

Shumaila Rafiq

BUSINESS AND POLITICS IN THE MUSLIM WORLD

SOUTH ASIA

Weekly Report 117: from 24th April to 30th April 2010

BANGLADESH:

POLITICAL

- Gilani, BD premier discuss bilateral ties, cooperation under SAARC
- India keen on seeing Delhi deals implemented
- Trial against 675 mutineers adjourned till Nov 1
- Bangladesh: Government suspends Channel 1, a TV station close to the opposition
- Indo-Bangla deals to be expedited, says Manmohan

SOCIAL

- Bangladesh retains Bollywood ban after protests

ECONOMIC

- Textile minister forces spinners to cut yarn prices
- Dhaka eyes Teesta treaty with Delhi
- Bangladesh To Amend Foreign Exchange Act To Woo More FDI

GEO-STRATEGIC

- Bangladesh Signs Five Deals To Generate 420 Megawatts Power
- Strike in India hits Indo-Bangladesh trade
- Rajapaksa urged to encourage Lankan businesses to invest in Bangladesh

BHUTAN

POLITICAL

- Qureshi meets with Bhutanese, Sri Lankan FMs
- Bhutan SAARC declaration for working together to tackle climate change

SOCIAL

- **No marriage in Bhutan till king's wedding!**

ECONOMIC

GEO-STRATEGIC

- **South Asian Leaders Meet in Bhutan for the 16th SAARC Summit**

MALDIVES

POLITICAL

- **LeT bids to make Maldives its base**
- **Decentralization bill passed barring seven provinces**

SOCIAL

ECONOMIC

- **Maldives Country Plan 2009-2010 (MAAMV001) Annual report**

GEO-STRATEGIC

- **Maldives rakes up Indo-Pak ties at SAARC Summit**

NEPAL

POLITICAL

- **Don't trigger crisis, EU tells Nepal Maoists**
- **Nearly 20 terrorists entered India via Nepal: Indian envoy**
- **U.S. asks Nepal to meet the May deadline for new constitution**
- **UN mission speaks out after Maoist commander violates arms agreement**
- **PM emphasises need for Nepal political parties to join hands**
- **Nepal Supreme Court issues stay order against the government**

SOCIAL

- **UNICEF, Save the Children join hands to promote children's rights in Nepal**
- **Religious freedom in Nepal**

ECONOMIC

- **Alliances: Russia's MTS to NSN, Aricent and Nepal Telecom, and more**

GEO-STRATEGIC

- **Nepal asks Bdesb to let Nepal use Mongla, Chittagong ports**

SRILANKA

POLITICAL

- Sri Lanka rebel leader's home is destroyed
- Panel to examine ethnic discord in Sri Lanka
- The political decomposition of the LSSP

SOCIAL

ECONOMIC

- Sri Lanka shares slip from record high on profit taking
- Rs. 2b initial capital to set up EXIM Bank: Cabraal

GEO-STRATEGIC

- Sri Lanka President holds talks with Bhutanese Prime Minister
- Pakistan, Sri Lanka agree to promote bilateral relations in defence and trade
- SAARC cannot progress in isolation, Sri Lanka President says

DETAILED NEWS:

BANGLADESH

Gilani, BD premier discuss bilateral ties, cooperation under SAARC

THIMPHU, (Bhutan) April 27 (APP) - Pakistan and Bangladesh Tuesday agreed to cooperate with each other for promoting democratic values by using the important forum of SAARC. During the meeting between Prime Minister Syed Yusuf Raza Gilani and Prime Minister of Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina Wajid here at Bangladesh House, both the leaders discussed the concept of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Charter of Democracy to further strengthen democratic institutions in the region. The Bangladeshi premier told Prime Minister Gilani that her country wants to present the concept of SAARC Charter of Democracy. Prime Minister Gilani assured her full support on this concept. Prime Minister Gilani said the leaders of both the countries, Pakistan and Bangladesh rendered sacrifices only for the cause of democracy therefore, they could further cooperate in strengthening the democratic institutions. Gilani said both the countries and other leaders of the region should get together for the success of the concept of SAARC Charter of Democracy. He said there are vast opportunities for strengthening bilateral relations between the two countries in all the fields. He said priority should be given to enhance and promote bilateral trade between the two countries. The Prime Minister emphasized the need for early meeting of foreign secretaries of the two countries so that bilateral relations could be further promoted. He said these bilateral relations should be further extended to high level meetings from both sides. In this regard, Prime Minister Gilani extended invitation to the Prime Minister of

Bangladesh to visit Pakistan while she also extended invitation to Prime Minister Gilani to visit her country. The two sides also agreed to cooperate at multilateral fora because both have convergence of views on international issues. Referring to presence of democratic governments in all the member states of SAARC, both the prime ministers also agreed to further cooperate with them for strengthening these democratic institutions. Prime Minister Gilani also briefed the Prime Minister of Bangladesh on the successful process of 18th constitutional amendment and efforts for creating consensus among the political forces in this regard. The issue of shortage of power was also discussed in the meeting and both the prime ministers agreed to work at regional level and taking advantage of surplus power with some of the countries in the region.

India keen on seeing Delhi deals implemented

India has been expediting the implementation process of various agreements, including export of 200MW electricity and providing one billion dollars soft loan to Bangladesh, signed in Delhi between the two countries in January this year. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said this to Bangladesh premier Sheikh Hasina when she paid a courtesy call on him at India House in the Saarc Village in Thimphu yesterday morning. During the meeting the two leaders discussed various issues of bilateral and multilateral interests including expansion of trade and business and enhancing connectivity between the two neighbouring countries. After the meeting Press Secretary to the PM Abul Kalam Azad told journalists that Manmohan assured Hasina of his country's support for the continuation of advancement of democracy in Bangladesh. The Indian PM also informed Hasina that his government will take necessary measures for finalising the draft of agreement on Teesta Water Sharing, which was handed over to Indian government recently. Dr Singh also announced his country's support for the Bangladesh's candidature in the Committee of Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (Cedaw).

In response to the support of Bangladesh's efforts for the inclusion of the Sundarbans in the list of New Seven Wonders of the World, the Indian PM said both the countries would take joint initiatives to this end.

Expressing her satisfaction over the existing bilateral relations between the two friendly countries, Hasina expressed her hope that the relations would be accelerated further in the days to come for the benefit of the two countries.

During the meeting, Hasina invited Dr Singh to visit Bangladesh at a convenient time and the Indian premier accepted the invitation.

Apart from joining the opening session of the Saarc Summit, she held separate meetings with the Saarc leaders and joined a banquet hosted by Bhutanese Prime Minister Lyonchhen Jigmi Y Thinley in honour of head of states and governments of the eight Saarc countries.

Earlier, Bhutanese King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck paid a courtesy call on Hasina at Bangladesh House in the Saarc Village. During the meeting, they discussed various issues of bilateral interest.

Foreign Minister Dipu Moni, State Minister for Environment and Forest Hasan Mahmud, Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister M A Karim, among others, were present.

Besides, Indian Foreign Minister SM Krishna and Foreign Secretary Nirupoma Rao were present on the Indian side

Trial against 675 mutineers adjourned till Nov 1

The Special Court-5 set up at Darbar Hall of Bangladesh Rifles Headquarters on Tuesday adjourned the hearing against 675 accused mutineers of 44 Rifle Battalion till November 1.

In the morning, prosecutor of the case Lt Col Kazi Aniruddha stated the crimes the mutineers of the battalion committed during the February 25-26 BDR mutiny before the court. The three-member court led by BDR Director General Maj Gen Md Mainul Islam fixed the date. The two other members of the court are Lt Col AKM Golam Rabbani and Maj Sayed Hasan Taposh. Earlier, the 675 accused mutineers of the battalion were produced before the court.

Of them, 27 suspected killers, including sepoy Selim Reza who is one of the masterminds of the Pilkhana mutiny, were in civil dress while the rest in BDR uniform. This is for the first time the suspected mutineers were produced before any special court in civil dress to face mutiny charges. The court on Monday ordered to produce them before it. The accused were involved in every offence -- from setting the plan at the "Golap Bagan" (Rose Garden at Pilkhana) in 2008-09 for executing the mutiny to devising the strategy of general amnesty from the prime minister hiding the killings inside the Pilkhana headquarters, said the prosecutor during his submission on Monday. The prosecutor on Monday freshly filed a case with the BDR mutiny court against the 675 personnel of the battalion. The prosecutor said the 44 Rifle Battalion had not only spearheaded the last year's BDR mutiny in Pilkhana, more than 30 of the killers are from this battalion of whom one soldier murdered the then BDR DG Shakil Ahmed.

According to the submission, a group of armed soldiers of this unit led by Salim Reza swooped on the Darbar Hall to kill the officers. Sepoy Kajal of 44 Rifle Battalion accompanied Sepoy Moin of 13 Rifle Battalion when he entered the Darbar Hall to kill DG Shakil. Kajal later fired a shot as a signal of the mutiny on action on the morning of February 25, 2009.

"Deputy Assistant Director (DAD) Nasir Uddin, kingpin of the mutiny, ordered to shoot eight to 10 officers outside the Darbar Hall after having the officers knelt down in a line and hands above their heads, said the prosecutor.

Most of those who carried out Nasir's order and shot the officers were from this battalion, he added. As per the prosecutor's submission, almost all the offences committed during the 33-hour bloody mutiny in Pilkhana were carried out under the leadership of DAD Nasir, sepoy Salim Reza, Altaf and Kajal and some others of the battalion. A total of 74 people, including 57 army officials, were killed during the February 25-26 mutiny in 2009 at Pilkhana BDR Headquarters.

Bangladesh: Government suspends Channel 1, a TV station close to the opposition

Dhaka – The Government of Bangladesh suspended Channel 1, a TV station founded by controversial businessman Giasuddin Al Mamun (*picture*), who has close ties to Tarique Rahman, eldest son of former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party. The authorities took the decision against the station, accusing the latter of “violating rules”. A number of human rights organisations have expressed deep concern for the action and its impact on freedom of the press and freedom of thought. Telecom Minister Raziuddin Ahmed Raju said that Channel 1 was temporarily suspended because it violated the rules of the broadcasting act. Under Bangladeshi law, TV stations are not allowed to use “transferable” equipment and licences. By contrast, Channel 1 was using equipment owned by other companies, something the minister called “a complete breach of the law”. For the minister, the government had no partisan motive to suspend the broadcaster. “We did not even consider who the owner is. If we had done so, many other channels would also have been closed.” Channel 1 was established on 1 June 2005; it began official broadcasting on 24 January 2006. It employs 400 people and is the

brainchild of Giasuddin Al Mamun, a controversial businessman involved in a number of criminal cases. Bangladesh has 15 private radio and TV channels. Human rights groups are concerned that the suspension of Channel 1 might negatively affect press freedom and favour censorship. Channel 1's director Mazidul Islam said the station provided the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) with all the relevant documents in the case. He blamed Prime Bank, which had bought the equipment on the station's behalf, for the problem. However, the BTRC did not buy that argument and decided instead to suspend its licence, temporarily

Indo-Bangla deals to be expedited, says Manmohan

THIMPHU, Apr 29 (BSS): India is expediting the implementation process of various agreements, including export of 200 megawatts of electricity and providing of US\$1.0 billion soft loan to Bangladesh, signed between the two countries in January this year.

Indian Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh said this when Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina paid a courtesy call on him at the India House at the SAARC Village in Thimphu Thursday morning.

During the meeting, held in a very cordial and warm atmosphere, the two leaders discussed various issues of bilateral and multilateral interests, including expansion of trade and **business** and enhancement of connectivity between the two neighbouring countries.

After the meeting that lasted at least half an hour, Prime Minister's Press Secretary Abul Kalam Azad told the press that Dr Singh assured Sheikh Hasina of his country's support for the continuation of advancement of democracy in Bangladesh.

The Indian Prime Minister also informed his Bangladesh counterpart that his government would take necessary measures to finalise the draft of the Teesta Water Sharing agreement, which was handed over to the Indian government recently.

Dr Singh also announced his country's support for the Bangladesh's candidature in the Committee of Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

In response to the support of Bangladesh's efforts for the inclusion of the Sundarbans in the list of New **Seven Wonders of the World**, the Indian Prime Minister said both the countries would take joint initiatives to this end

Textile minister forces spinners to cut yarn prices

the country's spinners fail to reduce the prices of yarn, an important indirect raw material for producing clothing, by Monday midnight, then Bangladesh Textile Minister, Abdul Latif Siddique, would open up the Benapole land-port to import cheap Indian yarn into the country.

According to the minister, yarn prices in the domestic market were exorbitantly high, owing to spinners cashing on an unstable international cotton market and a decade-old protection that was granted by the government.

After a meet with the spinners, textile millers, power loom owners and garment producers, Siddique said that the market, according to him, looked inconsistent and that the spinners were charging unjust prices.

Giving the textile spinners time till Monday midnight, to think over his proposal, Siddique informed that, "I have asked the millers to approach me with a reasonable rate that can help even out yarn prices, or else, if necessary, we will open the Benapole land-port for free imports of yarn."

It was only after the power loom owners and the garment producers lodged complaints against the country's spinning mills that, the spinners had formed a group and were charging exorbitant rates for their yarn, that the minister decided upon the Benapole proposal.

However, the minister stressed that the Benapole land-port will not open unless the situation demanded. More so, the textile spinners were urged to even out the yarn prices in accordance with the global cotton prices.

The Benapole land-port, country's biggest customs station, was closed for yarn imports since late 1990s in order to protect the domestic spinners from a volatile competition from their Indian counterparts.

As Indian yarn producers are one of the biggest manufacturers of cotton, domestic spinners from Bangladesh dread to compete with them. In addition, these spinners buy cotton from foreign markets to produce yarn, leading to increase in costs.

According to Siddique, increase in yarn prices would ultimately affect the textile spinners as they would be unable to find buyers.

Bangladesh retains Bollywood ban after protests

Bangladesh's near-four-decade-old ban on movies from Bollywood has been reinstated after the commerce ministry's decision on Saturday to lift the injunction, in an effort to boost the country's struggling cinemas, was greeted with furious protests by local actors and directors.

Films from India have been proscribed in Bangladesh since 1972, the year after the country's independence, to protect the local film-making industry. However, the number of cinemas has fallen from 1,600 a decade ago to 600 this year, a decline which cinema exhibitors attribute to poor-quality homegrown films failing to draw viewers. At the same time, Indian films are hugely popular in Bangladesh and locals can get their Bollywood fix on cable TV and through pirated copies which circulate widely.

"Film enthusiasts can easily see good Indian films on cable television so why should we stop Indian films being screened in our cinemas?" Kazi Firoz Rashid, president of Bangladesh Cinema Halls Owners Association, told AFP.

"By contrast, the standards, scripts and production of Bangladeshi films are so stale and poor they have trouble winning hearts or making enough money," he said.

Local film-makers and performers made their chagrin known almost immediately after the announcement, holding demonstrations and warning that the move could wipe out 25,000 jobs.

Actor and director Salahuddin Lavlo told the New Age newspaper: "This decision will create an unequal competition in the country's film industry as the budgets of Indian films are much bigger than that of ours." India's dream factory, centred on Mumbai, churns out about 1,000 new releases each year. He added: "The Indian film industry is so advanced that local films will not be able to compete with them."

Yesterday, Sheikh Hasina, the prime minister, stepped into the row and directed the commerce industry to scrap its decision. She also assured local film-makers that her government supported them, her spokesman Abul Kalam Azad told reporters

Dhaka eyes Teesta treaty with Delhi

Water Resources Minister Ramesh Chandra Sen said yesterday Bangladesh is hopeful of signing the Teesta river water sharing treaty with India soon. Preparations in this regard are on to hold a secretary level meeting in Dhaka between Bangladesh and India soon, he said while talking to newsmen in Dhaka yesterday.

Ramesh said the meeting would discuss in detail the draft proposals placed by India and Bangladesh in the last Joint River Commission (JRC) meeting held in New Delhi to prepare specific proposals for the water sharing treaty. "The meeting in New Delhi decided that the next JRC meeting to be held in Dhaka would focus on the Teesta water sharing treaty," he said. The Minister referred to the possible catastrophic situation to be created in Rangpur, Dinajpur, Thakurgaon, Kurigram and Gaibandha districts if the Teesta water is not available there. This is a serious issue and the Indian leadership would have to be sympathetic in this regard, he said. In the last JRC meeting in New Delhi, Bangladesh and India signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to conclude an interim treaty on the Teesta water sharing. There was no JRC meeting between the two countries in five years after the minister-level meeting held in September 2005. Dhaka and New Delhi agreed on water sharing during Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's India visit in January this year. Hasina and her Indian counterpart Dr Manmohan Singh asked their concerned ministers to hold a JRC meeting within three months

Bangladesh Signs Five Deals To Generate 420 Megawatts Power

The government has signed five deals with one local and two foreign companies to install five peaking power plants to generate around 420 megawatts (mw) of electricity by August 2011, officials said.

State-owned Power Development Board (PDB) signed two engineering procurement construction (EPC) contracts with local consortium of Energypac Power Generation and Energypac Engineering on Sunday for setting up two furnace oil-run power plants - one 100 mw capacity plant at Gopalganj and another 50 mw plant at Faridpur.

It has also signed two EPC contracts with the Chinese Guangdong Power Engineering Corporation for building two dual-fuel power plants - a 100 mw capacity plant at Hathazari and another 100 mw plant at Dohazari in Chittagong.

The PDB has signed the remaining deal with South Korean Hyundai Heavy Industries Co for setting up a 70 mw furnace-oil run power plants at Bera in Pabna district.

Peaking power plants generally run when demand for electricity peaks.

Energypac will set up the Gopalganj plant at a cost of US\$13.36 million (BDT 6.930 billion) and the Faridpur plant at \$8.90 million (BDT 3.835 billion). Korean Hyundai Heavy Industries will install the Bera plant at a cost of \$63.51 million (4.846 billion).

On the other hand, the contract price of Dohazari is \$104.98 million (BDT9.716 billion) and Hathazari is \$113 million (BDT9.087 billion), according to the contracts.

State Minister for Power Mohammad Enamul Haque said the national grid is expected to get power from these plants in 15 months from now. "We are committed and want to move forward."

The government has planned to generate 9,426 MW of electricity by 2015 by implementing a short-medium-long term plan.

Under the plan, an additional 792 MW would be added in 2010, 920 MW in 2011, 1,369 MW in 2012, 1,975 MW in 2013, 1,770 MW in 2014 and 2,600 MW in 2015.

At present, the country's available generation capacity is 3,800-4,000 MW

Strike in India hits Indo-Bangladesh trade

The dawn-to-dusk shutdown called by 13 opposition political parties across India against rising prices badly hit India- Bangladesh trade Tuesday, officials here said.

The disruption took place at the Benapole land customs station and the principal land port in India's West Bengal state.

'Hundreds of trucks were stranded on both sides of the land port due to the shutdown,' a customs official in Agartala told IANS, quoting his counterpart in Benapole border.

'Over 100 truckloads of Bangladeshi goods have been stranded on the other side of the border and unable to cross the Akhaurah land customs station in view of the strike in Tripura,' the official said.

Adjacent to Agartala, Akhaurah LCS is the most important international trading land port in northeast India with an average of 200 Bangladeshi trucks loaded with goods for export coming to Tripura every day.

'Due to the day-long strike and closure of Indo-Bangla trade through Akhaurah LCS, the central and Tripura governments would lose Rs 6.5 million as customs duty and sales tax,' Prasanta Bhattacharjee, member of the government's permanent trade facilitation committee (North East), told IANS.

According to Bhattacharjee, also an exporter, normally every day export-import business worth of Rs.30 million takes place through the Akhaurah LCS

Rajapaksa urged to encourage Lankan businesses to invest in Bangladesh

THIMPU (Bhutan), Apr 28 (UNB): Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wednesday requested Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa to encourage his country's investors to invest in Bangladesh's RMG, plastic, house building and CI sheet sectors.

Bangladesh provides various facilities for the foreign investors, Hasina said when she called on Rajapaksa at Sri Lanka House in SAARC Village.

The Prime Minister urged the Lankan President to import ceramic, pharmaceuticals and cement from Bangladesh, saying these were world-class products.

"These products are of world standard and the qualities are very high. You can import these items from Bangladesh as you are already importing these items from other sources," she said.

Hasina said this was the golden chance for all SAARC member countries to establish democracy on a strong footing, as democracy was prevailing in all SAARC member countries.

She said it was not possible for any country in the world to develop properly without having democracy.

The Prime Minister underscored the need for continuous democratic process in all SAARC member countries, saying that democracy had to be given a strong base.

She also said that the democratic institutions would have to be provided with strong base so these could function properly and smoothly.

For this, she said, the 16th SAARC summit was very important for all SAARC members.

Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa praised Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's idea of introducing photo in the voter ID cards in Bangladesh

Bangladesh To Amend Foreign Exchange Act To Woo More FDI

The Bangladeshi government has taken initiative to amend foreign exchange regulation act 1947, to woo more foreign direct investments (FDI) in the country, a senior official said Thursday.

The Finance Ministry official on condition of anonymity told Xinhua news agency that the government is keen to woo more foreign investments by making the act time-befitting for the foreign investors.

He said an expert committee, which is examining the provisions of foreign exchange regulation act 1947 in comparison with that of neighboring countries, would make its suggestions shortly.

The official said the government accelerated its move as FDI inflows to Bangladesh in the first eight months of the current fiscal year 2009-2010 (July 2009-June 2010) continued to fall.

During July-February period of the current 2009-10 fiscal year, Bangladesh attracted 63.716 percent or US\$460 million less FDI compared to the same period of last year, the Bangladesh Bank (B) data showed.

According to the bank's data, in the first eight months of the fiscal year 2009-2010 (July 2009-June 2010), net FDI inflows were recorded at US\$262 million against July-February 2008-09 when they stood at US\$722 million

BHUTAN

Qureshi meets with Bhutanese, Sri Lankan FMs

Foreign Minister Makhdoom Shah Mahmood Qureshi, who arrived here on Monday to attend the 32nd Session of the SAARC Council of Ministers to be held on Tuesday met with Lyonpo Khandu Wangchuck, Bhutan's Minister In Charge of Foreign Affairs and the Foreign Minister of Sri Lanka, Professor GL Peiries. They discussed issues of mutual interest, especially ways and means to further strengthen bilateral relations, as well as to enhance regional cooperative activities within the framework of SAARC.

During the meeting with Bhutanese Foreign Minister, Qureshi thanked the Royal Kingdom of Bhutan for making excellent arrangements for the 16th SAARC Summit and extending exceptionally warm hospitality to the Pakistan delegation. He expressed the hope that the summit would be a great success. The Foreign Minister congratulated the King of Bhutan for his vision of moving the country towards robust parliamentary democracy. The first ever parliamentary elections held in Bhutan in 2008 were a landmark development, he added. The Foreign Minister said now that Pakistan had also returned to democracy it was important for our two parliaments to exchange delegations and learn from each other. The Foreign Minister extended an invitation to a parliamentary delegation from Bhutan to visit Pakistan. Wangchuk thanked the Foreign Minister for the invitation and said that he would convey this to the Speaker of Bhutan's National Assembly. Foreign Minister Qureshi also extended assistance to Bhutan in human resource development, offering places for Bhutanese students in Medical and Engineering institutions in Pakistan, as well as in the Foreign Services Academy, Islamabad for young Bhutanese diplomats. The Bhutanese Foreign Minister appreciated the offer. It was decided to pursue these suggestions through normal diplomatic channels. The Foreign Minister commended the Bhutanese leadership for giving a fascinating concept of development based not only on traditional economic growth but also spiritual development. The Foreign Minister said that the world was becoming increasingly materialistic in its outlook. The concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH) provided a distinct index to measure development which attached immense importance to inculcating values and developing human relations.

Foreign Minister Qureshi expressed the hope that other countries would also adopt this model for their socio-economic development. The Foreign Minister emphasized that it was only by striking the right balance between spirituality and economic growth that we could achieve peace and prosperity in the world. The two Ministers agreed that SAARC had a vast potential to develop into a vibrant regional organization. It was unfortunate that political difference had not allowed SAARC to realize its potential to the benefit of its people. The time had come to seriously focus on important issues, including energy, climate change, water management, agriculture, education, science and technology and rural development. During the meeting with Sri Lankan Minister, Foreign Minister Qureshi appreciated that Sri Lanka and Pakistan had been able to develop excellent relations based on mutual respect and shared interests. He congratulated Sri Lanka for achieving decisive victory against terrorism and holding very successful parliamentary and presidential elections in Sri Lanka. Pakistan as a friendly country wished Sri Lanka stability and prosperity, he added. The Sri Lankan Foreign Minister thanked Pakistan for extending immensely valuable support to

Sri Lanka in its very difficult phase of national history, underlining that the people of Sri Lanka had great appreciation for Pakistan and its people. Foreign Minister Qureshi briefed his Sri Lankan counterpart about the law enforcement operations in Swat and Malakand and the FATA region and how the government had been trying with national consensus to fight the scourge of violent extremism. The Foreign Minister also apprised Professor Peiries about the 18th Constitutional Amendment which was a political landmark in the history of Pakistan. He said that the amendment which had come through a national consensus would go a long way in strengthening parliamentary democracy in Pakistan. The two ministers reviewed the state of bilateral relations and expressed satisfaction that there already existed expansive economic architecture including the Joint Economic Commission, the Free Trade Agreement, the Bilateral Investment Treaty and Agreement on Avoidance of Double Taxation, to enhance economic relations. There was also a huge scope in learning from each other in the areas of education and human resource development. The Sri Lankan Foreign Minister briefed Foreign Minister Qureshi about their development strategy which, amongst other things, put great emphasis on rural development to prevent urbanization which he said could lead to social unrest and uneven economic development. Foreign Minister Qureshi said that Pakistan and Sri Lanka enjoyed convergence of views on almost all matters of regional and international significance. The two countries had been closely cooperating in multilateral forums, including SAARC. It was nevertheless discouraging that SAARC had not been able to move beyond a certain point. Pakistan had been playing a very active role in making SAARC an effective and result-oriented organization. It was time for SAARC member states to introspect and take far-reaching measures towards injecting substance into the organization so that benefits of its activities should trickle down to the people of South Asia. Foreign Minister Qureshi underscored that intra-regional connectivity was necessary to enhance people-to-people interaction. He assured the Sri Lankan Foreign Minister that Pakistan would continue contributing positively to SAARC activities in our mutual benefit and interest. From the Pakistan side the meeting with the Sri Lankan Foreign Minister was also attended by Foreign Secretary Salman Bashir

South Asian Leaders Meet in Bhutan for the 16th SAARC Summit

Leaders from South Asian countries are meeting in Thimphu, Bhutan, for the 16th South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Summit. SAARC's outgoing chairman Sri Lanka's President Mahinda Rajapaksa handed over the chairmanship to the prime minister of Bhutan, Jigmi Thinley.

In his address, Rajapaksa stressed the need for the region to act as a collective force when addressing global issues.

“We must uphold our sovereign right to decide on what is best for us,” Rajapaksa said. “We must strive to avoid externally induced rigid solutions. We should now endeavor to strengthen

the mechanisms to speak with one voice on issues of common concern for our region in international fora, in particular at the United Nations.”

This year’s theme is “Towards a Green and Happy South Asia,” with a focus on climate change. SAARC countries are hoping to have a voice at the next climate conference in Cancun, Mexico.

"While we have been deliberating on environment as a priority issue for a number of years, it will be a sad commentary on SAARC if we cannot present a well negotiated unified position at COP 16," said Prime Minister Thinley in his speech.

Indian news sources say SAARC members plan to request for observer status at the conference, to be held later this year. It will give the eight SAARC nations – Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka – the opportunity to collectively express their concerns on climate change issues affecting the region.

“There is perhaps no region more vulnerable to the effects of climate change than ours,” said Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in his address to the regional body.

To celebrate the 25th year of SAARC and the launch of the South Asian University in August, Singh announced the awarding of new scholarships.

“India will provide 50 'SAARC Silver Jubilee Scholarships' for meritorious students from SAARC (least developed) countries for the South Asian University,” Singh said.

Several non-SAARC members are attending the summit as observers, Australia, the European Union, Iran and the United States among them. The summit will conclude Thursday

No marriage in Bhutan till king’s wedding!

BHUTAN: With 30-year-old King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck having not announced the date of his marriage so far, the citizens of Bhutan have placed a ban on their own marriages.

It may be mentioned that the former king Jigme Singye Wangchuck, father of the sitting sovereign, had married four sisters.

The former king abandoned his palace and started living in a hut, while his wives continue to live in the palace. The sitting king has a clean reputation and has no treasures.

Bhutan SAARC declaration for working together to tackle climate change

Thimphu (Bhutan) April 30 (ANI): With South Asia prone to the ill-effects of climate change, leaders attending the 16th SAARC Summit, which ended here on Thursday, have decided to tackle the issue of climate change. With climate change being the main theme of the Summit, held in Bhutan, member nations have also decided to establish an Inter-governmental Expert Group on Climate Change to develop a clear policy direction for regional cooperation as envisaged in the SAARC Plan of Action on Climate Change.

They also resolved to commission a study, for presentation at the 17th summit, on 'Climate Risks in the Region: ways to comprehensively address the related social, economic and environmental

challenges'.

Seeking a fresh approach to global climate talks, the SAARC leaders sought observer status for the regional grouping at the Cancun conference in Mexico on global warming to be held later this year.

All SAARC countries will undertake advocacy and awareness programs on climate change promote the use of green technology and best practices to promote low-carbon sustainable and inclusive development of the region.

It has also been decided to plant 10 million trees over the next five years to build a "green and happy South Asia" and enhance trade cooperation.

The statement also stressed on evolving national plans, and where appropriate regional projects, on protecting and safeguarding the archeological and historical infrastructure of South Asia from the adverse effects of Climate Change.

A SAARC Inter-Governmental Marine Initiative will be commissioned to strengthen the understanding of shared oceans and water bodies in the region and the critical roles they play in sustainable living to be supported by the SAARC Coastal Zone Management Center.

The member-states also resolved to commission a study, for presentation to the 17th summit, on 'Climate Risks in the Region: ways to comprehensively address the related social, economic and environmental challenges'.

They further decided that the Inter-governmental expert group on Climate Change shall meet at least twice a year to periodically monitor and review the implementation of this statement and make recommendations to facilitate its implementation and submit its report through the senior officials of SAARC to the SAARC Environment Ministers

MALDIVES

Maldives rakes up Indo-Pak ties at SAARC Summit

Thimphu: In unusual comments at the SAARC forum, Maldivian president Mohamed Nasheed today talked about strained relations between India and Pakistan, saying that he hoped that tomorrow's meeting between the two countries' prime ministers will lead to resolution of their differences. Addressing the 16th SAARC Summit, Nasheed said he hopes that leaders of India and Pakistan will have effective conversation and resolve their differences. Nasheed, who spoke extempore, said he hoped that the "conversation will lead to greater dialogue between India and Pakistan." The remarks came as a surprise as normally bilateral issues and relations are not raked up in the multilateral forum of SAARC. Prime minister Manmohan Singh is meeting his Pakistani counterpart Yousuf Raza Gilani tomorrow. The comments also reflected the common feeling that the relations between India and Pakistan mostly overshadow SAARC meetings.

LeT bids to make Maldives its base

The UPA government on Tuesday said Pakistan-based terror outfit Lashkar-e-Toiba is making concerted efforts to carry out attacks in the country and to develop links in Maldives and neighbouring

countries “Available inputs indicate that Pakistan-based terrorist groups, primarily the LeT, are making concerted efforts to organise terrorist attacks in various parts of the country, inter-alia, including iconic institutions, prominent industrial installations and tourist locations among others,” minister of state for home affairs Ajay Maken told Lok Sabha in a written reply. There has been evidence of the success of Lashkar and other jihadi groups in expanding their influence in predominantly Muslim Maldives. Intelligence agencies here have noted with concern the sharp increase in the number of visitors from Maldives to Pakistan, where they spend a lot of time travelling around the country for purposes which are unclear but suspicious to agencies here.

Maldives has been a target for Lashkar and other jihadi groups which have been trying to make it a hub due to its geographical uniqueness — isolated and sparsely populated islands in the Indian neighbourhood. According to official estimates here, about 700,000 tourists visit Maldives every year and so the island nation does not want to take any chance on security issues.

What is worrying the government here is the effort of Pakistan-based terror groups to recruit jihadis from Maldives. Sabahuddin, one of the two Indian nationals arrested in connection with the 26/11 attack on Mumbai, told his interrogators that they had got Ali Ahsham to do the recce on targets in Bangalore in the run-up to the attack on the Indian Institute of Science.

In his reply, the minister of state for home affairs said: “The government continues to be alert to these threats and re-calibrates its measures to combat terrorism by way of reviewing threat perception and a number of important decisions and measures have been taken.” He also said that India has been working closely with Maldives to strengthen bilateral security co-operation. “Our security concerns are conveyed through bilateral channels or mechanisms, with the concerned authorities,” he said

Decentralization bill passed barring seven provinces

The controversial Decentralisation Bill has been passed in Parliament preventing the country from being divided into seven provinces.

The crux of the bill was to divide the country into seven provincial councils for development purposes as pledged by President Nasheed during his presidential campaign.

But a DRP majority committee in Parliament brought in amendments to the bill and later it was passed with 42 votes in favour, retaining the country’s 21 atoll councils.

The ruling MDP walked out of the House in protest, Minivan news reported.

The only MDP parliamentarian who stayed behind in the chamber and voted against the bill was Ahmed Rasheed, MP for Hoarafushi, it said.

“A total of 68 amendments, the majority of which were proposed by the DRP, was passed today [April 28], it added.

The tug o’ war over the bill between the ruling MDP and the Opposition DRP saw many parliamentary sessions being cancelled **DRP celebrates decentralization bill victory**

The main opposition Dhivehi Rayyithunge Party (DRP) held a rally to celebrate the passage of the Decentralisation Bill in Parliament without the government proposed model of provinces, Minivan news reported.

Adding to the celebration, the rally at the artificial beach was attended by, “Maamigili MP Gasim Ibrahim, leader of the Republican Party, as well as MPs of the People’s Alliance.”

Former DRP Deputy Leader and business tycoon Gasim broke away from the party ahead of the 2008 presidential election. He formed his own party and contested the presidential polls. However he backed MDP candidate Mohamed Nasheed’s bid for presidency at the run-off.

DRP Leader Ahmed Thasmeen Ali said the passage of the bill with 42 votes in favour was “a very good and important signal” as 39 votes would be needed to override a possible presidential veto, Minivan News reported.

“If the bill becomes law, said Thasmeen, elected island and atoll councils will have decision-making powers on resource allocation and development projects.”

“The way the bill has been drafted gives no room for provinces,” he said, claiming there was no public support for the mode

The bill on decentralised administration proposed by the government early last year had been delayed due to an intractable dispute over creating seven provincial councils instead of 20 atoll councils,” it said.

Thasmeen denied ruling Maldivian Democratic Party allegations “that the wholesale changes made to the bill by the opposition would hinder the development of the atolls.

The leader of the opposition called on DRP supporters to “roll their sleeves” to defeat the government’s candidates for the upcoming local councils, it added **No choice other than going carbon neutral by mid-century, President Nasheed tells CNN debate**

President Mohamed Nasheed has told the CNN that there is no choice other than to go carbon neutral by mid-century saying if not “we won’t be around here.”

“If we cannot become carbon neutral by mid-century, then we won't be around here. It's as simple as that,” Nasheed told the CNN International’s “The Special Debate on Earth's Frontiers: The Future of Energy”.

President Mohamed Nasheed has participated, along with Academy Award-winning film director and environmentalist James Cameron in debate, the President’s Office said

President Nasheed said it was time especially for big emitting countries to find alternatives and move forward.

He reiterated that climate change was not an issue of developing and developed countries.

However, “industrialized countries have more capabilities and more means and there are people who are in trouble. If they want to lend a hand that's the decent thing to do," he said.

Joining the debate in Seoul, South Korea, from Los Angeles via 3D technology, the Director of “Avatar” pointed out a possible reason for the shift in public perception on climate change.

He said disinformation campaigns on climate change were “used to discredit science and steer public opinion away from any sense of social responsibility about climate change.”

Also featured in the debate were Jochen Zeitz, Chairman and CEO of Puma and Changhua Wu, Greater China Director of the Climate Group

The debate hosted by CNN's Anna Coren was one of the two special programmes of extensive environmental coverage by the network to mark the 40th anniversary of the Earth Day.

Encore presentations of the programme will also be aired on 1 May at 1230 hrs, 2230 hrs and 2 May at 0100 hrs, 0700 hrs, 1230 hrs, and 2000 hrs, Maldives local time

Maldives Country Plan 2009-2010 (MAAMV001) Annual report

Programme purpose: With the Inauguration of first General Assembly of the Maldivian Red Crescent (MRC) on 16 August 2009 the main focus of 2009 was focused on creating an environment for a local National Society to be established and begin its work to gain recognition by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) as well as become a member of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), with all rights and obligations.

Programme summary: With the birth of the National Society in the Maldives, all activities in the last quarter of 2009 was focused on its formation (developing its structures, capacities and programmes) and recognition within the community (be responsive to national vulnerabilities). Initially the community engagement was limited as activities implemented were mostly process oriented.

The legal foundation and ratification of the MRC Law by the Maldivian president took place in early May 2009. The law gave the legal right for an humanitarian organization – by the name MRC – to be established and undertake humanitarian work in the Maldives. Consequently, the interim planning group (IPG), which was leading the formation process with support of IFRC, scheduled the first General Assembly of MRC which was on 16 August 2009. The assembly elected the first governing board of MRC and adopted the National Society's statutes and rules of procedures.

The elected governing board approved MRC's interim development plan (which was prepared by the IPG) and undertook a systematic process of preparing a two-year MRC strategic development plan. Straight after the General Assembly, implementation of the plan took place with selection of the secretary general (during September) followed by hiring of key management and programme staff. This led to an induction of the National Society's governing board, management team, national advisory council members and programme staff was organized by IFRC as part of their capacity building. Formation of island units and atoll branches followed. The units and branches are to be formed in three atolls in early 2010 which in time will be able to develop services supported by appropriate structures, systems and capacity. Volunteers will be recruited from the units and branches to be directly involved in service delivery.

Financial situation: The revised budget is CHF 996,193 (USD 961,678 or EUR 671,212), in line with a realistic implementation rate. Coverage is 146 per cent while expenditure from January to December 2009 was 99.4 per cent of the total 2009 budget. With the Maldivian Red Crescent now operational, expenditure during 2010 will increase significantly. As such, additional financial and in-kind contributions to the 2010-2011 plan, in support of the new National

Society, are welcome and much needed.

NEPAL

Don't trigger crisis, EU tells Nepal Maoists

With Nepal's Maoist guerrillas announcing a show of might on May 1 followed by an indefinite general strike nationwide, a concerned European Union has asked the former rebels not to trigger a crisis.

The ambassadors of EU nations Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Great Britain and the European Union met Maoist chief and former prime minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal Prachanda Monday along with the ambassadors of Norway and Switzerland.

Expressing concern at the lack of progress in the peace process and at the raised political tensions, the delegation has asked the Maoist chief to show flexibility and make concessions in order to avoid a crisis. A statement issued by them said they were deeply concerned at the demonstration planned for May 1 and the impact on the economy and tourism the general strike threatened from May 2 would have.

The envoys also broached 'worrying' reports of physical training being given to cadre, and the risk of a confrontation.

Urging Prachanda to ensure the protests were restrained and peaceful, they also said the Maoists should try to solve the situation round a negotiating table instead of on the streets.

The envoys were also concerned about the Maoists raising funds through extortion and threats in the districts, which, they said, was creating a climate of fear

Pakistan, Nepal agree to promote bilateral relations

** Gilani tells Nepalese counterpart Pakistan has finalised projects worth Rs 13 million for development in Nepal*

KATHMANDU: Pakistan and Nepal on Monday, agreed to enhance their bilateral relations and decided to further promote trade, economic, people-to-people, defence and cultural relations.

This was decided in a meeting between Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani, who arrived in Nepal on Monday, on his way to Bhutan to attend the 16th SAARC Summit and Nepalese Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal.

Prime Minister Gilani emphasised the need to translate the cordial relations into strong bonds of friendship between the two countries.

Gilani said Pakistan greatly values its relations with Nepal, which are based on mutual respect, trust and shared perceptions on regional and international issues.

Prime Minister Gilani also condoled the death of former Prime Minister of Nepal G P Koirala who died in March this year.

He said, "We need to focus on the promotion of bilateral cooperation in the areas identified in the roadmap, to ensure our continued partnership in achieving peace and security in our region and at the international level."

Gilani informed his Nepalese counterpart that Pakistan had finalised projects worth Rs 13 million for development in different sectors of Nepal under the Special Assistance Programme for South Asia (SAPSA) in the fiscal year 2009-10.

In this programme, he said Pakistan had offered 29 scholarships last year for Masters courses in Mass Communications and this number would increase in the future.

The donation of ambulances and increased slots for Nepalese trainees in different fields are also included in this programme Gilani said.

The prime minister also suggested joint endeavours for promoting cooperation in the fields of health, human resource development and agriculture and the setting up of joint ventures in textiles and pharmaceutical sectors.

Regarding defence cooperation between the two countries, Gilani pledged more assistance to Nepal. He said Pakistan has been and will continue to accommodate officers of the Nepalese Armed Forces in its defence and defence production training institutions.

Gilani expressed satisfaction over the contribution of Nepal in SAARC and added that Pakistan and Nepal could work together under this organisation to promote regional cooperation.

Nepalese Prime Minister Madhav Kumar appreciated the "reconciliatory approach" of Gilani and told him that Nepal was also going through constitutional reforms, and would benefit from the experience of Prime Minister Gilani in this regard.

He thanked Gilani for providing assistance and cooperation to Nepal for development in various sectors. Madhav said there has already been cooperation in the banking sector between the two countries and emphasised the need for greater cooperation in other fields.

Nearly 20 terrorists entered India via Nepal: Indian envoy

Nearly 20 terrorists slipped into India from Nepal in 2009 using the open border between the two countries while fake Indian currency worth almost Rs 2 crore was seized in the country in what is a major security concern for India, a top official said.

Nearly a fortnight after Nepal's coalition government cancelled a deal with India to print new Nepali passports, India's ambassador to Nepal Rakesh Sood spoke to the media for the first time, highlighting the causes for India's concern.

"In 2009-10, the amount of fake Indian currency confiscated here amounted to almost Rs 1 crore 90 lakh (nearly \$4 million)," the Indian envoy told the Nagarik daily and its sister publication Republica.

"Clearly, people who are bringing the currency do so as it is easy to take it across the border."

India and Nepal share an 1,800km open border and following a bilateral pact of peace and friendship, Nepalis don't need a passport or visa to go to India and vice versa.

"Last year, about 17-18 terrorists having links with various terrorist organisations were apprehended in different parts of India," Sood said.

"(They) had entered India via Nepal. They came from different places, mostly by air, and decided to make use of the open border to get into India undetected."

The Indian envoy said in today's age and time, both countries needed to be conscious of the vulnerability the open border presented and step up cooperation to strengthen vigil against potential terrorist activities which could affect both.

A confidential letter written by Sood to Nepal's Foreign Minister Sujata Koirala had suggested that if India's state-owned Security Printing and Minting Company were to be awarded the contract to print nearly four million new Nepali passports, it would address India's security concerns rising due to the open border.

The letter was leaked to the opposition Maoist party, triggering a furore.

Sood defended the letter, saying it was "straightforward".

"A Nepali passport holder enjoys certain privileges in India," he said. "No work permit is required. A Nepali passport holder can open a bank account, can engage in trading on the stock exchange, buy property. "So naturally it is a shared concern that a Nepali passport should be as tamper-proof as possible."

India's concern about Nepali passports, which provide their owners such wide access in India, has been rising due to the growing reports about Nepali passports being lost or stolen.

"On an average, as many as 40 Nepali passports are reported lost every day," Sood said. "This is a cause of concern to us as much as it is for the Nepali government. We would not like Nepali documents to be misused. "So as a friendly neighbour, we were offering to prepare machine-readable passports of high standard." Ahead of an indefinite general strike called by the Maoists from May 2 and the spectre of violence and chaos it has raised, Sood said India was concerned at the anti-India rhetoric and activities by the former guerrillas and their sister organisations. "We see statements made by Maoist leaders from time to time and anti-Indian graffiti in Kathmandu," the envoy said. "In protest marches, anti-Indian slogans appear regularly." Sood said there were also reports of Indian companies in Nepal being prevented from doing their work. The Indian envoy rejected Maoist allegations that India caused the fall of the Maoist government last year and was interfering in Nepal's internal matters. "The Maoist-led government resigned as its own coalition partners were no longer with (Maoist chief Pushpa Kamal) Dahal," he said. "(Dahal) has never provided concrete examples of how India has interfered with his party. In his interview (to an Indian daily) he said he asked me to get a high-level envoy. We did not do so. "It shows we were not interfering."

U.S. asks Nepal to meet the May deadline for new constitution

The United States has asked Nepalese political parties to work together to meet the May 28 deadline to draft and finalise the new constitution.

This was conveyed to leaders of the main political parties of Nepal by the Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia, Robert Blake, during his meetings with them, the State Department said yesterday.

Mr. Blake, who was on a two-day visit to Nepal, met with Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal, Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist Chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal, Home Minister Bhim Rawal and other leaders.

“He urged them to work together to meet the May 28 constitution drafting deadline, extend the UN Mission in Nepal mandate, and agree on a plan to integrate former Maoist combatants,” the Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs, P J Crowley, said.

Earlier Mr. Blake visited Maiti Nepal, an anti-trafficking foundation that was recently awarded a two-year \$ 500,000 grant by the United States Department of State.

“He talked to trafficking survivors and commended the head of Maiti Nepal on the valuable work her foundation has achieved,” Crowley said.

Mr. Blake would now travel to Thimphu to attend the SAARC summit from April 28-29, as an observer. He will hold bilateral meetings with regional leaders on the sidelines of the summit

Nepal asks Bdes h to let Nepal use Mongla, Chittagong ports

KATHMANDU: Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal requested Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to allow his country use Mongla and Chittagong ports during the meeting with bangladeshi Prime Minister at Bangladesh House in SAARC village, Thimpu.

The Bangladeshi Prime Minister said that she had already talked to Indian Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh on the issue during her India visit in January this year. She said that Nepal — with huge potential of producing hydro-power — could benefit through exporting electricity to Bangladesh. During the meeting, the issue of regional connectivity featured prominently in the discussion. The two prime ministers also discussed various issues of bilateral interests, including expansion of trade and business between the two countries. Bangladeshi Foreign Minister Dr Dipu Moni was also present during the meeting.

Meanwhile, the scheduled meeting of the commerce secretaries of Bangladesh and Nepal in Dhaka next week — to facilitate bilateral trade and establish connectivity between the two countries under a proposed transit deal — is postponed. The meeting was supposed to focus on further integration in sub-regional perspectives and mutual recognition of each other’s testing and standardisation certificates, according to experts. 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 said.

Besides, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the two countries on mutual recognition of standardisation is likely to be inked at the meeting. The trade talks to be held between the countries will also focus on problems relating to loading and unloading of goods at zero point of the border.

At present, Nepali trucks cannot 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.

Similarly, due to absence of such agreement, Nepali trucks cannot reach the warehouses of the land port and they need to wait on no man’s land for Bangladeshi trucks to come for re-loading, which increases the cost of business.

The volume of bilateral trade between the two countries is very low, less than \$60 million a year. Bangladesh exported goods worth \$6.70 million to Nepal in 2008-2009, its imports figured \$53 million. Major exports from Bangladesh to Nepal include pharmaceuticals, woven garments, plastic goods, furnace oil, zippers, duck down, dry cell battery, ceramic table ware and handicrafts. Pulses, lentils, rice and wheat make up Bangladesh’s import basket from Nepal.

Nepal’s merchandise exports during the first eight months of the current fiscal year declined by eight per cent to Rs 40.41 billion against a growth of 16.2 per cent in the corresponding period of last fiscal year.

On a monthly basis, the merchandise exports, however grew by 8.9 per cent in February-March as against a decline of 0.8 per cent in the corresponding month of the previous year.

UN mission speaks out after Maoist commander violates arms agreement

The United Nations political mission in Nepal today called for an investigation and appropriate disciplinary action after a Maoist army platoon commander was discovered to be travelling on public transport with a hand grenade.

“Holding and carrying arms in violation of the law is legally punishable and a breach of the Agreement on the Monitoring of the Management of Arms and Armies (AMMAA),” the mission, known as **UNMIN**, said in a **statement**.

Under that agreement, the Maoist army has committed to confine its combatants within cantonments and register them with UNMIN, as well as register and safely store all its weapons and ammunition at the seven main cantonment sites under 24-hour UN monitoring – except those weapons kept for perimeter security and leadership security purposes.

“UNMIN condemns this reckless risk to life and calls on the UCPN-M [Unified Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist] to cooperate fully in an investigation and take appropriate disciplinary actions,” it stated.

The mission is responsible for monitoring the management of arms and armed personnel of both the Maoists and the Nepal Army, as well as in assisting in monitoring ceasefire arrangements.

The commander, Santosh Rai from Main Cantonment 2 in Sinduli, was discovered in possession of the hand grenade while travelling on 27 April.

UNMIN also called on UCPN-M and all parties to adhere strictly to the peace agreements and refrain from any provocative statements or actions.

A decade-long civil war, claiming some 13,000 lives, ended in 2006 with the signing of a peace accord between the Government and Maoists. After conducting Constituent Assembly elections in May 2008, the nation abolished its 240-year-old monarchy and declared itself a republic.

UNMIN was established in 2007 as a special political mission tasked with helping advance the peace process. It has been extended through mid-May this year to assist in the management of arms and army personnel contained in the cantonments

PM emphasises need for Nepal political parties to join hands

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh today emphasised the need for all political parties in Nepal to sink their differences and come together to push the peace process as he met his Nepalese counterpart Madhav Kumar Nepal here.

Singh and Nepal met on the sidelines of the SAARC Summit during which they held detailed discussions on the status of the peace process in Nepal, including the redrafting of the Constitution.

Nepal, while apprising Singh about the latest on the peace process front, said that differences persisted among the parties because of which much progress could not be made on redrafting of the Constitution, sources said.

He particularly talked about the stiff attitude of the Maoists which was hampering the process of redrafting the Constitution, they said.

As per the agreement between mainstream parties and Maoists in 2006, the new Nepal Constitution is to be written by May 28

UNICEF, Save the Children join hands to promote children's rights in Nepal

UNICEF and Save the Children in Nepal signed a Memorandum of Understanding in Kathmandu Tuesday committing to working more closely together on programmes and projects of mutual interest.

Save the Children and UNICEF have been working in Nepal to advance children's rights to survival, protection, development and participation, and are guided by the United Nations Convention on Rights of the Child (CRC). The two agencies have agreed, among other things, to support and promote the realisation of children's rights in the country.

"We have been encouraged with the positive developments in Nepal with regard to child rights and the implementation of the CRC," said Gillian Mellsop, UNICEF Representative to Nepal. "The inclusion of child rights as a fundamental right in the constitution drafting process is very encouraging too, though much still needs to be done and we are joining hands to better impact on the quality of life for Nepali children."

In the three year agreement signed today, Save the Children and UNICEF will conduct joint advocacy initiatives and campaigns to promote and defend children's rights and increase collaboration during emergencies. The agencies, guided by the CRC and in close cooperation with the Government of Nepal, will undertake initiatives to help strengthen the capacity of government networks and civil society to promote, fulfill, defend, and monitor the rights of children in Nepal.

The partnership will seek to create spaces and opportunities to strengthen children's rights to participation in an appropriate manner. Similarly, the two agencies will focus on sharing information and experiences that will lead to the development and implementation of tested and effective actions to benefit children.

"This memorandum of understanding underscores our strong belief that international organisations must cooperate and collaborate in the best interest of children," said Brian J. Hunter, Country Director of Save the Children in Nepal. "We can and should do more to complement each other's efforts and those of the government and civil society to achieve real and lasting impacts for children.

Nepal Supreme Court issues stay order against the government

Nepal Supreme Court issues stay order against the government Supreme Court (SC) on Thursday issued an interim order against the government staying the Constitutional Council (CC) recommendation on different constitutional bodies. The Supreme Court, the apex court of the country has made the decision in response to the writ filed by UCPN (Maoist) Chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal. Justices Balram KC, Ramkumar Prasad Shah and Mohan Prakash Sitaula issued the order asking the government to put on hold the CC recommendation until the final hearing on the case.

Religious freedom in Nepal

Freedom of religion is not often an issue at the very heart of a constitutional debate, but things have shaped up differently in the new republic of Nepal. Notwithstanding rising political turmoil, the deadline is looming for a new constitution, which will complete and formalise Nepal's transition from Hindu monarchy to secular republic. The constituent assembly has declared Nepal a secular state, but there is an increasing resistance to the nation's new identity, seemingly fuelled by Hindu nationalists in India.

In the most dramatic gesture so far, a popular Nepali holy-man, Kali Baba, recently threatened to burn himself alive in protest unless Nepal is once again established as a Hindu nation.

It remains to be seen whether this will become a make-or-break issue for the constitution, which is due to be finalised by an increasingly unlikely deadline of 28 May. However, what is abundantly clear is that the debate centring on religious hegemony and pluralism is not a mere tussle over a constitutional detail, but a disagreement about the very identity of Nepal.

If Nepal is to see through its transition to pluralist democracy, the right to freedom of religion and belief will need to be protected carefully in the new constitution. However, the current interim constitution, and proposals for a new constitution, suggest there is a long way to go before this happens.

One major problem area is religious conversion. The interim constitution says that nobody shall be entitled "to convert another person from one religion to another" and one of the two constitutional proposals is almost identical to this.

Religious conversion arouses strong passions across south Asia, an area with a uniquely complex and chequered history of religious transactions among Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, Sikhs and others, and where religions bear a heavy historical baggage of conquest, colonialism and territorialism and provoke questions of loyalty to community and nation. Yet south Asia also enjoys a rich history of harmony, peaceful coexistence and mutual respect among members of different religions.

However, religious sensitivities are not best handled by banning conversions, as the interim constitution has done and a new constitutional proposal seeks to do. There are three main reasons.

Firstly, a ban on conversions would be against the international treaties with which Nepal's new constitution should comply. Asma Jahangir, the UN special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, has stated unequivocally that religious freedom "includes carrying out actions to persuade others to believe in a certain religion".

Secondly, it is not clear what it would mean "to convert another person", and this clause could be misused easily to harass religious minorities. The implication of the clause is that a religious conversion comes about by the new convert being acted upon by external forces, while new convert has little or no agency in this process. It is very difficult to define for legal purposes what then constitutes a genuine religious conversion, and legitimate, peaceful activities carried out by any religious group which might conceivably attract new converts would be put at risk of legal reprisals.

As with anti-conversion laws in force in five Indian states and proposed in Sri Lanka, the rationale for this proposal is a fear of coercion to bring about nominal changes of religion. Any genuinely coercive attempts to effect a change of religion would – or should – be utterly condemned by sensible members of any religious community. However, illegitimate acts of coercion could simply be prosecuted under existing general provisions of the law.

This leads to a third problem, that legislating specifically against religious conversions only serves to fuel prejudice and intolerance against religious minority groups. Jahangir recently spoke out strongly against the similar anti-conversion laws in India, stating that they "are being used to vilify Christians and Muslims". Vilification all-too-often leads to violence, as many Christians or Muslims in India could testify.

Undoubtedly, the political leadership of Nepal has to navigate some very thorny territory in forging the best possible constitution to safeguard for the future of a hopeful nation. Within this wider process, they would do well to agree that the cause of social harmony and a peaceful future would be best served by protecting the right to religious freedom, not by limiting it.

Alliances: Russia's MTS to NSN, Aricent and Nepal Telecom, and more

Appalachian Wireless said it will implement 14 of **Transaction Network Services'** roaming, network and database solutions in an effort to strengthen its mobile roaming program.

Aricent said **Nepal Telecom** has awarded the company a three-year systems integration contract to provide Convergent Mediation and Convergent Interconnect Billing solutions.

Brightpoint Inc. said it has signed a global supply chain agreement with **Inmarsat Global Ltd.**

that calls for the company to provide an integrated solution to Inmarsat for fulfillment and physical distribution of its forthcoming IsatPhone Pro satellite phone.

Cinterion Wireless Modules, which provides M2M communication modules, and **Assembly Contracts Ltd.** announced a strategic partnership to jointly design and integrate wireless components based on Cinterion's cellular modules.

Edgenics, a broadband and E-learning solutions provider, has chosen **Ericsson** to be the prime integrator of its next-generation broadband network. Ericsson will supply, host and manage the company's packet core network.

Mobile TeleSystems outsourced its network operations to **Nokia Siemens Networks** in an effort to reduce its costs. The carrier outsourced the daily operation and maintenance of its entire mobile network in central Russia to NSN under a five-year managed services deal. About 250 employees will transfer to NSN under the deal.

NTT DoCoMo, **Renesas Electronics Corp.**, **Fujitsu Ltd.**, **NEC Corp.**, **Panasonic Mobile Communications Co. Ltd.** and **Sharp Corp.** all have agreed to jointly develop a new application platform for mobile phones that will be compatible with both Symbian and Linux operating systems. Commercial launch of phones that incorporate the new platform is expected next year.

Telefonica has chosen **Myriad Group** to provide social networking aggregation services to Telefonica's subscribers in Latin America. Myriad services will allow users to access multiple social networks via mobile browsers, downloadable apps and other mobile technologies.

Texas Instruments Inc. and **PolyCore Software Inc.** have teamed up to use PSI's development tools and runtime software to support TI's multicore digital signal processors. The combination is expected to simplify deployment of multicore applications and promote the Multicore Communications API standard.

Verizon Business said it has added **Riverbend Technology's** WAN optimization solution to its Managed WAN Optimization Services portfolio. Riverbend's solution allows companies to overcome a variety of IT issues, including poor application performance, slow backups and insufficient bandwidth at remote sites.

ZTE Corp. has chosen **Aziumuth Systems Inc.'s** ACE MX Universal MIMO channel emulator to support its WiMAX testing requirements. ZTE will use the solution primarily for 4x4 bi-directional testing and beamforming testing of WiMAX networks, said the companies

Sri Lanka rebel leader's home is destroyed

The north Sri Lankan ancestral home of Tamil Tiger rebel leader Velupillai Prabhakaran has been demolished by the Sri Lankan army, Tamil politicians say.

The house was situated in the Valvettithurai area of the northern Jaffna peninsula. The army told the BBC it had not demolished the house.

The Tamil Tiger leader was killed and his rebel movement defeated after heavy fighting in the north last May brought nearly two decades of war to an end.

Must-see attraction

"The Sri Lankan Army was guarding this place. They were not allowing anyone to visit the area. They have been demolishing the house bit by bit for the past few weeks," former Tamil Member of Parliament Sivajilingam told the BBC.

"I have written to the president about this. But when I went back there [on Wednesday] the house was reduced to rubble

Prabhakaran spent his childhood at the house with his siblings.

Prabhakaran's father, Thiruvankadam Velupillai, died earlier this year and was cremated in Valvettithurai.

The house was badly damaged during army operations of 1987 - the rebel leader's family had left it four years earlier.

The end of fighting in the north has attracted thousands of tourists from the south, and for many Prabhakaran's house was among the must-see attractions in Jaffna.

"Thousands of people were coming and seeing the house everyday. This might have angered the authorities," Sivajilingam said.

But the army denies any wrongdoing.

"It is not correct. We completely deny this allegation," army spokesman Prasad Samarasinge told the BBC.

"We have not destroyed any house of Prabhakaran in the country. The army has not done a thing like that."

But Tamil sources say that the military want to rid Sri Lanka of any memory of the rebel movement.

They claim a number of Tamil Tiger war graves have also been destroyed over the past year.

Sri Lanka President holds talks with Bhutanese Prime Minister

Thimpu: Upon his arrival in Bhutanese capital of Thimpu today, Sri Lanka President Mahinda Rajapaksa has held bilateral talks with the Prime Minister of Bhutan, Jigme Thinley at the SAARC village this afternoon.

The two leaders have discussed the bilateral issues important to the two countries and to the other SAARC countries. President Rajapaksa has emphasized the importance of all South Asian countries cooperating in solving regional issues.

The President who is on a four-day visit to Thimpu to participate in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) summit has assured his host of Sri Lanka's fullest support towards future development and political processes in the tiny Himalayan Kingdom.

The two-day conference of heads of state from eight countries in the region is to begin on April 28.

Pakistan, Sri Lanka agree to promote bilateral relations in defence and trade

Prime Minister Syed Yousaf Raza Gilani Wednesday called on President of Sri Lanka Mahinda Rajapakse and the two leaders agreed to promote their relations in all the fields especially in defence, trade and commerce. During the meeting, which was also attended by Foreign Minister

Shah Mahmood Qureshi, both the leaders also emphasized the need to strengthen the SAARC organization for the betterment and more development in the region.

Prime Minister felicitated Mahinda Rajapakse on his re- election for a second term as President of Sri Lanka as well as on United Peoples Freedom Alliance' victory in the parliamentary elections.

He said Pakistan greatly values its traditionally close, cordial and mutually supportive relationship with Sri Lanka adding that both the countries have always stood by each other in difficult times.

Prime Minister Gilani said both the countries shared commonality of views on numerous issues of mutual interest.

He said, "We should closely coordinate our positions on the regional and international fora."

He said that Pakistan is happy to note that Sri Lankan Government has been able to defeat terrorism. He said both the countries have been cooperating to defeat terrorism. Sri Lankan President thanked Pakistan for its cooperation and assistance in dealing the threat of terrorism.

He said Pakistan has always forcefully supported the unity, territorial integrity and sovereignty of Sri Lanka.

The Prime Minister said Pakistan despite its own economic difficulties will continue to contribute towards socio-economic development of Sri Lanka. He especially referred to Pakistan's assistance under Special Assistance Programme for South Asia.

He said it is gratifying to note that volume of trade between two countries has registered significant increase in the last four years after the signing of Free Trade Agreement.

The Prime Minister said, "We should nonetheless keep striving, jointly, to further expand our commercial ties."

He said services sector should be included in the FTA for promoting investment and trade facilitation between the two countries. The negotiations towards that end need to be fast-tracked, he added.

The Prime Minister emphasised the need for reactivation of Joint Economic Commission (JEC), to facilitate bilateral economic cooperation and monitor its progress as its last meeting was held way back in 2005.

Pakistan also invited a team of senior Sri Lankan officials to visit Islamabad for preparing the agenda of next JEC meeting in the near future.

He said Pakistan would continue to assist Sri Lanka in military training and to fulfill its defence needs and requirements.

Pakistan also offered overhauling facilities for equipments of aircrafts of Sri Lankan Air Force.

The Prime Minister also reiterated his earlier invitation extended to President of Sri Lanka to visit Pakistan.

Referring to role being played in SAARC, Prime Minister Gilani said both Pakistan and Sri Lanka are playing vital role in the organization and expressed satisfaction with the considerable progress SAARC has made in numerous fields.

The Prime Minister said both Pakistan and Sri Lanka should work closely together under SAARC to promote regional cooperation.

Prime Minister Gilani also appreciated the Sri Lanka-Pakistan Parliamentary Group especially comprising young parliamentarians. He said it would help to promote bilateral relations.

Both the countries also agreed to adopt joint strategy and initiate joint ventures to overcome the power and water crisis in the region.

Prime Minister Gilani thanked the Sri Lankan President for sending their cricket team when the world was not coming to Pakistan. He said it gave encouragement to Pakistan but regretted the unfortunate incident on this occasion in Lahore.

The Prime Minister told the Sri Lankan President that both the countries are cooperating with each other in the investigation of attack on cricket team in Lahore

Panel to examine ethnic discord in Sri Lanka

Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa has told Prime Minister Manmohan Singh about his government's plans to reach a political settlement with the Tamil ethnic community, which will include the setting up of a panel of eminent persons to examine all issues of discord.

In a 30-minute meeting here on Thursday, Mr. Rajapaksa also detailed the move to set up an Upper House in Parliament that would ensure greater representation to all ethnic communities and add weight to the move towards a political settlement, senior Foreign Ministry officials said.

The Sri Lankan President said he would also consult with all sections of the Tamil community, including those not represented in Parliament, to infuse a sense of participation and equality in the nation's re-building process after the end of conflict between the armed forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The two leaders also discussed the continuation of high-level exchanges, which will include a visit by Mr. Rajapaksa after about a couple of months. Dr. Singh said he looked forward to the visit which would further contribute to strengthening relations.

The Prime Minister congratulated Mr. Rajapaksa on his victory in the presidential elections, which was followed by a comprehensive win by his party in the recently held parliamentary polls.

The two leaders met after an interaction between External Affairs Minister S.M. Krishna and his Sri Lankan counterpart, G.L. Peiris, here on Tuesday.

The two leaders underscored the need to expeditiously settle all those displaced by the war between the LTTE and the armed forces, with Mr. Krishna stressing on the need to rehabilitate them with dignity and providing them with livelihood.

In a recent report, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees stated that resettlement had started after a three-week hiatus due to the parliamentary elections and the Tamil New Year.

Sri Lanka shares slip from record high on profit taking

Sri Lanka's shares slipped on Tuesday, snapping a six-day record streak as foreign and institutional investors booked profits in high trading volumes.

The All-Share Price Index .CSE of the Colombo Stock Exchange fell 0.04 percent or 1.59 points to 4134.46. It hit a new all-time high of 4,161.56 points on Monday.

"A layer of profit-taking seen in the market which brought the index marginally down on high turnover," said Prasanna Chandrasekera, associate director at Asia Securities in Colombo.

Analysts said despite Tuesday's marginal fall, the market would continue to move up with earning expectations and better economic development despite delay in the budget.

The newly-elected Sri Lankan government has said the 2010 budget will be delayed until July.

Investors had been expecting the government to come up with long-needed fiscal reforms to improve the investment climate. For Sri Lanka's key political risks, see [ID:nRISKLK]

Traders said low interest rates kept turnover up.

Yield in Sri Lanka's benchmark 91-day T-bills fell 6 basis points to a near five-week low of 8.40 percent at a weekly auction on Wednesday while 364-day T-bill yield fell to an over four months high of 9.30 percent, the central bank data showed.

SAARC cannot progress in isolation, Sri Lanka President says

Sri Lanka President Mahinda Rajapaksa today told the leaders of the South Asian nations that the SAARC, regional organization cannot progress in isolation and called to strengthen the means for practical engagement with the SAARC Observer States and with selected International Organisations in particular, for the development efforts in the region.

Addressing the 16th South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) conference in the Bhutanese capital of Thimpu today as the Chairman of the organization, President Rajapaksa said the SAARC nations must not hesitate to build new structures and mechanisms, to enable SAARC to reach its full potential. The President accompanied by First Lady Shiranthi Rajapaksa and the Sri Lankan delegation received a warm welcome from the Bhutan's Prime Minister Jigmi Y.Thinley and First Lady of Bhutan at the majestic Conference Hall in the Bhutanese capital.

Speaking of the theme of the summit, climate change, the President said the impact of the climate is of acute and common concern for the countries in the South Asian region and called for international efforts to alleviate the problems arising from the climate changes

The South Asian voice on this issue guided by the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities must be strongly heard in all international fora. Those in the developed world who have historically contributed to the climate change must now bear the lion share of the burden to mitigate this phenomenon," President Rajapaksa stressed.

The President emphasizing the importance of empowering the economy in the rural areas of the countries said that the economic progress should filter down to the village level and touch the community at all levels.

He pointed out that Sri Lanka despite an adverse economic global environment achieved economic growth at about 6% per annum and the per capita income has increased from 1,060 dollars in 2005 to 2,050 dollars at present.

The economic progress does not require the mass movement of populations from the rural hinterland to urban areas, he said. Rather than moving people to urban areas the Sri Lankan government has focused on developing the rural areas to achieve the economic growth, President Rajapaksa added.

The President in conclusion said SAARC can reach its full potential if there is commitment and dedication

At the 16th Summit the current chairman, President Rajapaksa handed over the chairmanship of the SAARC organization to Bhutan Prime Minister.

Foreign Minister Prof. G.L.Peris, Secretary to the President Lalith Weeratunga, Namal Rajapaksa, Sajin Vaas Gunawardena, and members of the President's Delegation were also present at the inaugural

Rs. 2b initial capital to set up EXIM Bank: Cabraal

Sri Lanka will incorporate its EXIM Bank with an initial capital of Rs. 2 billion by August this year under the provisions of the Companies Act, Central Bank Governor Ajith Nivard Cabraal said yesterday.

Mr. Cabraal told Daily Mirror that it is proposed to issue shares with voting rights and equal rights to dividend and surplus assets amounting to Rs. 2 billion valued at Rs. 10 each to raise Rs. 20 billion to be subscribed by Government of Sri Lanka and leading state financial institutions.

“Sri Lanka is currently well positioned to fast-track its economic growth to improve the economic welfare and elevate the living standards of the population as a result of peace after the defeat of the LTTE. There will re-unification of the Northern and Eastern provinces with the rest of the country, political stability, improved foreign investor confidence, low inflation, moderate interest rates and the prospective recovery of the global economy,” he said.

Mr. Cabraal said EXIM Bank is set up to promote and finance international businesses such as exports, imports and investments overseas. In most countries, EXIM Banks are state owned /sponsored specialized banks that provide financial and promotional support for international business and perform an agency function of the government on overseas businesses.

EXIM Banks of China and India are examples and they function as agent of the Government in overseas businesses.

In general, the business operations of EXIM Banks include credit facilities to exporters, foreign buyers of exports, small and medium enterprises (SMEs) catering to exports and imports of priority sector products, export credit insurance, letters of credit services for importers, foreign exchange, investment consultancy, securities trading, inward remittance services, Mr. Cabraal emphasized.

The sources of funds include capital, local and foreign borrowing, refinance schemes and borrowing from the Government. Mobilization of deposits is generally not authorised as EXIM Banks are not conventional banks that engage in deposit-taking and lending. EXIM Banks in other countries generally operate with profits at different levels depending on the business model and management efficiency.

Sri Lanka is relatively an open small economy with a significant dependence on foreign businesses. The import /export trade and other foreign transactions account for about 80% of GDP while Sri Lankas economic growth has posted an average growth of 6% in the past five years. Therefore, significance of international business to provide impetus of economic growth of Sri Lanka is reflected in the aforementioned indicators, Mr. Cabraal stressed.

Promotion of international business requires types of finance and services that are generally provided by EXIM Banks. The institutional support available at present in Sri Lanka is inadequate for this purpose. Though commercial banks provide export and import credit facilities to established customers on commercial terms, banks are reluctant to finance new businesses

The political decomposition of the LSSP

The April 8 parliamentary election has again underlined the putrefaction of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP). In the 1940s and 1950s, the party commanded the allegiance of the most militant and class conscious sections of workers on the basis of the struggle for Trotskyism. Today, having betrayed those principles in 1964, it is a desiccated corpse that functions as loyal faction of the ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA).

As it has done for years, the LSSP did not campaign in the election under its own banner, but that of the UPFA. It was allowed to stand five candidates in five districts, winning just one seat in Kegalle district with a relatively unknown member, Y.G. Pathmasiri. As part of the UPFA’s arrangements, President Mahinda Rajapakse’s Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) allocated a national list seat to the current LSSP leader, Tissa Vitharana.

In the initial allocation of ministries, Vitharana, who was the minister of science and technology in the previous Rajapakse government, was overlooked. After whining to Rajapakse over the neglect of the party, it appears that Vitharana may be given a ministerial job when the president returns on April 30 from the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation meeting.

This cringing subservience is reflected in the LSSP's support for all the Rajapakse's anti-working class policies and crimes over the past four years. It backed Rajapakse's renewed war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) that resulted in thousands of civilian deaths as well as the incarceration of more than a quarter of a million men, women and children following the LTTE's defeat last May.

The LSSP's support for the communal war flows directly from its betrayal of Trotskyist principles when it entered the bourgeois SLFP-led coalition government of Sirima Bandaranaike in 1964. The party that had fought for socialist internationalism, courageously defended the citizen rights of Tamil plantation workers and opposed the SLFP's racist "Sinhala only" language policy, junked its previous program of socialist revolution and embraced parliamentarism and the Sinhala chauvinism of the Bandaranaike government.

The LSSP's betrayal was the outcome of a protracted nationalist degeneration, encouraged at every step by the opportunist International Secretariat of the Fourth International led by Michael Pablo and Ernest Mandel. Its full implications became apparent in the second Bandaranaike government that took office in 1970. The LSSP supported the ruthless suppression of the misguided Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) uprising in 1971 that resulted in the death of at least 15,000 Sinhala rural youth.

LSSP leaders held key cabinet posts in the Bandaranaike government. As minister for plantation industries and constitutional affairs, Colvin R. de Silva was responsible for the 1972 constitution that entrenched Sinhala as the state language and Buddhism as the state religion. The constitution along with another forms of official anti-Tamil discrimination led ultimately to communal war. As finance minister, N.M. Perera imposed the brunt of the 1974-75 global recession onto the backs of the working people, creating enormous hardship and suffering.

The LSSP was thrown out of the coalition in 1975 and, like the SLFP, suffered a devastating electoral defeat at the 1977 election that brought the right-wing United National Party (UNP) to power. The UNP imposed pro-market restructuring and, as social tensions increased, plunged the island into war against the LTTE, which the LSSP backed. Subsequently, the LSSP joined a renewed coalition with the SLFP that brought President Chandrika Kumaratunga to power in 1994. Since then, it has virtually ceased to exist as an independent party.

Like its cavernous headquarters in central Colombo, the LSSP is nothing more than an empty shell. The leaders who once fought for revolutionary Trotskyism, only to betray its principles, are for the most part dead. The new generation of leaders is thoroughly imbued with the politics of parliamentary manoeuvre. Tissa Vitharana, a doctor and relative of N.M. Perera, joined the LSSP in the late 1950s and assisted Perera. He entered parliament in 2004 through a national list seat to become party's sole parliamentarian and leader.

The LSSP leadership is literally in the SLFP's pocket. Its political committee has 13 members—apart from Vitharana who is likely to resume a ministerial post, eight others are paid government "advisors". The party claims to have 700 members, but no more than 150 attend party meetings. Its "monthly" newspaper, *Samasamajaya*, is published intermittently.

The LSSP no longer even pretends to have its own program distinct from President Rajapakse's so-called Mahinda Chinthanaya (Mahinda Vision). In an interview with the *Sunday Observer*, newly-elected MP Pathmasiri explained: "The main theme during my election campaign was

LSSP ideology and policies which are quite compatible with Mahinda Chinthana Idiri Dekma (Perspective of Mahinda Vision).”

The LSSP previously had mass trade unions in the private and public sectors that had a long history of struggle. Many of them have disappeared completely and the remaining few are little more than formal names with a few hundred members. Insofar as the LSSP unions exist, they play a completely treacherous role in assisting the bloc of government unions to suppress any opposition by workers.

A discussion is underway in the LSSP leadership over how to prevent the party’s complete collapse. Lal Wijenayake wrote to the leadership more than a year ago advising that the party to distance itself from the government by not accepting ministerial posts and making limited criticisms of its gross abuses of democratic rights. Wijenayake joined the right-wing UNP on its “Platform for Freedom” in January to posture, falsely, as a “democrat”. Fearing Rajapakse’s wrath, the LSSP promptly suspended Wijenayake from membership of the party’s central committee.

To try to bolster its fortunes, the LSSP has joined its longtime ally, the Stalinist Communist Party, in forming the Socialist Peoples Alliance (SPA) with other ex-left groups, including the Democratic Left Front (DLF) and the Peoples National Liberation Front. The SPA’s parliamentarist orientation was underscored last week, when, after a meeting at the LSSP’s headquarters, it resolved to beg the SLFP for a ministerial post for DLF leader Vasudeva Nanayakkara.

Insofar as Rajapakse has any need for services of these ex-lefts, it is to offer a threadbare disguise for its reactionary policies. The main job of LSSP leader Vitharana in the previous government was not as science minister but as chairman of the All Party Representative Committee (APRC) set up in May 2006 to prepare a “political solution” to the grievances of the Tamil minority. While Vitharana went through the motions, Rajapakse prepared the military and plunged the country back to war in July 2006 in flagrant breach of the 2002 ceasefire.

At last week’s meeting of the SPA, Vitharana hailed the government, declaring: “In this country people have given a very good mandate for this government. People gave this mandate to continue the fight against imperialism. We must make people aware of this and we have this responsibility.” The LSSP ended any genuine struggle against imperialism decades ago. Vitharana is simply echoing Rajapakse’s propaganda designed to counter the very limited criticisms of the US and European Union of the military’s human rights abuses.

As Vitharana manoeuvres for a cabinet post, the Rajapakse government is preparing to implement the austerity measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund in the wake of deepening global economic crisis. Like the rest of the ex-left milieu in Colombo, Vitharana will muster up what remains of the LSSP to attempt to suppress any independent movement of the working class against the Rajapakse government.

The Revolutionary Communist league (RCL), the forerunner to the Socialist Equality Party, was founded in 1968 in a political struggle against the LSSP’s historic betrayal. The SEP, the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), is the only party that embodies the revolutionary principles of Trotskyism that provide the sole foundation on which the working class can defend its basic rights in the coming class struggles

Sources:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk>

<http://www.dailytimes.com>

<http://www.gulftimes.com>

<http://www.thefinancialexpress-bd.com/>

<http://www.bernama.com/>

<http://www.app.com>.

<http://www.allvoices.com>

<http://www.paktribune.com>

<http://www.dnaindia.com>

<http://economictimes.indiatimes.com>

<http://www.asiantribune.com>

<http://sify.com>

<http://www.ndtv.com>

<http://www.thehimalayantimes.com>

<http://www.ptinews.com>

<http://www.nepalnews.com>

<http://www.reviewnepal.com>

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/com>

<http://news.bbc.co.uk>

<http://www.colombopage.com>

<http://beta.thehindu.com>

<http://in.reuters.com>

<http://www.wsws.org/articles>

