many endeavours for this nation. In the coming 2 to 4 months, several projects are on course to be started. Therefore, in my mind, if a framework to resolve issues through dialogue among the different political parties represented at this esteemed Majlis could be constituted, that would provide many benefits for the people. Hence, I appeal to this esteemed Majlis that those members among you who have disagreements, to talk to the Government so that the bills submitted by the Government are speedily passed, even if it should be with amendments they want.

As you would know, the Government is making several efforts to protect our delicate environment and to promote tourism.

In this regard, a number of relevant meetings have taken place to promote the protection of coral reefs, diving sites and to safeguard protected marine zones. Discussions have been held with the collaboration of Environmental Protection Agency to ensure that due attention is given to this matter in the projects undertaken by Government institutions.

Forecast projections for job requirements for the newly established resorts have been done, and a study has been done to identify the difficulties faced by newcomers to the industry after training, and on possible ways to overcome those difficulties. Also, last year, measures to improve training facilities were identified and undertaken. In addition,

several work were done last year to ensure sustainable diversification of the tourism industry, and to pave the way for the industry's benefits to be equitably shared by the people.

The Tourism industry is now returning to previous levels, and tourist arrivals are now picking up. Tourist arrivals in last January were the highest in any given month of January. This is a good omen; it is a sign that revenue from tourism will increase this year.

In the third Tourism Master Plan 36,659 beds are planned to be developed by 2012. To make this Plan successful, instead of making available only a single category of rooms, we need to pave the way for cheaper holidays. This year, we will begin establishing mid-market tourism in the Maldives. The Government has now submitted a bill to this esteemed Majlis to bring changes to tourism taxation.

I estimate that several more projects will be carried out to expand the services of Maldivian airports. As you would know, the Government signed an MoU with GMR Company of India to upgrade Hanimaadhoo Airport to an international airport.

Invest Maldives has announced for Expression of Interest to upgrade and develop Gan Airport in Addu Atoll. We estimate to receive an investment of US Dollar 30 million for this project. To date, Government is in discussion with three overseas parties.

The International Finance Corporation (IFC) is the transition advisor for the Government and the Airports Company Limited, to invest over US Dollar 250 million for the development of Male' International Airport and to find a joint venture partner in making the company a profitable one. After reviewing the different transaction structures proposed by IFC, the Government has now selected six eligible parties. The six parties include companies from India, Canada, Turkey, Switzerland and France. With the grace of God, a partner will soon be chosen to upgrade the Male' International Airport and work will begin soon.

The Government had decided to establish a Fisheries Training Institution to improve and broaden the fisheries sector in the Maldives and to train fishermen on how to exploit modern technology. Moreover, the Government has decided to open the skipjack tuna industry for more investors.

The Government accords a high priority to introduce mari-culture in the Maldives. With the grace of God, two such projects will begin this year.

Also, last year, under the Fisheries Sector Development Project, efforts to provide loan assistance were taken. Similarly, work to standardize quality of fish exported to EU was done last year.

Today my appeal to Maldivian fishermen is to find a new method for fishing. Those massive fishing vessels that we built yesterday, that are now anchored in the lagoons as they are not suitable for pole-and-line fishing, are causing us immense loss. What we

have been hearing is that it is not feasible to burn fuel and engage in pole-and-line fishing in those vessels. Hence, finding a feasible alternative for fishing is the new thinking that I am talking about. Experts have advised me that it would be more profitable to use these bigger vessels for group long-line fishing. Financial and technical support for fishermen adopting this method will be provided through the Ministry of Fisheries and Agriculture. I urge fishermen to take to the seas once again.

As you would know, some foreign fishing vessels were issued licences to do long-line fishing within 75 miles of our fishing zone. As a result of the cabinet decision made last year to halt issuing such licences, starting from April this year, foreign vessels will not fish in our fishing zone. Fishing in those areas will, henceforth, be carried out by Maldivian vessels.

Last year, much work were also done to develop agriculture in the Maldives. In this regard, establishing new agricultural training centres, upgrading established centres and long-term leasing of uninhabited islands are notable.

Last year, under the Agriculture Development Programme and with the collaboration of the Bank of Maldives, applications for soft loans were opened. The agreement signed between the Ministry of Fisheries and Agriculture and the Bank of Maldives will pave the way for Maldivian farmers to reap the benefits of these soft loans.

Under activities targeted for youth, in 2009 a number of youth were active as volunteers. Likewise, with the grace of God, a legal framework for youth development will be designed and its implementation will start this year.

In order to develop youth, Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) was established. The TVET system was strengthened and a number of training programmes were carried out under this system. This project is intended to play an important role in reintegrating disenfranchised youth back into the society and encouraging their positive engagement.

The Government gives priority to protecting the rights of employees and employers, and is attempting to create awareness on the ILO Convention among the Government ranks, employers and employees with the assistance of the ILO, as is required for the signing of the ILO Convention.

In the area of sports development in the year 2010, sports centres will be decentralized under the National Sports Council. Preparations to host a water-sports festival in the Maldives by the year 2012 will be initiated this year. Plans are also underway to establish a National Sports Institute in the Maldives. Liaising with the Ministry of Education, the 'Sports for All' program will enable every student in all single session schools to participate in a sport early this year. With the formulation of a national sports policy, a National Sports Council has now been established. A sports framework at the provincial level has also been formulated.

Following a cabinet decision taken on 29 December 2009, ‘temporary special measures’ were introduced in areas where gender inequality and discrimination based on gender prevailed. This initiative will be a component of the gender mainstreaming process in the Maldives. Gender mainstreaming is expected to reduce the damage and harm brought on by cultural and societal gender discrimination.

In January this year, a ‘Forum of the Role of Women in Development’ was held with the participation of members of women’s committees of all the islands of the Maldives and the Province Offices. The recommendations and propositions of the forum were incorporated into the bill on Decentralization, and it is my ardent hope that this bill is passed in the People’s Majlis.

To reduce the financial burden and assist in overcoming difficulties and disparities faced by the less fortunate families and senior citizens, the Pensions Act was adopted, a fundamental pension for senior citizens and, a retirement pension scheme for employees were introduced and is currently in operation. A gender mainstreaming framework based on the Government’s policies was formulated, and this framework has been adopted. The law on special measures in dealing with paedophiles is now enforced.

Special programs will be conducted this year with technical expertise to improve the quality of services provided to children and adults under the state’s protection. In order to put in place essential laws and regulations to protect the most vulnerable of society, a bill proposing revisions to the existing Children’s Act, and a bill on domestic violence will be submitted to this esteemed Majlis within this year. In addition, the recommendations presented at the National Forum on Women’s Role in Development held in January this year, have been incorporated into the decentralization bill, with the aim of attaining legal status for women’s development committees.

To ease the burden on financially disadvantaged persons and to support them directly, some subsidies are now being issued. The Government initiated the program of subsidies to all citizens over 65 with the intention of improving the quality of life of senior citizens.

As an austerity measure to reduce wasteful spending, and to ensure fair distribution without discrimination, it was decided to dispense all welfare assistance under a comprehensive state social protection system overseen by a single administrative office.

Work will also be initiated to establish a social security fund in order to provide welfare assistance to the less fortunate in a sustainable manner. God willing, this Government will not be reticent or take a single step backward in ensuring that we fulfil our promise of prosperity and happiness for all citizens through good Governance and a benevolent state.

Major policies have been formulated to achieve the pledge of establishing a nation-wide transport system. Under this policy, agreements have been signed with various parties to establish the systems. The chosen parties will begin their services within this year.

There have been favourable outcomes following increased efforts to improve bilateral diplomatic relations and attract foreign aid and assistance. Within the past couple of months, approximately US Dollars 16 million worth of foreign grant aid has been directed to the Maldives. These include the 10 million US dollars pledged by the EU and the 5.8 million dollars pledged by the Abu Dhabi Khalifa Foundation.

In order to improve bilateral ties, diplomatic relations have been established with Republic of Uruguay, Trinidad and Tobago, Montenegro and Republic of Kosovo. In addition, I have undertaken trips to friendly countries as India, Sri Lanka, the UK, Italy, and Sweden, UAE, Qatar and Bahrain to further enhance bilateral relations. Consular services provided by Maldivian missions and embassies abroad have been greatly diversified. Also the Maldives was represented at the United Nations General Assembly, Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting and the UN Climate Summit at the Copenhagen. As you would know, the Maldivian delegation played a central role at the Copenhagen Summit.

Although the Maldives is not yet a full member of the UN Human Rights Council, the role of the Maldives within the council has been greatly strengthened. Moreover, the Maldives has this year submitted its candidature for the membership of the Council.

Under a new system, National Awards of honour and Awards of Recognition were given last year.

An independent National Awards Committee, of members from different areas, was established.

In recognition of their services to the nation, the Government had decided to provide opportunities for the conferees of National Awards to participate as guests of honour at functions organised by the Government.

In light of these points, as the Maldives passes the milestones and stages of consolidating democracy, our prospects and the times ahead appear clear, bright and prosperous. People are content and their lives are flourishing. With the grace of God, the Government's continued efforts to provide even more fulfilment and prosperity for the people will result in easing and enriching their lives further this year.

As I also stated at the beginning, this address to the esteemed Majlis will be centred on the message that all endeavours of the Government are constant efforts aimed at bringing about benefits and prosperity to all. Therefore, I call again for the cooperation and support of the honourable Members of the People's Majlis and to transcend political turmoil and differences of thought and ideology. I call for those beloved citizens who might harbour what might be considered extremist ideas and opinions to be moderate and soften their ways of thinking. I call for all citizens to prioritize friendship and understanding for the harmony and progress of society.

May Allah bestow His bountiful blessings forever on the Maldives and its people. May the work of this esteemed Majlis be more productive and successful. Aameen.

Thank you very much. Praise be to God

Social justice not present in Maldives, say experts

A panel of experts has raised concerns, claiming there was no social justice in the Maldives.

Speaking in a forum at SHE Building, to mark World Day of Social Justice, Deputy Human Rights Commissioner Mohamed Zahid, Founder Member of Care Society Fathimath Afiya and lawyer Mohamed Anil agreed Maldivians did not have access to equal rights and opportunities.

“We are hearing... that a new constitution is established, new laws are being made and that a person does not get justice at the courts,” Zahid, an expert on social development said.

“While a new constitution and laws are implemented, there are certain difficulties in our society, which prevents us from establishing social justice.”

The three emphasized that a person, regardless of their wealth, religion, race, or political beliefs, should be provided with equal opportunities for personal development and welfare. They raised concerns about the discriminations in the society, concerning age, gender, beliefs, island, atoll, family, and wealth.

Speaking at the forum organized by Democracy House in collaboration with UNDP, Anil and Afiya noted that discriminations were common in treating individuals in unique situations.

“While discriminations are seen among the public, I believe that they are much common against vulnerable groups,” Anil, who was also a founder member of Democracy House, said.

He stressed that discriminations were mostly common in treating persons with disabilities, adding that opportunities were less for them.

“There are some situations that they [the disabled] do not have the opportunity of getting education. There are no ways [for the disabled] to earn an income,” Anil added.

Afiya said vulnerable groups, including children, women, senior citizens and people with different religious beliefs were neglected in the society. She added such discriminations violated some of the UN conventions Maldives has signed.

Afiya, who is pursuing a doctoral degree in Human Rights and Peace Studies, also noted that people living in the islands were neglected and added the centralization of services in Male was also discrimination.

“All the services are centralized in Male and a large gap is still present in the islands,” Afiya said.

“I hope the services will be distributed among the atolls, under the decentralization program.”

The experts also noted that despite democracy, being the consent of majority of people, the minority groups should not be neglected.

“The democratic system should be established in ways that the voices of the minority are included,” she said.

“Even if we look at the Maldives, there are minor groups within the society. We should conform to a political situation, where the beliefs and ideas of the minority are welcome.”

The participants of the forum also noted that the social justice should be provided through laws, policies, and institutions so that a person is not forced to seek court orders for it.

India-Pakistan Talks: Nepali Viewpoint

Maybe they should have installed a closed circuit TV camera inside the hall sending live feeds over the Web. That could have saved millions of people from confusion. No one knows for sure what exactly happened inside Hyderabad House, a New Delhi landmark, where foreign secretaries of India and Pakistan held talks on Thursday. After the talks held out of the media glare were over, the leaders of the delegations went to address the press separately to provide conflicting details of the talks. Indian foreign secretary Nirupama Rao said the discussions were mainly focused on the issue of terrorism and briefly touched Kashmir while her Pakistani counterpart Salman Bashir stated the exact opposite. The same contrast was splashed all over the front pages of newspapers of both countries on Friday with Indian media persons blaming the Pakistani side for trying to score points over the talks and their Pakistani counterparts stating that no progress was made at the meeting as India “engaged in a game of doubletalk, saying one thing while meaning the other”. Nothing different was expected, in fact, from both sides as we know they have very different concerns and priorities. While terrorism is an issue of the topmost importance to India, Pakistan can’t put Kashmir aside. India wants Hafiz Saeed, a man it thinks plotted and executed the Mumbai attack, to be arrested and tried in Pakistan. India said that it submitted three dossiers to Pakistan detailing anti-India activities of terrorists based in Pakistan. Maintaining that the talks shouldn’t be limited to the issue of terror, Pakistan, on the other hand, wanted to discuss India’s violations of the Indus Water Treaty that concerns sharing the water of six rivers that flow into Pakistan through India’s Jammu and Kashmir. Despite their contrasting interests, I believe, Indians and Pakistanis should get some inspiration from the Oscar-nominated movie *Invictus* that is now being screened around the world. I am well aware that cinemas and international

diplomacy are two different things. But then this movie is based on a true story, and this is the part of the subcontinent where movies are integrated deeply into the people's lifestyles. Based on Nelson Mandela's effort to unify his racially divided post-apartheid South Africa by using the 1995 Rugby World Cup, the movie depicts how people can rebuild a society by choosing to forgive the enemy and appreciate one another. Blacks hate whites and whites dislike blacks. Blacks are in a majority, whites control the economy. Whites jailed him for years in a small cell, blacks voted him to the mammoth presidential palace. Demonstrating true leadership, Mandela persuades his black compatriots by example to forget the past, forgive the enemy and join hands with them to build a nation, the rainbow nation.

While travelling around India, I have experienced firsthand the deep resentment that many ordinary Indians harbour against Pakistanis, in many cases for no convincing reason. I am sure the same happens with ordinary Pakistanis. A receptionist at a Mumbai hotel in July told me he would cut a Pakistani or a Bangladeshi into pieces if they ever came to his hotel. "I am neither of them, but also not an Indian," I said. "I am from Nepal. Am I welcome here?" "Arre yar, Nepali toh apne hi hey," he said. (Nepalis are our own, my friend.) I was relieved to hear that; nevertheless, I remained disturbed for several days by the man's hatred against his other neighbours. That was the same kind of hatred that existed for many years in South African society even after the end of apartheid.

The Thursday talks might not have been a ground breaking event, but they have certainly paved the way for future talks and negotiations between the two powerful neighbours. The South Asian rivals were officially talking for the first time after the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks that almost pushed them into war. Hawks in India were talking about "bombing Pakistan in retaliation" while their counterparts on the other side of the border were no less enthusiastic about fighting. As time passed, all that raw emotion and anger evaporated and common sense prevailed even though the main opposition party in India, the BJP, is opposing the diplomatic move arguing that not talking (to Pakistan) can also be an option. Many fundamentalists in Pakistan are also voicing the same, disappointing many others who see engaging with India as the only means to build a better relationship. The recent Pune attacks provided hardliners and anti-talk camps yet another reason to reassert their stand. But that didn't discourage the Indian prime minister from initiating the process of dialogue with Pakistan. Some say India initiated the dialogue process only after "a gentle prodding" or "a sustained pressure" from the Americans. Whatever the propeller may be, something good has started which hopefully will reduce the hostility that exists between the neighbours.

Kuwait monarch seeks Nepali soldiers for security
Their valour and daredevilry have earned the Gurkha soldiers from Nepal lot of fans worldwide. And now the ruler of Kuwait-the oil rich west Asian nation wants them for his security. Kuwait has requested the Nepal government for 200 serving Nepali soldiers who are to be employed in providing security to Emir Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah-the ruling monarch. The proposal has been forwarded by the Nepal embassy in Kuwait to the army headquarters through the foreign ministry. Reports say that the defence ministry has responded positively to the request. The soldiers would have to be less than 35 years of age and served in the army for 12 to 15 years with specialized training on providing security to VVIPs. "Kuwait has asked for some 150 to 200 incumbent soldiers as body guards. We are positive on that," the *Nagarik *daily quoted defence ministry spokesperson Sreedhar Prasad Pokhrel. This is not the first time that services of Nepali

soldiers have been sought by ruling families of oil-rich nations in Asia. There have been similar instances in the past as well. Four years back 55 serving Nepali soldiers were given retirement and sent to United Arab Emirates to serve as guards at the palace of the country's ruler Sheikh Khalifa II bin Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan.

Nepal malnutrition affecting half of under-fives

Nearly half of Nepal's children under five are suffering from malnutrition, a report by the Nepalese government says. The study says there has been steady but slow progress in cutting poverty in the past decade but more needs to be done to tackle poor nutrition. Health experts say extra attention should be given to Nepalese women before and during pregnancy, and in the first two years of an infant's life.

They say without this a child is likely to have permanent intellectual damage.

National health plan

The report says that nearly half of the country's 1.7 million under-fives are stunted or suffer from chronic malnutrition. In the past few years Nepal has rolled-out programmes to combat deficiencies in micronutrients - giving children vitamin A supplements and encouraging the purchase of iodized salt. But health experts say that more needs to be done. The United Nations Children's Fund is supporting the government to deal with the issue. Their country representative, Gillian Mellsop, says that the Nepalese government is aware of the long-term consequences of poor nutrition. "When a child is stunted, it means that they're not going to meet their intellectual potential." "If you have children well-nourished you're going to have the basis of a population that is ready for school, productive members of society and a really developing Nepal, socially and economically." The Nepalese government plans to use an already established network of 50,000 female health volunteers to combat malnutrition.

It says it plans to make nutrition a key element of its upcoming national health plan.

tS. Arabia, Iran, Nepal pull out of Tour de Pakistan race over security fears

Lahore, Mar. 1 (ANI): Saudi Arabia, Iran and Nepal have pulled out of the 15th Tour de Pakistan cycle race owing to safety concerns. The News quoted a Pakistan Cycling Federation (PCF) spokesman, as saying on Sunday that the three countries had opted out of the race that begins from Peshawar today. "Obviously they have security concerns and have pulled out for this reason but the Afghanistan team members have already reached Peshawar," the official added. Meanwhile, the eight-member Afghanistan team, comprising five cyclists and three officials, was given a warm welcome by organizers in Peshawar after reaching the city via Torkham. NWFP Governor Owais Ahmed Ghani will inaugurate the race, which will conclude on March 13 at the Mazar-e-Quaid, Karachi after going through eleven stages. (ANI)

US warns against adopting in Nepal

KATHMANDU — The United States has warned its citizens against adopting children in Nepal, saying it has "grave concerns" about the reliability of that country's adoption system.

The government urged prospective adoptive parents to choose another country, citing the case of a young Nepalese girl placed in the custody of an American couple without the consent of her biological mother and father.

"The US Department of State strongly discourages prospective adoptive parents from choosing Nepal as a country from which to adopt due to grave concerns about the reliability of Nepal's adoption system," it said in a statement on its website dated March 4.

Nepal introduced new adoption legislation in 2008 following reports of widespread abuses of the system by unscrupulous agents who were effectively trafficking children overseas for profit.

Twenty Nepalese children have been adopted by foreign parents since the system restarted last year, seven of whom are in the US, but experts say little has changed since the new rules came into force.

The State Department said that in one of the first cases processed by the Nepal government, the US embassy in Kathmandu found the birth parents of the adopted child were actively searching for her.

The US government warning follows a recommendation last month from a team of international legal experts based in The Hague that international adoptions of Nepalese children be suspended.

They said their investigations found documents were routinely falsified and children's homes were largely unregulated, with the interests of the child often not considered at all.

Germany moved to suspend adoptions from Nepal after the findings of The Hague team's investigations were made public, and 14 embassies in Kathmandu issued a statement urging the Nepalese government to tighten controls.

- **Impunity for rights violators, UN watchdog flays Nepal**

Kathmandu, Mar 3 (PTI) The UN rights watchdog has flayed the Nepal government for "impunity" for rights violators as it warned that political developments in the country have made the peace process "increasingly fragile".

A report by the Office of United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in Nepal (OHCHR-Nepal), scheduled to be presented at the 13th session of the Human Rights Council in Geneva on March 24, warned that the government and political parties are ignoring human rights issues, which would have serious implications on the sustainability of the 2006 peace process.

The report said recent political developments in Nepal have pushed the peace process to an "increasingly fragile state", according to the Kantipur online.

"The government has failed to implement the vast majority of recommendations made by the Commission while cooperation by state security forces with human rights investigations, including investigations by OHCHR into conflict-related violations, remains poor," it said.

Nepal to grow by 2.53%: Report

Kathmandu: Nepal's economy, which is still reeling from a decade-long civil war that came to an end in 2006, is expected to grow by 2.53 percent this year, according to a top report.

According to the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), the current fiscal year's growth in GDP is much lower than the budgetary target of 5.5 percent.

CBS estimates that the overall size of the economy will touch USD 15.68 billion by the end of the current fiscal year ending in mid-July. Nepal's total GDP at market price was USD 13.22 billion last year.

Among the major sectors of Nepal's economy, the agriculture sector is estimated to grow by a minimal 1.12 percent against the initial target of 3.3 percent. Last year, the sector grew by 3 percent.

Adverse weather conditions that dragged down the output of prime agriculture products like paddy and maize are the major reason behind the low performance of the agriculture sector, according to CBS.

Similarly, the non-agriculture sector has been estimated to increase by 3.6 percent whereas the budgetary expectation was 6.6 percent.

The industrial sector is estimated to grow by 3.88 percent. After two consecutive years of contraction, the CBS expects the manufacturing sector to expand by 2.65 percent while the construction sector is estimated to grow by 6.62 percent.

The 22-party coalition led by CPN-UML has vowed to establish peace and stability in the country so as to boost economy after a decade-long Maoists-led insurgency which ended in 2006.

Govt to consider exports of grains: Pawar

NEW DELHI: India, sitting on a huge stockpile of grains, will soon discuss lifting a ban on exports of wheat and common grades of rice, the farm ministersaid on Thursday. Sharad Pawar told reporters a panel of ministers headed by Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee would meet next week to discuss the issue as the

country has the ability to export grains. "This will be discussed in the next meeting. We have to take a definite view," he said.

India, the world's second-biggest wheat producer, recently approved the sale of small quantities of wheat from government stocks to neighbouring Nepal. Government officials last month said the country would sell an additional 200,000 tonnes of wheat to Nepal, despite a ban on overseas sales of the grain, and may supply limited quantities of rice to Bangladesh.

On Feb. 1, stocks of wheat at warehouses were at 20.6 million tonnes, up 22.6 percent from a year earlier, while that of rice rose 26.7 percent to 25.6 million tonnes. The government banned exports of wheat in early 2007 and prohibited overseas sales of common rice varieties in 2008.

Nepal's gold import crosses 14 tonnes

KATHMANDU, March 4 (Xinhua): Nepal's gold import crossed over 14.03 tonnes, which is about two-fold higher than the annual total demand, in mere first seven-and-a-half months of 2009/10, thanks to cross-border duty difference, local media reported Thursday.

According to myrepublica.com report, Nepal Gold and Silver Dealers' Association (Negosida), which argues that the country's total gold demand increased substantially this year with more people taking gold as alternate investment avenue, estimates that the monthly national demand of yellow metal remains just at around 450 kg.

But statistics shows that import in each of the month from mid- July 2009 to February well exceeded this figure-highest one being 2,875 kg for the month ending mid-January (sixth month of the fiscal year).

Even the lowest import quantity, recorded at 696.5 kg for the month of mid-February after the central bank intervened into the market, is well above the actual domestic demand, said a customs official. Import over the first 15 days of the eighth month too stands at 675 kg.

Over the first seven-and-a-half months of 2009/10, duty in India was higher than in Nepal by 190 Nepali rupees (about 2.6 US dollars). And it was enough to ensure handsome return to the illicit traders.

If what happened in the past was bad, then country is presently exposed to even worse situation, according to the report.

India has further increased its import duty, pushing duty difference between the two countries up to 350 rupees (some 4.8 dollars), it said.

NEPAL: Stalled government policy leaves IDPs in limbo

KATHMANDU, 4 March 2010 (IRIN) - Efforts to help thousands of families displaced during Nepal's decade-long armed conflict (1996-2006) to return to their homes or

resettle have stalled over government inaction, leaving many unassisted, aid agencies say.

There are an estimated 52,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) registered with the government, according to the Ministry of Peace and Reconstruction (MOPR), although the UN estimates there could be up to 70,000.

In 2007, the government formulated a national IDP policy that allowed for the return, integration and resettlement of IDPs.

Crucial directives for implementing the policy on the ground were also submitted to the Cabinet at the end of 2007, but are still waiting to be approved.

“The failed implementation of the IDP policy is clearly at the heart of the problem,” said Frederik Kok, senior country analyst with the Norwegian Refugee Council’s Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC).

“The failure to adopt the directives is undermining return efforts and preventing IDPs from enjoying their full rights,” he told IRIN.

The IDP policy provides assistance which includes shelter, food, security, health services, training and appropriate compensation. It also includes a rehabilitation programme for IDPs to help them recover their lives where they used to reside.

The directives were intended to give clear instructions from the central government to district-level officials on how to implement this policy.

Wendy Cue, head of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in Nepal, said information about the IDP policy and its implementation had not been transmitted to district-level authorities, who are key in ensuring IDP returns and rehabilitation.

“The displaced people haven’t received the type of assistance they need in terms of legal assistance or access to information that the government should provide,” Cue told IRIN.

Assistance lacking

About half of the IDPs are in Kathmandu, where they live in squatter settlements, crowded neighbourhoods and along the Bagmati river. Families are also scattered in the urban areas of Bardiya and Dhangadi districts in the country’s mid- and far-western regions, and other major cities such as Biratnagar and Nepalgunj. “We... have been constantly making efforts to help the IDPs,” Shankar Prasad Pathak, a senior official from the Ministry of Peace and Reconstruction, told IRIN.

“We will be introducing an IDP rehabilitation programme which includes income generation and reintegration support for the IDP families,” he added.

In spite of these efforts, displaced families still lack access to basic services such as water

and sanitation, and health and education, and have poor livelihood opportunities, say agencies.

Mistrust

Meanwhile, those IDPs who do attempt to return to their homes face a number of obstacles, according to the latest report on Nepal IDPs issued on 28 January 2010 by the IDMC.

Returnees have to cope with inadequate livelihood opportunities and discrimination borne of the mistrust amongst communities generated during the years of conflict. Along with the IDPs, returnees are also locked in a struggle to win back homes and land confiscated by the rebel Maoists and their supporters during the conflict.

“We have lost all hope of ever reclaiming our land and have lost our only source of livelihood,” said Dipendra Shrestha, originally from mid-western Bardiya District, but who fled the conflict and now lives in Nepalgunj city.

“The question is, what do they return for when they have no land to grow their crops and many suffer from insecurity,” said Bhola Mahat, regional coordinator of the Informal Sector Service Centre (INSEC), a Nepali human rights group.

Losing

interest?

Besides the stalled implementation of the government’s IDP policy, aid workers say they are now concerned about diminishing interest by the international aid community in this issue, now rarely discussed.

Since 2008 there has been a gradual disengagement of the UN and the international community in general, including international NGOs, from the issue of conflict-induced IDPs, according to the NRC.

“Priorities have now again shifted back to development programmes with decreasing funding available for humanitarian programmes,” said the NRC’s Kok.

The humanitarian community has also lost its capacity, while local and international NGOs and UN agencies are no longer as active on the issue as before, said OCHA's Cue.

“We are trying to get together and find the capacity to have somebody who can focus on this issue to work with the government and get the IDP directives passed,” she added.

Government forces battled Maoist guerrillas for 10 years before a peace agreement was signed in November 2006, ending an anti-monarchist revolt that killed more than 13,000 people.

FNJ asks Nepal, Rawal to quit

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Nepal fails to meet deadline on constitution

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Kathmandu: The panel of lawmakers entrusted with drafting the new constitution of Nepal yesterday rapped three of the top political leaders on their knuckles, accusing them of not being serious about the statute as the nascent republic failed to keep a major date with destiny.

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The Constitutional Committee, which has been mandated to write a new constitution by May, yesterday ordered the chiefs of the three biggest political parties to be present at its next meeting scheduled for tomorrow without fail.

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The three errant leaders, who despite being part of the committee have almost always skipped its meetings, are former prime minister Girija Prasad Koirala, whose Nepali Congress (NC) is the biggest party in the ruling coalition; Jhala Nath Khanal, chief of the Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist Leninist, which is heading the alliance; and Pushpa Kamal Dahal Prachanda, whose Maoist party is the biggest party in parliament.

The octogenarian Koirala has stopped attending parliament and the Constitutional Committee's meetings, reportedly due to illness. However, he continues to hold several key posts, refusing to relinquish any.

Prachanda has been skipping major meetings citing party and personal work and is currently said to be ill as well.

Due to the disregard shown by the top leaders to the statute-drafting process, it is in chaos and unlikely to meet the May 28 deadline, when the constitution should be promulgated.

Yesterday, the Constitutional Committee was to have tabled the first draft of the constitution, which is regarded as the cornerstone of the peace agreement that ended a decade of Maoist insurgency.

However, the committee is yet to start the work due to the failure of the parliamentary committees to submit their recommendations on the key aspects of the statute.

Only two of the 11 parliamentary committees have submitted their reports so far.

In the past, Nepal's parliament, coming under growing fire from people because of its tardiness, has amended the constitution nine times to extend deadlines that it continuously failed to meet. Now the schedule is headed for a 10th amendment with yesterday's deadline failing as well.

The three top parties, still locked in a bitter tussle for power, are said to be now trying to extend the May 28 constitution deadline.

Former NC minister Ram Sharan Mahat this week told a local daily he did not feel the statute would be completed in time while yesterday, Maoist parliamentarian Krishna Bahadur Mahara said in Dang district that a mini constitution could be promulgated on the May date.

But those parliamentarians who want the new statute in time say a "mini constitution" would be a meaningless document and the delay would stoke widespread public anger and probable violence.

The constitution provides that the May 28 deadline may be extended by six months in case of an emergency situation, like a civil war.

However, there is growing fear that the three parties will try to amend the interim constitution to extend the deadline by at least a year.

'Nepal Maoists must shun violence to head coalition'

Kathmandu, Mar 3 (PTI) A senior leader of the ruling party CPN-UML has asked the Maoists to shun violence and dismantle its paramilitary force if it wants to head a government, amid warnings by the former rebels that it would not allow the promulgation of new constitution if it was not allowed to lead a coalition. K.P. Sharma Oli, the leader of CPN-UML that heads the 22-party coalition, said his party would only support a Maoists-led government if they take to peaceful politics by shunning all types of violent activities, adopt constitutional path and dismantle their paramilitary organisations.

Speaking at a function in southern Nepal's Chitawan district, Oli said if the Maoists are ready to fulfil these three conditions, we are ready to participate in the government led by them.

Nepal gets Japanese aid to boost rural infrastructure Kathmandu, Mar 5 (PTI) Japan has pledged to provide a financial aid of USD 11 million to Nepal to improve community access and strengthen infrastructure in the rural areas.

Local Development Secretary Rameshore Prasad Khanal and Japanese ambassador to Nepal Tatsuo Mizuno inked the pact today here to construct some 35 all-weather-motorable bridges in 13 linking roads in Sindhuli, Ramechhap, Kavre, Sindhupalchowk and Mahottari districts in central Terai plains.

The USD 11 million aid would also help in construction of bridges in linking rural road to the BP Koirala Highway in southern Nepal, according to Ministry.

The project to be implemented by the ministry of local development is expected to be completed by July 2012. Japan is among the largest financial aid to Nepal.

Nepal's effort to strengthen its rural infrastructure has been hit by the frequent violence against local contractors and foreign firms who have been targeted by the Maoists.

Nepal, India finalize investment protection agreement KATHMANDU, March 4: Nepal has agreed to compensate Indian investors for any losses they might suffer from non-commercial factors -- like change in tax structure and other policy decisions -- in a bid to lure more investments from the southern neighbor.

As this ended long-running differences over the article on "compensation of loss", technical officials of Nepal and India also finalized the draft of Bilateral Investment Protection and Promotion Agreement (BIPPA) on Thursday

Researchers discover gene that affects susceptibility to TB

WASHINGTON: University of Washington (UW) researchers have discovered a gene that affects susceptibility to tuberculosis (TB). The same gene, boffins have found, has a role in the severity of leprosy, which is caused by a related pathogen. The researchers also have learned why this gene is important for susceptibility.

The gene, *Ita4h*, appears to orchestrate pro-inflammatory and anti-inflammatory responses. When these responses are balanced, the body destroys invaders without unduly hurting itself. But an imbalance results in problems. Either the infection takes hold or damage occurs from an overly aggressive defense.

The findings has been published as the cover story for Cell.

"For a long time, burning questions have been, Why do people differ from each other in their susceptibility or resistance to TB, even when they have the same exposure? Why do those who do contract TB vary in the severity of their illness?" posed the study's senior author, Lalita Ramakrishnan, associate professor of microbiology, medicine, and immunology.

The answers came from zebrafish, a tiny fish whose home is the Ganges River, as well as from people from Vietnam and Nepal.

First, UW researchers David Tobin, John Ray and Lalita Ramakrishnan created random mutations in zebrafish larvae in collaboration with Cecilia Moens, a Howard Hughes Medical Institute investigator at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle and her postdoctoral fellow Gregory Walsh.

They then inoculated the larvae with mycobacteria similar to the germ that causes human tuberculosis. Because zebrafish are transparent, it was easy for the scientists to spot signs of disease. In the fish, growing mycobacteria caused the formation of characteristic structures called granulomas. The fish inoculated with the mycobacteria had a range of outcomes, from resistance to the infection to extremely severe disease.

"We were able to divide the fish into multiple mutant classes with distinct patterns of susceptibility to the mycobacteria. Some fish had worse infections than their siblings, and some had very limited infection." said Tobin, a postdoctoral fellow in microbiology who led the study. "Genetic studies enabled us to map a mutation for hyper-susceptibility to a particular location in the zebrafish genome called the *lta4h* locus."

Sri Lanka's dissolved parliament will reconvene next week to extend a state of emergency after reports that Tamil Tiger remnants are intent on attacks. The office of President Mahinda Rajapaksa said Wednesday he signed a decree extending the emergency by a month and legislators will be asked to vote on it Tuesday. The statement said the government wished to take no risks as Sri Lankans vote for their next parliament on April 8. The Tamil Tigers fought a 25-year civil war for an independent state for minority Tamils before a crushing defeat last May. Between 80,000 and 100,000 people were killed in the violence.

The emergency laws give security authorities wide power to search, detain and arrest terrorist suspects.

RPT-UPDATE 1-India allows some rice exports to Nepal, Sri Lanka

NEW DELHI, March 3 (Reuters) - India has allowed exports of 20,000 tonnes of non-basmati rice to Sri Lanka and 25,000 tonnes to Nepal, the government said in a statement on Wednesday, partly lifting the ban on shipment of regular grades.

Exports would be allowed through two state-run companies, said the Directorate General of Foreign Trade, an arm of the commerce ministry, in an order.

PEC Ltd has been allowed to export rice to Sri Lanka, while MMTC Ltd (MMTC.BO: Quote, Profile, Research) will ship it to Nepal.

India, the second biggest producer of rice in the world, banned non-basmati rice exports in 2008 to ensure smooth domestic supplies.

The decision to allow a limited quantity of the non-basmati rice reflects the federal government's confidence of a healthy rice stocks, despite a high level of food inflation.

India's food price index rose 17.58 percent in the 12 months to Feb. 13, the government said last week. The rise was lower than an annual rise of 17.97 percent in the previous week. (Reporting by Ratnajyoti Dutta; editing by Malini Menon)

Sri Lanka cricketer Jayasuriya criticised over election

Sri Lankan cricketer Sanath Jayasuriya has been criticised for refusing to quit the sport as he enters politics.

The veteran of the national team has said he will run in April's election on the governing coalition ticket of President Mahinda Rajapaksa.

Jayasuriya said he would continue to play one-day internationals but not Test cricket.

Critics say those not selected for the team might feel they have to support the government to win a place.

'Disastrous'

Jayasuriya has retired from Test cricket but will continue in one-day internationals (ODIs) and in the Indian Premier League.

"Since I am not playing Test cricket, I will have enough time for the politics," he told BBC Tamil.

It is highly unlikely that the popular player, nicknamed "Master Blaster", will lose his election battle. He would become the first MP to play international cricket.

Arjuna Ranatunga, who was Jayasuriya's captain when Sri Lanka won the World Cup in 1996, was highly critical of the move.

"Jayasuriya has indicated that he will continue to play until the 2011 World Cup, so perhaps he might be trying to use his political influence to get a permanent place in the team until then," he said.

Ranatunga, a former ruling party MP, is also contesting the April elections but on the opposition ticket.

He said Jayasuriya's move would be "disastrous" for Sri Lankan sports.

"From now on many other players who do not get a place in the national team will join the governing party's political stage to be selected to the national team," he told BBC Sinhala.

However, Sports Minister Gamini Lokuge said every member of the national team had the right to be a parliamentarian while playing international cricket.

"If they are qualified and still playing cricket, they all have the opportunity to play for the country. They can all be MPs but they should attend practice sessions and obey the rules of the game," he said.

Sri Lankan' north the latest landmine priority

The clearing of landmines in Sri Lanka looks set to be an increasing challenge, as parts of the island's north are cleared for resettlement by those displaced by the fighting.

The Mine Advisory Group, often known as MAG, is one of several organisations worldwide that specialises in clearing landmines, as well as destroying unexploded ordnance and stockpiles of weapons. In Asia, MAG works in Afghanistan, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, and Sri Lanka.

TULF for Indian model in Sri Lanka

The Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) led by V. Anandasangaree in its manifesto for the April 8 general election has advocated a federal model on the lines of Indian system to resolve the ethnic conflict.

"The TULF during the past five years had been advocating for a solution under a Federal Constitution and have also offered to accept the Indian Model as the only alternative to a federal solution. This proposal should satisfy those who are opposed to both the Federal and Unitary systems," said the manifesto, copies of which were released here on Wednesday.

On the demand from some sections for re-merger of the Northern and Eastern Provinces, the TULF said it did not believe that the merger would prove detrimental either to the country or to any ethnic group.

Further the party has said the delay in re-settling the Internally Displaced persons in their respective residences is very unfair and demanded full compensation should be paid immediately for the loss of life, limbs, and properties of the Internally Displaced Persons's (IDPs).

It has also sought quick action to compile a list of missing and dead persons who lived in Vanni during the war and asked the government to hand over the 10,000-odd children detained in rehabilitation camps wrongfully branded as Tiger cadre

US honours displaced Sri Lankan Muslim woman

A Sri Lankan Muslim woman who has been internally displaced in the north of the country for 20 years has won a top award from the US state department.

Majeed Jensila is one of 10 worldwide recipients of the state department's International Women of Courage award for 2010.

She heads a group called the Community Trust Fund, engaged in "activities for the betterment of minority women".

The state department said her focus was on uniting Muslims and Tamils. The US Embassy in Colombo said that Ms Jensila had worked with young people on minority women's issues including women's rights, peace building, relief work and mine risk education.

Ms Jensila, from Mullaitthivu in Sri Lanka's northern province, told the BBC Tamil service that she had been displaced when Tamil Tiger rebels evicted the entire Muslim community from the area in 1990.

She and others sought refuge in Puttalam, a small fishing town on the north-western coast, where she lives now with her husband and three children. She started the Community Trust Fund with five people in 1992.

"At the start the task was very difficult," she said.

But she was able to overcome the obstacles with support from her husband and family.

The annual International Women of Courage award was started in March 2007 to recognise women around the globe who have shown courage and leadership in advocating women's rights. Two women from Afghanistan also won awards this year

Sri Lanka shares up from over 1-wk low on local buying

COLOMBO, March 4 (Reuters) - Sri Lankan shares recovered from a more-than-one-week low on Thursday led by a surge in local buying on hopes the country could reduce its budget deficit from an eight-year high after IMF delayed a loan on fiscal concerns.

The All-Share Price Index .CSE of the Colombo Stock Exchange closed 0.84 percent or 31.82 points up at 3805.85. It hit a record high of 3847.18 points on Tuesday.

"Local retail and institutional investors are confident that the government can tackle the deficit problem in the next budget after the April election," said Jaliya Wijeratne, director of institutional sales at SMB Securities.

"Foreigners are leaving and will be in a 'wait and see' mood after the IMF delay and deficit concerns ahead of the polls." Sri Lanka will hold legislative elections on April 8, after a presidential poll on Jan. 26.

On Tuesday, Sri Lanka's finance ministry said the 2009 budget deficit had hit an eight-year high of 9.7 percent of GDP, well over the 7 percent target set by the International Monetary Fund for a \$2.6 billion loan. The ministry also said the country will miss the 2010 IMF deficit target as well. The IMF last week said it would delay a third tranche of the loan until it sees the budget after the April 8 parliamentary polls. [ID:nSGE61O0GP]

Sri Lanka will initiate tax and investment reforms in its next budget following the election, a government official said on Thursday. [ID:nSGE6220HA] [ID:nSGE6230BZ]

Analysts said local investors were looking to buy in high quantities after prices fell on Wednesday, but foreign investors continued their exit strategy, and would watch out for factors like further erosion in fiscal management, rating downgrades, political instability or IMF suspending the loan

U.N. Rights Chief Slams Abuses In Sri Lanka, Iran

GENEVA (Reuters) - Human rights abuses in Sri Lanka are damaging prospects for reconciliation after 25 years of civil war and a violent crackdown on dissent in Iran is deeply worrying, the top U.N. human rights official said on Thursday.

Repeating her call for an independent investigation into war crimes allegations in Sri Lanka, U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay told the U.N.'s Human Rights Council she was singling out outstanding cases in different countries.

"I am convinced that Sri Lanka should undertake a full reckoning of the grave violations committed by all sides during the war, and that the international community can be helpful in this regard," she said in a speech presenting her annual report.

The opportunity for peace and reconciliation in Sri Lanka was marred by the treatment of journalists, human rights defenders and other critics of the government.

Her comments on Sri Lanka and other states will reassure critics of the council who argue that the 47-member body often fails to deal with human rights violations as countries unite in regional alliances to shield each other from scrutiny.

Last May, the council held a special session on Sri Lanka just after the end of the war against the Tamil Tigers, but the government deflected criticism by introducing its own resolution praising its defeat of the separatist group, which was then passed, boosting the Colombo stock exchange.

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Pillay, a former U.N. war crimes judge, said she had talked with Iranian officials about the deteriorating human rights situation in Iran, which is seeking a seat on the council, and suggested her office should visit the country.

Demonstrators, rights activists, journalists and prominent politicians had received harsh sentences, including capital punishment, for their role in protests after the disputed election last year following questionable trials, she said.

Pillay said continuing executions in Sudan were deeply troubling, and she repeated her call for an independent inquiry into killings by Egyptian forces of unarmed migrants trying to enter Israel via the Sinai Desert.

In a separate statement, Pillay condemned violence against women, especially an estimated 5,000 "honour killings" a year worldwide. These could not be brushed aside as a primitive atrocity happening elsewhere but were an extreme form of discrimination against women plaguing every country, she said.

Pillay dismissed the argument that family violence was outside international human rights, and said states had a clear duty under international law to uphold women's rights and ensure freedom from discrimination. The South African jurist also directed comments against rich countries, saying the treatment of Roma in some European states, such as Slovakia and the Czech Republic, was deteriorating. Pillay told the council she would raise the issue of discrimination and attacks against Roma and other migrants with the Italian authorities when she visits Italy next week. The United States -- which joined the council last year after boycotting it under the previous administration of George W. Bush -- had made some progress in steps to close its prison in Guantanamo Bay and to ban illegal methods of interrogation and transfer of prisoners, she said. "The United States should now conduct thorough investigations into allegations of torture at the detention centres in Guantanamo Bay and Bagram, account for practices that may have contravened international law, and hold violators to account," she said, referring to U.S.-run centres for security detainees in Cuba and Afghanistan.