

Shumaila Rafiq

BUSINESS AND POLITICS IN THE MUSLIM WORLD

South Asia

Weekly Report: from 9th jan to 15 jan 2010

Bangladesh

POLITICAL

- Bangladesh PM hails India trip
- India, Bangladesh in talks over extradition treaty:
- India, Bangladesh look to turn a corner
- Bangladesh Says Musharraf Met With Indian Secessionist Leader
- India, Bangladesh to sign 3 pacts on terrorism
- Hasina's visit and after Daily Pioneer
- India, Bangladesh meet-a new phase of relationship ncrsamaylive.com

SOCIAL

GEO-STRATEGIC:

- Pakistan-backed terrorists and insurgents seeking shelter in Bangladesh

ECONOMIC:

- Energy-deficient Bangladesh will receive the power from Indian grids in West Bengal and Tripura
- Natural Gas Crisis in Bangladesh- Possible Remedy
- Bharti's deal with Bangladesh telecom firm: challenges ahead

SRI LANKA

POLITICAL

- Increases Security after Election Shooting
- Sri Lanka president woos Tamils with power

- Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger suspects 'won't be freed soon'
- Presidential election 2010, and the next armed uprising in Sri Lanka

ECONOMIC

- President Rajapaksa of Sri Lanka: Sri Lankan Economy Showing Signs of Recovery Following Five Year Anniversary of Tsunami

SOCIAL

- Millennium's longest annular solar eclipse on January 15

GEOSTRATEGIC

- Sri Lanka President receives rousing welcome in Jaffna

Nepal

POLITICAL

- Nepal President to visit India on February 15
- India, Bangladesh look to turn a corner Asia Times Online
- [The Eroding Common Middle Ground In Nepal: UN](#)
- [Nepal Prime Minister warns parties to consolidate peace](#)
- [UNSG Ban unaware of Nepal's real situation: Koirala](#)
- Peace process in Nepal still at risk: United Nations Press Trust of India
- Nepal Army imported weapons: Maoist Telegraphnepal.com Nepal's top leaders form mechanism to expedite peace process
- NC, UML agree to include PM Nepal in HLPM
- Nepal asks UN for extension of peace mission

GEOSTRATEGIC

- [Seaports to be developed for use by India, Nepal, Bhutan](#)
- Ban's report far from reality, says Koirala Press Trust of India
- 'Ban's report at odds with Nepal reality' Republica Nepal Maoists to raise demand for withdrawal of Indian forces from Kalapani
- Nepal, India to decide oil pipeline modality
- [Nepal marks 12th National Earthquake Safety Day](#)

SOCIAL

- Solar Eclipse in Nepal, South Asia
- Nepal could suffer Haiti's fate

ECONOMIC

- [Traders for regional cooperation in energy sector](#) Businessmen community shows concern over 40 % devaluation of rupee Pakistan Daily Mail
- ICCI demands relief measures to accelerate economy Regional Times
- Landgren heaps praise on HLPM Himalayan Times
- Nepalli [envoy to UN apprises Security Council of progress on peace process](#)
- Nepal's Alpine Air To Link Kathmandu To KL In April anuary 14, 2010 14:23 PM
- Power Grid Corporation approves investment in Nepal JV
- Sugar being smuggled to Nepal from Bihar: Intelligence report
- Oil prices near USD 80 as traders eye rising equities

BHUTAN

POLITICAL

- China, Bhutan hold 19th border talks
- Kutshab Yeshey Dorji is concurrently accredited to Vienna, Austria
- PM defends move to allow port use
- Bhutan refugees start over in Philadelphia Kutshab goes to Vienna

SOCIAL

- Bomb on bus to Bhutan border
- Loopholes in mining policy

GEOSTRATEGIC

- Analysts back opening ports to neighbours
- Bhutan-India Regional Trade Fair in Gelephu inaugurated by Hon'ble Agriculture Minister
- Indismart sets up base in Bangkok and Bhutan
- Nepal, Bhutan too will be allowed to use ports

ECONOMIC

- Biological E in pact with US firm
- CSC warns finance ministry on pay

MALDIVES

POLITICAL

- Maldives - President to speak on his upcoming visits to Abu Dhabi and India in his weekly radio address
- Maldives - Weekly Radio Address: President speaks on government's subsidy policy, planned trips abroad, DRP elections and Poets' Day
- Maldives - President ratifies Clemency Bill

SOCIAL

- Cruise sails to Maldives for solar eclipse
- No eclipse watching in the Maldives
- Weak Climate Accord Disappoints Student
- UN helps protect children against neglect and abuse in Maldives

Geostrategic

- Maldives - Canadian High Commissioner presents his letter of credentials to the President
- Korean Air to Fly to Maldives

Economic

- Research and Markets: Travel and Tourism - Maldives

Bangladesh

Bangladesh PM hails India trip

The success of the just concluded visit to India of Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has to be judged by how India's handsome response to her various gestures of friendship will be viewed in Bangladesh. Ms Hasina has sought to put an end to the policy of her political rivals at home to provide a sanctuary to anti-India extremists. The arrest of the topmost leaders of the United Liberation Front of Assam (Ulfa) provided the backdrop to her visit this week. Clearly, this initiative has laid the foundation for improved relations between the two South Asian neighbours. It remains to be seen how Islamist opinion in Bangladesh which, along with a section of the country's middle class and elite, remains unhappy about the breakup of Pakistan, will respond to improved relations with India. There is no doubt that the Awami League's massive electoral victory in late 2008 has opened a historic window of opportunity to take India-Bangladesh relations to a qualitatively different level. The importance of this context has to be grasped because the League has been in power for only about 10 of the 40-year life of Bangladesh. Equally, attitudes in New Delhi have also changed, thanks to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's unilateral gestures of friendship towards Bangladesh.

Two significant initiatives which India has taken to help Bangladesh are, first, the promise of 250 Mw of power to the energy-deficient neighbour, even when India itself is in deficit, and, second, the offer of a \$1-billion line of credit for infrastructure development. Another important Indian initiative is to reduce the list of negative items of import from Bangladesh and extend to Bangladesh the zero tariff treatment, available to Saarc's less developed countries. In turn, Bangladesh has given India access to two ports, Chittagong and Mongla, through which Northeast India can access the Bay of Bengal. Both sides have taken small steps to facilitate transit of goods — through India from Nepal and Bhutan to Bangladesh and between India and its northeast through Bangladesh. Also, it has been decided to take forward the project to link Tripura by rail to Bangladesh.

There remains a long list of significant issues which need to be sorted out to realise the full potential for bilateral relations. The two countries have to agree on their maritime boundaries

so as to go ahead with gas exploration in the Bay of Bengal. This can change the energy picture in both. Smooth and easy transit of goods through Bangladesh is crucial for the future economic growth of Northeast India, which suffers from both physical and psychological isolation. Enormous work remains ahead in making good use of the rivers and water resources that flow through Nepal, India and Bangladesh. Only a token beginning has been made in this regard by deciding to jointly study the flow in the river Kosi. Substantial progress also needs to be made in promoting cross-border investment. A major initiative by the Tatas to invest in Bangladesh has not yielded anything. Cordial relations with a rapidly growing neighbour are in themselves important for India. They are important for Bangladesh too in its quest for a better quality of life for its own people. Changed mindsets in both countries can resolve many longstanding issues.

India, Bangladesh look to turn a corner

NEW DELHI - Ever since India intervened in the partition of Pakistan that led to the creation of Bangladesh in 1971, relations between Delhi and Dhaka have been strained, with the latter ever-suspicious of its neighboring "big brother", compounded by fears of Indian goods swamping Bangladesh's economy. India, for its part, has been frustrated by Dhaka's penchant to "obstruct" meaningful bilateral dialogue and is concerned about

Bangladesh Says Musharraf Met With Indian Secessionist Leader

A senior minister of the Sheikh Hasina cabinet says the Bangladesh government has evidence that former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's administration arranged a "secret meeting" in capital Dhaka in July 2002 between the then Pakistan President and Chief of Army Staff Parvez Musharraf with a jailed secessionist leader wanted by India.

Reiterating his claim that Musharraf had met with United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) leader Anup Chetia, local government minister and ruling Awami League's general secretary Syed Ashraf Islam said: "We've the evidence. We've not made any statement without evidence. I am aware that no comment should be made about a president without any evidence."

India, B'desh to sign 3 pacts on terrorism

India and Bangladesh will sign three pacts related to counter-terrorism and organised crime during Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit here from Monday, a step that could help address India's concerns about Northeast insurgents taking shelter in that country.

The two countries will also sign an Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on cooperation in the power sector during the three-day visit that is expected to give a push to the bilateral relations in the backdrop of recent positive atmospherics.

Clearing the way for their signing, the Union Cabinet today approved an agreement on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters and a pact on Combating International Terrorism, Organised Crime and Illicit Drug Trafficking.

The meeting, chaired by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, also gave a nod to the MoU on sharing of power between the two countries, official sources said.

The Cabinet had earlier approved an agreement on Transfer of Sentenced Persons, which also will be signed on Monday after the talks between Singh and Hasina, who is making her

maiden trip to India after taking over last January.

The agreements are aimed at addressing India's concerns with regard to north-east insurgents taking shelter in Bangladesh as a legal framework would be put in place to transfer them, including those having undergone sentences in that country.

India has a lot of expectations on this front from the Hasina government. Dhaka has already taken a number of discreet measures to deny safe haven to north-east insurgents, which is reflected by the arrest of some top ULFA leaders like Arabinda Rajkhowa.

The MoU on power provides for import and export of electricity to the tune of over 900 million units per annum depending on availability, need and price, the sources said.

The price and various modalities for exchange of power will be worked out later for the MoU under which about 250 MW is expected to be exchanged initially and eventually it could touch 1,000 MW.

Energy-deficient Bangladesh will receive the power from Indian grids in West Bengal and Tripura.

Natural Gas Crisis in Bangladesh- Possible Remedy

Natural gas based economy of Bangladesh is in the grip of serious crisis due to growing deficit in national gas grid. Predominantly Mono fuel Power Generation can not remedy power crisis in short term, fertilizer production is also suffering for lack of supply to fertilizer plants. Not only industrial growth has completely stalled, operation of existing industries has become extremely difficult. Gas crisis has hit domestic and commercial consumers over gas distribution network. The national gas production capacity is about 2000MMCFD but the demand is about 2400MMCFD and is still growing. Transmission and distribution capacity further restricts gas supply. Gas and power crisis have also adversely impacted upon local and foreign investment. But a nation can not keep all fingers crossed like this indefinitely. Something needs to be done and done today.

Before we suggest remedial measures to overcome present crisis let us have a birds eye view of the Gas system of Bangladesh. Government still controls almost 100% of the Gas system planning, development and operation. Energy and Mineral Resources Division (EMRD) of Power, Energy and Mineral Resources Ministry controls every affair. There is a so called Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission (BERC) which has mandate to regulate independently all energy sector activities excepting upstream of the petroleum sector. But for several years after commencement of activities BERC is not fully operational. Consequently private sector is not allowed level play ground in infrastructure v development and operation. BERC also remains old man house for retired beauracrats of the past. EMRD owns 100% share of several exploration, production, transmission, distribution & marketing companies of gas and two mining companies. Some International oil companies operate some gas fields in their assigned blocks under PSC with Petrobangla and Government. IOCs share Production with PB. PB has to buy IOC share of gas at much higher than Bangladesh price of gas. IOCs upfront investment is recovered from PB share of gas. Market price of gas is comparatively lower than IOC price which creates discomfort for PB companies in earning profit and reinvest in exploration and development activities. PB companies have to rely on fund from Government ADP or bilateral donor agencies and development partners. Service conditions are poor in Gas industries. For various reasons hundreds of qualified and competent well trained professionals have left PB company jobs for better opportunities abroad. Consequently all SOEs of gas sector have become weak and sick. These can hardly plan and implement any major projects or operate system professionally.

Petrobangla system operation is unbundled on functional lines. But there is no defined gas market structure. Petrobangla buys gas from IOCs. But marketing companies buy gas from national producers. PB Transmission Company GTCL owns, operates, develops and maintains National Gas Grid. It evacuates gas from national producers and IOCs. But GTCL has no contract with any one. Government arbitrarily decide wheeling charge for GTCL with out any economic basis. National Production companies doing same kind of works get much less price than IOCs for the gas produced. The following companies carry out specific tasks.

Pakistan-backed terrorists and insurgents seeking shelter in Bangladesh.

India has of late conveyed to the United States that its global efforts against terror in Pakistan and Afghanistan cannot succeed unless nations such as Nepal and Bangladesh are strengthened, economically and politically. Weak governments and security structures in India's smaller neighbors provide safe havens for terrorists, given the heat of US military operations in other areas. Some of these issues were addressed this week during the maiden visit to India of Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina following her electoral victory in December 2008. She sought "a path-breaking and historic opportunity" to build a "new and forward-looking" relationship. Bangladesh looked at India as a "natural friend", said Hasina, and asked India to "open new doors and a new era" in bilateral cooperation, even as New Delhi conferred on her the prestigious Indira Gandhi Peace Prize. Commenting on anti-India sentiment in Bangladesh, Hasina said, "Perhaps that may remain. I cannot change that ... But common people want better lives and if results are achieved [in India-Bangladesh cooperation], these sentiments will not work." Observers say that such statements are not mere rhetoric as the ground for positive movement in India-Bangladesh relations has never been better, given that it has traditionally been Dhaka that has been "prickly" about being associated too closely with India. First, Hasina rides on a large parliamentary majority, which means that her government does not depend for survival on Muslim hardiners and India-baiters. Former Bangladesh prime minister Khaleda Zia and her Islamist allies governed the country from 2001 to 2006, a period during which India-Bangladesh relations were particularly bitter. Second, militants killed Hasina's former finance minister and have tried to assassinate her; she has little sympathy for militancy. She is aware of the situation in Pakistan, where former state-backed militants orchestrated attacks in India and elsewhere, but now threaten the existence of their creators. A reflection of changed thinking is that Dhaka recently delivered Arabinda Rajkhowa, the chief of the banned rebel group, the United Liberation Front of Assam, to India. Third, Bangladesh has become a bigger garment exporter than India, which gives it some confidence to stand up for itself as an economy. Dhaka is also considering inviting Indian software firms to set up in Bangladesh. New Delhi has indicated that it aims to set in motion goodwill and structures (business, transport etc) that last beyond the thinking of a political party or an individual in power. Thus, when Hasina met Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in New Delhi, the expectations were high. Manmohan was full of praise, calling Hasina an "outstanding political figure of South Asia who has worked tirelessly for the restoration of democracy in Bangladesh". The premiers then got down to business, signing five agreements, including three pacts on counter-terrorism and one on power-sharing. A combined front against terror was at the top of the agenda. "Terrorists do not have any religion or country and are giving a bad name to Islam, which symbolizes peace," Hasina said, emphasizing that her country was committed not to allow its soil to be used for terrorist activity against India. The three pacts on counter-terrorism, including those on mutual legal assistance, transfer of convicted prisoners, the fight against international terrorism, organized

crime and illegal drug trafficking, were aimed at concerns about stopping insurgents in India's troubled northeast from spilling into Bangladesh. Importantly, Hasina said the countries were working on an extradition treaty. Though a timeframe was not specified, officials said the modalities would be worked out "soon". New Delhi also announced a US\$1 billion line of credit for infrastructure development in Bangladesh, which is the highest grant to any one country by India. India is also committed to supply 250 megawatts of power to its neighbor from its central grid. India also offered a reduction of items from its negative trade list; this will benefit Bangladesh. Hasina's schedule included meetings with Indian business groups looking to invest in Bangladesh. These included the Tatas, who were earlier forced to scrap steel and power projects in Bangladesh worth US\$3 billion, and India's biggest private telecom operator, Bharti Airtel, which is making a foray into Bangladesh. Bangladesh welcomed New Delhi's initiative to provide duty-free access to the Indian market for the least-developed countries in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation.

Regional

Implications

Apart from acting on terror, another major breakthrough could be the proposed 950-kilometer, \$1 billion Myanmar-Bangladesh-India (MBI) gas pipeline. With the Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline stalled due to US-Iran geopolitical issues, India has become a supporter of the MBI so that it can access the rich hydrocarbon resources of Myanmar. The MBI has been in limbo since a draft memorandum of understanding was signed three years ago as Dhaka linked implementing the pipeline to a reduction of its trade imbalance with India, to the establishment of a corridor for Nepalese goods to go into Bangladeshi ports, and access to hydropower from Bhutan. This irked New Delhi as it opposes resolving bilateral issues as part of a trilateral agreement. All the same, Hasina has now granted India access to Mongla and Chittagong ports for the movement of goods. In exchange, India expressed its intention to give access to Nepal and Bhutan to Bangladesh through its territory. The MBI was initially mooted by a Bangladeshi private company, Mohona Holdings Limited, in 1997, a move approved by India and Myanmar. The pipeline is proposed to cut across Shwe in Arakan province in Myanmar and then go on to the Indian states of Mizoram and Tripura, and then to Kolkata in West Bengal via Bangladesh. Frustrated with the repeated failure to get the MBI off the ground, Myanmar opted to supply gas to China, a fierce competitor for energy. China has since begun the construction of oil and gas pipelines from Myanmar. New Delhi, however, feels there will still be plenty left over after meeting China's demand. Gas reserves of about six trillion cubic feet have been estimated in blocks A-1 and A-2 off Myanmar's Arakan coast. In the new climate, the MBI might yet be a goer; Bangladesh has an acute gas shortage and could certainly use MBI gas, along with transit and management revenues. Recently, Myanmar's ambassador to India, U Kyi Thein, said the project may take shape in the near future. "Something could happen in two to three years with Indian companies like GAIL, Essar Oil, ONGC and IOC exploring gas in Myanmar," Thein said.

SRI LANKA

Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger suspects 'won't be freed soon'

Thousands of Tamil Tiger suspects in government custody will not be released soon, a Sri Lankan minister has said. Power and Energy Minister WDJ Seneviratne said there were a "considerable number of suicide bombers" among the 14,000 detainees. A military spokesman said there were fewer than 12,000 suspects in custody. In May, Sri Lanka's army defeated Tamil Tiger rebels who had been fighting for a separate homeland for the country's Tamil minority for 26 years. Speaking to journalists in Ratnapura, Sabaragamuwa province,

Mr Seneviratne said some 14,000 suspected members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, or LTTE, are being held in various detention centres. "These people are not somebody we can release soon, because some of them are suspected to be connected to very serious incidents," he said. He added that "a considerable number of suicide bombers" are among the detained. However, military spokesman Brig Udaya Nanayakkara told the BBC's Sinhala service that just over 11,000 LTTE suspects are in custody, following the release of 712 former LTTE combatants on Saturday. The reason for the discrepancy was not immediately clear.

Disputed video

The main opposition candidate in Sri Lanka's presidential elections on 26 January, former military commander Gen Sarath Fonseka, has pledged if elected to release all LTTE suspects within a month if no evidence is found against them.

The Tamil National Alliance (TNA), the major Tamil party in Sri Lanka's parliament, said it would support Gen Fonseka's candidacy days after he submitted a proposal named "Immediate Relief Measures for War Affected Persons," which included the pledge to release the LTTE members. Mr Seneviratne also accused international community of trying to "corner Sri Lanka" on war crimes charges, a reference to claims that a recently aired video shows extra-judicial killings by Sri Lankan troops. Sri Lanka has angrily rejected UN claims that the footage, which was allegedly shot in January during the final stages of the Sri Lankan conflict, is genuine. Mr Seneviratne claimed that UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon was under pressure to take action against Sri Lanka, after a UN human rights official called for a war crimes investigation. Sri Lanka's conflict left more than 70,000 people dead and many more displaced. The government recently opened camps for the displaced in the country's north to allow them to return home. The defence ministry said on Saturday that just over 80,000 people remained in the camps, down from more than 280,000.

Sri Lanka President receives rousing welcome in Jaffna

Jan 10, Jaffna: Sri Lanka President Mahinda Rajapaksa on the campaign trail in Jaffna today received a rousing welcome from the massive crowd gathered at the Duraiappah Stadium in Jaffna. President Rajapaksa in his first visit to the peninsula after winning the war arrived at the Palaly Military Base this morning where the commanders of the three armed forces and the IGP received the President. The President paid a floral tribute to the fallen war heroes at the war memorial and addressed over 5,000 security forces and police personnel. Reiterating that the people of this country are proud of the victory gained from the sacrifices by the war heroes the President stressed that no one would be allowed to betray that victory. "No one should be allowed to divide the united country or to create terrorism in the country again," the President said. The Jaffna Commander, Major General L.B.R Mark presented a memento to the President. Prior to the campaign rally President Rajapaksa paid homage to the Sri Naga Viharaya in Jaffna and visited the International Buddhist Centre there. The chief incumbent Ven. Jabure Gnanarathna Thero blessed the President and commended him for restoring peace in the country after 30 years. The President participated in a special Pooja at the historic Nallur Kanthaswamy Kovil in Jaffna. The President also called on the Jaffna Bishop Reverend Father Thomas Savundranayagam. The President also toured the Jaffna library and visited the town on foot spending some time with the people. Eelam People's Democratic Party leader and Minister of Social Services Douglas Devananda and several other ministers accompanied the President in his tour of Jaffna.

Presidential election 2010, and the next armed uprising in Sri Lanka

"The feeling that the rule of law does not preside over the highest authority in the country led to disgust and mistrust in the ability of the constitution to protect the fundamental rights of

people.” January 14, London, Sri Lanka Guardian) I carefully observed the developments in Sri Lanka around the current race for the presidency in order to find an answer to one of my major points of interest as a citizen. That is who has a better sense of what is needed to be done to avoid a fourth armed uprising in Sri Lanka?

Higher education: If we carefully look at the root causes of the past three armed uprisings, frustrated university students and intellectuals played a central role in the early developments in the two JVP led uprisings and the Tamil Nationalistic movements like EROS (Eelam Revolutionary Organization of Students) that finally led to LTTE’s armed struggle. Though the JVP movement gave more emphasis on employability of graduates, the Tamil movement gave more emphasis on wider access to a quality higher education. I feel that they are the flip sides of the same coin. Still today, only 3% of the students who sit for A/L examination get entrance to the state universities under a quota system that marginalizes students in cities to give more opportunities to the rural students. Moreover, state universities are virtually running a monopoly in higher education denying the choice of a university education to the rest of the 97%. I urge Sri Lankans to read the manifestos of the two main candidates – Mahinda Rajapakse and Sarath Fonseka - carefully to see who seems to have a better sense of urgency to bring in reforms in this area.

Freedom of expression: All three armed uprisings went through a brief stage of radical politics that were met with harsh police and military retaliations from the state that spiraled the status quo down to messier depths. Therefore, there is a need to build a culture of tolerance for opposite views. Sadly, we have been seeing an increasing level of violence against opposite views that peaked with a death yesterday in Tangalla. Intimidation is everywhere. The best test is to ask yourself if you feel free to talk against any of the presidential candidates. If you feel more scared to talk against one candidate, he is responsible for creating that fear psychosis. The danger, is that this fear psychosis makes some youth to develop extremist ideas though they may look dormant.

Rule of law: The feeling that the rule of law does not preside over the highest authority in the country led to disgust and mistrust in the ability of the constitution to protect the fundamental rights of people. The immediate questions many ask are, whether Government corruption is tolerated by the law or not, whether executive presidential discretion risks the country’s future in the personality of the president than the values of the constitution? etc. The withdrawal of the foreign currency remitting ceiling during the election heat, failure to implement the 17th amendment to the constitution gave open indications that Mahinda Rajapakse has not been that great in combating corruption and abuse of state property by the ruling party. On the other hand the recent scandal on Sarath Fonseka’s involvement in a defence hardware supplying company headed by his son-in-law raised fresh concerns about his integrity. However, we should give more priority to exact legal mechanisms both of them propose to bring in to fight corruption in the future, because it is only the law and the power of the law enforcement agencies to hold all citizens including the president liable under the law that can guarantee clarity in the future. Who looks more innocent is a secondary issue. In that sense, I highly appreciate Sarth Fonseka’s specific reference to bring in regulations in line with the UN convention against corruption (page 12 of his manifesto). However, we should note that Mahinda Rajapakse has given strong promises to fight corruption though he does not refer to the legal mechanisms he will use to do that.

Notion of citizenship: National integration and solidifying the noble notion of citizenship plays a pivotal political role in avoiding extremism. The question we should ask is, whether every citizen feels that he/she has a reasonable right to live a free life and achieve his/her economic and political aspirations without compromising the right of another citizen to his/hers, and does not feel that a particular section of the society is preferentially treated? In that sense, both candidates have made attempts to bring minority communities to the

mainstream politics. Mahinda Rajapakse took steps to give a former rebel commander wide powers within his party and a ministry of National Integration. However, many educated Tamils do not seem to see much effect in this move. Sarath Fonseka on the hand has managed to bring members of the Tamil National Alliance which was virtually the LTTE's democratic arm in the parliament, and JVP who claim to be representing the rights of the oppressed communities in Sri Lanka, along with the main opposition United National Party to play pivotal mainstream roles in his political campaign. If it continues to listen to the cries of the former rebels and the communities they represent, I do not see anything more valuable than this political miracle. However, I am not sure if Sarath Fonseka will have enough political maturity to keep this coalition of diverging ideas to evolve a lasting solution to the discriminated masses in Sri Lanka.

Sustainable economic growth: The economy needs its due attention because it was the economically deprived communities that provided the foot soldiers to fuel all three armed uprisings. Both candidates seem to be promising lucrative Government concessions and salary hikes to Government servants. While appreciating this generosity, I am yet to see any of the candidates galvanizing the public opinion that it is sheer focused hard work of each of us that can one day save us from the economic crisis. The Government can not deliver concessions if the wealth creation machinery is retarded. In order to revive our economy, we should give the bats and balls to the private sector and make the Government play the umpire's role. At present, we are in a confusion. Government corporations like CEB (per day loss is more than Rs. 3 million), Petroleum corporation (annual loss in billions of Rupees), and the National career (again the loss in billions of Rupees) need to be revived with viable business models without sacrificing the Government's ability to run them in the best interests of the public. Local universities should be empowered to back up the private sector with relevant R&D. My own survey among universities proved me that successive Governments have not dared to bring in reforms to the way Universities are allowed to manage their R&D finances. Mahinda Chinthana program has undoubtedly lead a number of credible projects like the Norichcholai power station, the Galle, Hambantota, and Colombo harbor projects, and the highway projects. The rapid development in North and East also deserves a salute. However, it is Sarath Fonseka's belief that better Government accountability and transparency will save a massive amount of money wasted in vain, and expand more room for faster growth. He estimates that the economy could grow at an additional 2% if the wastage could be stopped.

Foreign relations: Foreign relations is a double edged sword. One can effectively use it as a resource to develop the country and maintain political stability, or one can view it as a threat and alienate the country from the rest of the world or be aligned to one camp of countries leading to its own risks and opportunities. In the past, mistakes done by certain administrations regarding our relations with India played a vital role in the formation of LTTE as a formidable military force, and their ability to win international support. Mahinda Rajapakse Government took a critical decision to risk any relation that stood in the way to the military victory and foster those that stood favorable. Though this was a bold step, I am yet to see any credible efforts to repair damaged relationships after the war, compared to the effort put to gain political advantage of the military victory including the decision to advance the presidential election by two years. Though Sarath Fonseka's foreign policy looks more non-aligned, he should be more clear about the stand on the West and neighboring India.

Final remark - when we are in a war, we should choose the right candidate to win the war. When we are in peace, we should choose the candidate who is best to eliminate the root causes that may give rise to the next war. The past war has transformed all Sri Lankans who suffered from the war. I hope it transformed the minds of these two main candidates who were directly steering the war effort, and they attained maturity to go beyond egoistic claims

to the war victory to serve the needs of a peaceful society – one where harmonious change can take place without oppression.

Millennium's longest annular solar eclipse on January 15

The solar eclipse on January 15 will be seen from the southern tip of the country at Dhanushkodi in Tamil Nadu and neighboring Sri Lanka as the millennium's longest annular solar eclipse will make the sun appear like a 'Ring of Fire' with the moon covering its disc.

During the eclipse nearly 90 percent of the solar disk will be covered by the moon. Sky watchers will be able to view the eclipse in Sri Lanka from about 11.11 a. m. to 3.12 p. m. while in India the eclipse will start around 11 a. m. and end around 3:15 p. m.

Kanyakumari in Tamil Nadu will be the first place from where the eclipse could be seen, later moving to Rameshwaram and Dhanushkodi and further to Kerala and end in Mizoram in the northeast. More than half of the eclipse could be seen from the capital starting at 11.53 a. m. to 15.11 p. m. while people in most part of India will be able to see a partial eclipse.

The annual solar eclipse occurs when the sun and the moon are exactly in line. The moon's shadow is smaller than the visible disc of the sun. Thus, sun's rays appear spread out from the outline of the moon making it appear like a Ring of fire.

India witnessed the "Ring of Fire" on Nov 22, 1965 and the next one will not be before June 21, 2020. Duration of 11 minutes 08 seconds makes it the longest annular eclipse of the millennium.

Global recovery, an impetus to domestic economy- Cabraal

Last year was the most difficult year for Sri Lanka as a result of global economic crisis as well as internal issues, the war in the North-East reached to its peak with high inflation, declining of reserves to the lowest level and difficult balance of payment situation in the early part of the year, said the Governor of Central Bank (CB), Ajith Nivard Cabraal. At the launching of Road Map 2010 the monetary and financial sector policies for 2010 and beyond, Cabraal said that Sri Lanka's economy grew by 2.6% in the first three quarters of the year, and is expected to grow by 3.5% in 2009 although the negative impact of the global economic crisis hindered growth prospects. The successes achieved by enormous challenges such as controlling inflation, managing reserves at a time of great uncertainties, dealing on exchange rates, facing global recession, dealing with high security threats and destabilising efforts and countering misconceptions and direct negative interventions. The coordinated and timely policy action taken by the Government and the Central Bank was the key to success. During the first nine months of 2009 the Government's recurrent expenditure in terms of GDP increased to 16.5% from the original target of 15.8%. The Government adopted many measures to maintain the budget deficit at 7% of GDP in 2009, the Governor said. He said, achieving economic and financial stability was intensely tough. In 2007 and 2008 we adopted stringent monetary policy measures. These measures delivered the desired results, evidenced by recorded low level of inflation by the end of 2009. Since final quarter of 2008 CB eased monetary policy and market interest rates declined. New situation is expected to facilitate economic activity leading to higher economic growth. Maintaining financial system stability was even tougher. Globally hundreds of banks and financial institutions failed. To bailout them many governments and central banks pumped billions of dollars, Euro, Yen and Sterling Pounds and even nationalized financial institutions.

However, Sri Lanka was able to ensure functioning of financial markets at no cost. We maintained stability in our financial infrastructure and the payments and settlements systems too.

Cabraal said that the gradual recovery of the global economy and the end of the civil conflict will provide a strong impetus to the domestic economy in 2010 and beyond. The expected medium term GDP growth rate is 7-9%. On the external front, exports and imports are projected to increase in the medium term, thereby generating higher economic activities. Despite the expected increase in workers' remittances and higher inflows to the services account, the current account is expected to record a deficit less than 3% in the medium term. However, capital and financial inflow to the capital account (both from private sector and government sector) will be more than adequate to finance the deficit in the current account. CB also expects a BOP surplus over the medium term. On the fiscal front, overall budget deficit is expected to reduce over the medium term. The improvement in the financial position of both the government and public corporations is expected to release resources to the private sector. This is pivotal to achieving the 7-9% economic growth projected in the medium term. The monetary program for 2010 has been designed in the light of this medium term framework relating to real external and fiscal sectors. According to the targets, monetary aggregates have been based on a level commensurate with 7% real GDP growth rate and a 6% GDP deflator for the year. Average reserve money targets will continue to be the operating framework. Broad money supply is expected to grow on average 14.5% in 2010. Annual average growth in reserve money is also targeted at 14.5%

Inflation is expected to be continued within single digit in 2010. The monetary policy strategy has to be guided by the trends in underline inflation. Hence a proper measure of core inflation is imperative and there are several weaknesses in the current core inflation measures. Therefore, a series of alternative core inflation measures based on different approaches are now being reviewed, Cabraal said. (GW)

President Rajapaksa of Sri Lanka: Sri Lankan Economy Showing Signs of Recovery

Following Five Year Anniversary of Tsunami

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka, January 13 /PRNewswire/ -- This time of year is a period for reflection for many people around the world. For the people of Sri Lanka it brings back acutely painful memories, but also for the first time in many years a genuine sense of hope.

On the 26th December 2004, one of the worst natural disasters in modern times befell our country and we required aid and other support from the world on an unprecedented scale.

The tsunami that struck the length of Sri Lanka's eastern coast and enwrapped the island had a devastating effect. In a matter of moments, over 30,000 people had lost their lives and a further 20,000 were injured. More than half a million people were displaced with in excess of 100,000 homes destroyed.

Those who survived or who came to assist in the aftermath, from across Sri Lanka and from abroad, will never forget the horror the ocean wrought on the island that day.

Thankfully those events are in the past. And for the people in the north and east that survived and gradually rebuilt their lives with the assistance of the international community, NGOs and Sri Lanka's own Reconstruction and Development Agency (RADA), it can finally be said that the future holds great promise. For our people are now living without the threat of terrorism for the first time in over a quarter of a century.

This closing of a chapter will bring improvements in quality of life beyond many Sri Lankan's living memories.

For a country that has managed average economic growth of over 6% since 2004, despite our difficulties, it is clear that our promise is significant, something that is beginning to be recognised internationally.

In July the Government issued a US\$500 million sovereign bond that received the highest oversold subscription of the year, over 13 times oversubscribed, while both Fitch and S&P have revised their ratings from 'negative' to 'stable'.

Analysts are now excitedly talking about Sri Lanka as the next Singapore and our Central Bank is putting in place comprehensive plans to make this vision a reality.

We are beginning to see large investment funds plough money into the country, not as an act of generosity, but because they see the potential that is being unlocked in Sri Lanka.

Over the whole of Sri Lanka, massive infrastructure projects are taking place, from the construction of one of the largest deep water ports in the Indian Ocean, at Hambantota in the south, to the establishment of the Trincomalee Investment and Tourist Zone in the north east. Formerly at the heart of our troubled areas, Trincomalee is now marked out as a major potential commercial and industrial hub in the South Asian region.

Moreover Sri Lanka's people have talent. Our potential as an outsourcing destination is already being recognised and you only have to look at the success of our diaspora, doctors and engineers, lawyers and accountants, to know what extraordinary capabilities our people have.

We also have a thriving garment industry that not only provides the West with value goods, but also enshrines the highest standards of labour conditions.

We have vast untapped potential in our fertile agricultural lands, particularly in the north.

And there's tourism. Overseas visitors have always flocked to Sri Lanka, but never in the numbers that we could have achieved without the threat of terrorism. With this now at an end, we have set an annual target of 2.5 million visitors by 2016. We encourage people from around the world to come and experience the unrivalled Sri Lankan spirit of hospitality.

So, five years on from the terrible events of 2004, now is truly an exciting time for our country. We are creating a land of opportunity for all Sri Lankans and no-one will be left behind. Aid is no longer the priority for us. We offer investment opportunities, an island of beauty and tranquillity to be enjoyed, not pitied.

Sri Lanka is ready to make its mark. Our troubles are behind us and we look forward to welcoming the world. As scientist and writer Arthur C. Clarke said of his adopted home, this is the best place in the world from which to view the universe.

NEPAL

Nepal President to visit India on February 15

Kathmandu: Nepal President Ram Baran Yadav, who met External Affairs Minister S M Krishna on Saturday, will make his maiden official visit to New Delhi next month.

Krishna today met the Nepalese President at Rashtrapati Bhawan and discussed the political developments in the country amid a deadlock between the 22-party coalition and the Maoists over Yadav's decision to reinstate General Rukmangad Katawal, the then Army Chief dismissed by Maoists Prime Minister Prachanda in May last year.

The Nepalese President is visiting India on February 15 at the invitation of the President of India and we discussed the matter with President Yadav, Krishna told journalists after the meeting. his will be the first visit of the Nepalese president to any foreign country after Nepal was declared a republic in May 2008. We are looking forward to the first visit of Nepalese President to India, Krishna said.

The Eroding Common Middle Ground in Nepal: UN

Hardened positions have seriously eroded the common middle ground in Nepal, the latest UN report says. In the latest report to the UN Security Council, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon expresses serious concern at Nepal's political stalemate. Moon has stated that the next few months will be crucial for the peace process. "Positions have hardened at the opposing ends of the political spectrum, which has seriously eroded the common middle ground that had, from the outset, defined the peace process and remained its driving strength," part of the text in the report says:

I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to Security Council resolution 1879 (2009), by which the council, following the request of the Government of Nepal and the recommendation of the Secretary-General, renewed the mandate of the United Nations Mission in Nepal (UNMIN) until 23 January 2010. UNMIN was established as a special political mission in 2007 and its mandate included the monitoring of the management of arms and armed personnel of the Nepal Army and the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) (CPN-M), which is now the Unified Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (UCPN-M).

2. The report reviews the progress of the peace process and the implementation of the mandate of UNMIN since my report to the Security Council of 26 October 2009 (S/2009/553).

II. Progress of the peace process

The peace process remained largely stalled during the reporting period. The tensions, deep differences and distrust among the parties which I highlighted in my last report have persisted. While the major political parties maintained some level of dialogue and communication, no agreement has so far been reached on critical issues, including integration and rehabilitation of Maoist army personnel, democratization of the Nepal Army and the scope of presidential authority. The proposed high-level political mechanism to serve as a dedicated forum for multi-party dialogue on key peace process issues has not been established. UCPN-M continued its series of nationwide protests calling for what it terms "civilian supremacy" over the Nepal Army, a demand that has its roots in the President's reversal, in May 2009, of the dismissal of the Chief of Army Staff by the then Maoist-led Government, following which the Government resigned.

4. The Special Committee to supervise, integrate and rehabilitate Maoist army personnel has not made headway in its work nor has it formally considered the draft proposals submitted by its Technical Committee. Important progress was achieved in November, with the announcement by UCPN-M that it would proceed quickly with the discharge of all its personnel disqualified through the UNMIN-led verification of the Maoist army in 2007. On 16 December, further significant movement was made with the signing of an action plan by the Government, UCPN-M and the United Nations for the discharge and rehabilitation of those disqualified as minors. Meanwhile, the Constituent Assembly has made slow progress

on drafting the new constitution, which is to be promulgated by 28 May 2010.

5. As the stalemate has continued, tensions have risen within and among the parties, and talks among senior leaders of the Nepali Congress, the Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist-Leninist (UML) and UCPN-M have remained inconclusive. The major Madheshi parties have continued to voice dissatisfaction with what they regard as their exclusion from political discussions among the major parties. President Ram Baran Yadav and UCPN-M Chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal, "Prachanda", also held discussions during the reporting period, but without apparent progress. In other forums, the President's role was discussed extensively in the context of the legal situation that could arise if the new constitution is not promulgated by 28 May 2010, and if no fresh deadline can be set.

6. UCPN-M-led protests calling for "civilian supremacy" disrupted daily life as well as the functioning of Government offices around the country. On the first day of a nationwide general strike held from 20 to 22 December, a major clash occurred between Maoist demonstrators and the security forces in Kathmandu, during which some of the worst violence since 2006 led to a reported 75 people being injured, several seriously. The protracted blockade of the Legislature-Parliament has resulted in a backlog of bills for consideration, including one that could resolve the issue of the Vice-President having taken his oath of office in Hindi. The obstruction was lifted briefly from 23 to 25 November to allow passage of the budget for the fiscal year 2009-2010, averting an imminent financial crisis. On 23 December, UCPN-M ended its almost seven-month blockade of the work of the Legislature-Parliament.

7. On 11 December, UCPN-M began a series of declarations of "autonomous federal states", notwithstanding the current work within the Constituent Assembly to determine the future federal structure of Nepal. The President, the Prime Minister, leaders of several parties, the media and several organizations representing ethnic groups in areas where the "states" have been declared strongly criticized this step, which UCPN-M downplayed as a "symbolic" action. My Representative has strongly urged that all parties should refrain from provocative statements or actions and permit the democratic process to function.

8. In a similar fashion, tensions escalated sharply over the seizure of land and crops by people with the support of UCPN-M-affiliated organizations. On 4 December, a fatal clash in the Kailali district in the far-western region between people who had occupied a forest area and security forces deployed to remove them led to four fatalities, including one member of the security forces. UCPN-M responded with protests the following day and with a nationwide shutdown on 6 December. The Government and a number of senior political leaders have called the recent UCPN-M actions breaches of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement and have drawn this to UNMIN's attention.

9. During the reporting period, the Minister of Defence again called for fresh personnel recruitment for the Nepal Army. UNMIN has consistently stated that such recruitment would be in violation of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. The proposed recruitment of some 5,000 personnel has not yet begun.

10. The brinkmanship and confrontation between the Maoists and the Government, accompanied by a sharp and dangerous hardening of positions, is making a negotiated solution significantly more difficult.

A. Drafting of the constitution

11. The protracted political stalemate has had an impact on the constitution drafting process. The Constituent Assembly has concluded discussions on concept papers and draft texts

submitted by 8 of its 10 thematic committees, intended to provide the basic tenets and language of the new constitution, however the committees on the determination of forms of governance of the State, on State restructuring and sharing of State power, and the Constitutional Committee itself, have yet to present their papers. The Constitutional Committee has the core responsibility for compiling the concept papers and texts into the draft of the constitution as well as determining the preamble, emergency measures, transitional provisions and other issues that do not fall under the direct ambit of the thematic committees for submission to the Constituent Assembly. Owing to those delays, on 23 December, the Constituent Assembly announced an eighth amendment to its workplan for drafting the new constitution, reducing the public consultation period to three weeks and making the deadline for promulgation — 28 May 2010 — increasingly tight. On 25 December, the Constitutional Committee decided on 98 constitutional provisions, most of which centred on terminology, through a voting process.

B. Integration and rehabilitation of Maoist army personnel

12. The Special Committee to supervise, integrate and rehabilitate Maoist army personnel, to be convened by the Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal, on a weekly basis, had met only five times by late December. It has made little or no substantive progress during the reporting period, and has yet to consider proposals submitted by its Technical Committee on 17 September for a supervisory mechanism and a code of conduct for the Maoist army personnel. UCPN-M has not attended several meetings, and in mid-November it stated that command and supervision modalities as well as integration and rehabilitation of the Maoist army should be resolved at the senior-most political level rather than by the Special Committee, as part of the broader negotiations to end the current political stalemate.

13. The Technical Committee completed its assessments of the Maoist army cantonments as scheduled on 28 October, and has continued to develop a plan for the integration of Maoist army personnel. It is also planning a number of seminars and study visits in early 2010 in order to draw on best practices from other post- conflict countries that have undertaken integration and rehabilitation programmes.

Nepal Prime Minister warns parties to consolidate peace

The Nepalese Prime Minister, Madhav Kumar Nepal, has warned that time is running out for political parties to consolidate peace. In an interview with the BBC, Mr Nepal said that unless the country's new constitution was written soon, there is a concern the peace process could fail. He said that Nepal's predicament was causing apprehension in the international community and the UN. Mr Nepal was elected as prime minister in May. He became the second leader of the Democratic Republic of Nepal following the resignation of Maoist Prime Minister Prachanda, who was in dispute with the president over the sacking of the army chief. Mr Nepal said that a deadline of May was looming for the country to get to grips with its two main problems. **'Very serious'** "All the political parties here, all the stakeholders here, need to be very serious because time is running out," Mr Nepal told the BBC's Joanna Jolly in Kathmandu. "And within this period we have to complete [two] tasks - number one, take the peace process to a positive conclusion so that integration and the rehabilitation of the Maoist combatants can be done within this period. And number two, [we must] draft the constitution and promulgate the constitution so that it will be finished by 28 May 2010." He said that UN and the international community have warned political parties to ensure that the peace process is not disrupted. I don't think the peace process is in danger of failing, but there is a worry," he said. There is a strong desire on the part of the international community that we all

should be aware of the danger, we all should be very serious and responsible in fulfilling these two tasks.

UNSG Ban unaware of Nepal's real situation: Koirala

The Nepali Congress President Girija Prasad Koirala upon meeting residential ambassadors of the European countries on Friday January 15, 2010 expressed his serious reservations over fresh report tabled by United Nation Secretary General Mr. Ban-Ki Moon at the Security Council meeting, New York. Ban presenting the situation report on Nepal had earlier in the week warned that Nepal's peace process remained largely stalled and the major disagreements remain unresolved thus increasing the risk of its collapse. While meeting ambassadors representing England, Germany, France, Denmark and Finland at his personal residence located in Maharajgunj-Kathmandu Koirala as quoted by his advisor Dr. Suresh Chandra Chalise said, "His statement on Nepal was far from truth" "The UN General Secretary resides in the US...I am in Nepal", Koirala said adding "There is great distance that separates us". "He may not be totally aware of Nepal's unfolding political situation and our internal dynamics", also said Koirala.

Similarly, Krishna Bahadur Mahara of the Unified Maoists' Party said that the formation of High Level Political Mechanism was a positive step and Nepali political actors are totally aware of their duties. "The situation portrayed by Mr. Ban is not entirely true", said Mahara talking to BBC Nepali Service, January 15, 2010.

NC, UML agree to include PM Nepal in HLPM

Two main ruling parties – Nepali Congress and CPN (UML) – have agreed to induct Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal in the three-party high level political mechanism (HLPM) as an 'invited member'. NC president Girija Prasad Koirala and UML chairman Jhala Nath Khanal reached an understanding to this effect during a discussion Wednesday. The HLPM headed by Koirala includes UML chairman Khanal and Maoist chairman Pushpa Kamal as members. Speaking to reporters after the meeting with the NC president held at the latter's Maharajgunj residence, Khanal said Prime Minister Nepal will participate in the HLPM meeting on Thursday as invited member. However, the Maoist side is yet to agree to the decision to induct the PM in the mechanism. Maoist chairman Dahal has said yesterday that Nepal would not be included in it as the government led by him is the cause of the political deadlock. PM Nepal has already expressed dissatisfaction for not being included in the HLPM. The formation of the three-party body has been touted as an important step towards resolving the protracted political impasse some NC leaders have also said PM Nepal must be part of the HLPM should there be a political consensus.

Nepal asks UN for extension of peace mission

Nepal's government has asked the United Nations to once again extend its mission monitoring the peace process that ended the Himalayan nation's 10-year communist rebellion, officials said Wednesday.

The mission was established in January 2007 to track the fragile process that started the year before when Maoist rebels gave up their armed revolt to focus on entering mainstream politics. The original yearlong mission has been extended several times.

Foreign secretary Madan Bhattarai said Wednesday that a formal request has been sent to U.N. headquarters in New York asking the observers to stay until May 15.

The Maoists contested elections in 2008, where they won the most seats in the

national assembly. But they later resigned following a dispute over what to do with the thousands of former rebel fighters living in U.N.-monitored camps.

The Maoists want the ex-combatants to be integrated in the national army but other political parties are against the idea. The U.N is also in charge of guarding the Maoist's weapons, which were locked away in metal containers as part of the peace process. Last week, several former child soldiers were freed from one of them camps in southern Nepal.

Seaports to be developed for use by India, Nepal, Bhutan

Bangladesh can't keep its doors shut: Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina told the media personnel Saturday that Bangladesh would soon take initiatives to prepare and develop the Chittagong and Mongla sea-ports and also its road and other related infrastructures "for movement of goods to, and from, India through road and rail", report agencies. Large investments will be required for the purpose and also to make the same facilities available to Nepal and Bhutan at the both sea-ports of Bangladesh, she added. Replying to a question at a crowded press conference held at the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), Sheikh Hasina said: "We will take initiatives to prepare and develop the Chittagong and Mongla ports so that India, Nepal and Bhutan, can start using them this year." About imperatives for connectivity, the prime minister noted that Bangladesh "in this age cannot keep its doors shut". She said: "At present we are using only 40 per cent of the capacity of the Chittagong ports. If we can maximise the 100 per cent use of them, we will be significantly benefited." In case of Mongla port, the utilisation of capacity is much lower than that of the Chittagong port, she added. The Prime Minister said that the use of the port facilities at Chittagong and Mongla by India and two regional countries -- Nepal and Bhutan, would help fetch a significant amount of revenue earnings. The projected figures about such earnings will be clearly known when the facilities become operational for the would-be regional user-countries, she added. At the press conference, she also dilated on an important power agreement. "India will provide us 250 MW of electricity. Talks were also held for constructing a joint power plant" We also called upon India to take initiatives to stop killing of BDR personnel and innocent Bangladeshis on the border," Hasina said. Highlighting the major outcomes of her first visit to New Delhi after the assumption of responsibility as the head of government following the general election held on December 29, 2008, the Prime Minister observed that only friendship among the countries in this region could greatly help South Asia fight its common enemy -- poverty. "You can get many things through the friendship (with neighbours), which you can't get through enmity . . . I am not the person to pick up quarrels with anyone while the countries in the region need intensified cooperation to help alleviate poverty," she told the press conference, two days after her return from New Delhi. Asked for comments on opposition allegations that she had "compromised the national interest" during the visit to New Delhi, the Prime Minister said, "I have succeeded in my mission and Bangladesh's interests have been protected in full." "Opposing India is nothing new in Bangladesh; we are familiar with the anti-India campaign since 1954 elections . . . it became a habit of some people and we have nothing to do about it," Sheikh Hasina said. The prime minister said she would continue to do whatever is "justified and good for the people of the country", defying the unfounded criticism by the opposition. Besides Foreign Minister Dipu Moni, the press conference was also attended by the leaders of the Awami League-led grand alliance including ex-president HM Ershad MP of Jatiya Party, Samyabadi Dal leader Dilip Barua, Workers Party leader Rashed Khan Menon MP and Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD) Hasanul Haque Inu MP. Asked if a national consensus could be sought before making commitments on issues of utmost importance as far as India was concerned, she said the stand of her

government on such issues is based on peoples' mandate and her party had clearly spelt out those in its last election manifesto. Sheikh Hasina said the opposition "expected me" to return with concrete results on several issues including the sharing of waters of the common rivers "but while in power they did nothing to settle these issues". Making a stout defence of her understanding with Indian Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh on offering the facilities of Bangladesh's two seaports to India alongside Nepal and Bhutan, he said it would pave the way for regional trade connectivity, besides earning "huge revenues for the country". Sheikh Hasina pointed out that one of the major successes of her visit to New Delhi related to obtaining Indian 'nod' in allowing its territory for Bangladesh's road links with Nepal and Bhutan, though India "is otherwise considered to be interested only in bilateral arrangements on all issues". Replying to another question seeking her comment on opposition fears that Bangladesh might lose the two ports to India, she said they had made such allegations when her previous Awami League (AL) government had signed the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace accord ending more than two decades of tribal insurgency and also the Ganges water sharing treaty with India. "They had said India will expand its territory up to Feni, but it remains to be an integral part of Bangladesh . . . the opposition leader has been elected to Bangladesh parliament from a Feni constituency and she (Khaleda Zia) has not become a member of the Indian parliament," she said. Sheikh Hasina said that a meeting of the Indo-Bangladesh Joint River Commission (JRC) would be held "immediately" to address sharing of waters of the common rivers. The issue of bilateral maritime boundary also will be sought to be settled without delay, she added. The Prime Minister said her Indian counterpart reassured her that they would not undertake any project which could harm Bangladesh. The meeting of the technical committee and the secretary-level talks, have already been held, she noted. In replies to questions, she recalled the issues of the Teesta and the Tipaimukh did not emerge overnight and the Flood Action Plan (FAP) documents of the early 1990s, too, had reference to the cross-border Tipaimukh structure but the past Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)-led four party alliance government "uttered nothing" then on the issues. She said if the previous government had done something on the matters, "we could have carried forward the process to a large extent . . . as the governmental process involves a continuing process," Sheikh Hasina stated. She regretted that the successor BNP-led government had scrapped 99 projects undertaken by her previous Awami League (AL) government, after the change of power in 2001. Dhaka and New Delhi inked three treaties on security and terrorism, cross border crime and mutual legal assistance and two memoranda of understanding on power swapping and trade links, besides agreeing on other issues including offering India the port facilities in Bangladesh in a joint communique. The Prime Minister during her nearly 45-minute press conference cited from the Rabindranath Tagore's Gandhari and national Poet Kazi Nazrul Islam's Sabyashachhi while responding to questions. "I am the victor today," she said referring to her "success", protecting the country's interests in full. When asked about the opposition allegations of "selling" out the country's interests, she said "We have liberated the country at the cost of the blood of millions . . . my father, mother and brothers have sacrificed their lives for the country. So, Sheikh Hasina can not sell out the country's interests. "Bangladesh's interests have been fully secured," she stated. At the press conference, the Prime Minister gave a brief resume of AL's achievements since coming to power a year ago. She said one of her government's achievements had been a turnaround of Bangladesh's 'negative image' abroad into a positive one, by combating corruption and militancy over the past one year. Hasina said the government would move very fast to upgrade the Chittagong and Mongla ports to these of the international standard. The prime minister urged the opposition to return to parliament and place their criticisms before the House. Among those AL leaders present at the press conference were its advisory committee members, Suranjit Sengupta, Amir Hossain Amu and Tofail Ahmed, and presidium members

Sheikh Fazlul Karim Selim and Obaidul Kader. Those from the cabinet included, among others, Local Government Minister

Nepal's top leaders form mechanism to expedite peace process

Kathmandu: Top leaders of the ruling and opposition parties in Nepal today formed a high-level mechanism in an effort to break the political deadlock, and take the peace process to "a logical conclusion", including finalising a new constitution by May this year.

The three-member political mechanism formed by the ruling Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist Leninist) (CPN-UML) and Nepali Congress (NC), along with opposition Unified CPN-Maoist has been entrusted with the task of overseeing the process of drafting the new constitution by the May 28 deadline, NC leader Krishna Sitaula said.

It would ensure that the peace process is taken to its logical conclusion, said Sitaula, an NC Central Committee member. The high-level body will also try to resolve the current political deadlock, he said. The mechanism is headed by NC president Girija Prasad Koirala and its two other members, Maoist leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda' and CPN-UML chairman Jhulanath Khanal.

Observers view the formation of the mechanism as a major breakthrough to end the months-long political stalemate, wherein Maoists have been blocking the Parliamentary proceedings and launching anti-government agitations. The formation of the mechanism is expected to expedite the process of moving forward the peace process and writing the constitution as per agreed schedule. The Constituent Assembly had set May 28, 2010 as deadline for drafting the new Constitution. Top leaders from other parties would also be included in the mechanism on the basis of political consensus, Sitaula said. Political parties having representation in the body can nominate other members to take part in the regular meetings of the mechanism, whose formation was proposed by Koirala. The mechanism would help government overcome the political crisis in the future, and focus its attention in drafting the new Constitution, Sitaula said.

Nepal, India to decide oil pipeline modality

KATHMANDU, Jan. 12 (Xinhua) -- Nepal Oil Corporation (NOC) and Indian Oil Corporation (IOC) are to decide this week whether to form a joint venture company or adopt another modality to build a cross-border pipeline, said NOC managing director Digambar Jha. According to Tuesday's eKantipur.com report, NOC and IOC had recently discussed a new modality for the pipeline project as the earlier plan to implement it as a joint venture had raised doubts over its effectiveness and feasibility. As per the new modality, the two sides will construct the pipeline separately in their respective territories.

The pipeline will then be linked after signing a bilateral pipeline treaty. Out of the 40-km length of the planned Raxaul-Amlekhgunj oil pipeline, 38 km lies in Nepal and 2 km in India. According to the report, Nepali Commerce and Supplies Minister Rajendra Mahato directed NOC to choose the modality that would benefit the country. He also asked NOC to finalize the modality without any delay. "The project has been lingering for the last 13 years, and still there is no sign of its being implemented as everything has to be done all over again," a source said. A pre-feasibility study (in 2004) and a technical study (in 2006) had projected the bilateral pipeline project as economically viable, provided it is operated

unhindered for 20 years. The project, which was first proposed by IOC in 1995, is intended to reduce the fuel transportation costs by over 50 percent.

Sugar being smuggled to Nepal from Bihar: Intelligence report

While the country is importing sugar from Brazil to bring down the soaring prices a large amount of it is getting smuggled to Nepal from Bihar. According to intelligence report sugar is being smuggled unchecked through bordering districts of Sitamarhi, Saharsa and even West Champaran. Neither the state police nor the personnel of the Shashtra Suraksha Bal are putting a check on this illegal transportation of sugar. Prices of sugar can not be brought down unless police carry out crackdown on smugglers. The state government has not yet taken action against hoarders too. Meanwhile, traders of the state are of the view that the government's decision not to impose VAT on sugar is not going to have any impact on the prices of sugar. They said that the prices could be brought down only when the free sale of sugar is allowed.

Oil prices near USD 80 as traders eye rising equities

Kathmandu, Jan 15 (PTI) India today expressed its concerns over Nepal being used for anti-India activities, evoking a promise from the Nepalese leadership that it will not allow its territory against its neighbour as the two sides inked four pacts to give boost to bilateral ties. The MoUs in the fields like infrastructure, power and science and technology were signed in the presence of External Affairs Minister S M Krishna, who is here on a three-day visit, and his counterpart and deputy Premier Sujata Koirala. Krishna also met Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal during which he voiced concern about Nepal being used to pump in fake currency to India. On the Kalapani border issue, Krishna said it should be dealt with at the political level. He also emphasised the need for "constant vigil" on the security front, considering the fact that "terrorists find safe haven" in the neighbourhood.

Power Grid Corporation approves investment in Nepal JV

Power Grid Corporation of India Ltd has announced that the Board of Directors of the Company at its meeting held on January 06, 2010, have accorded approval for new investments. The Board approved POWERGRID's Equity Participation of 26% in the Joint Venture Company 'Power Transmission Company Nepal Ltd.' with Nepal Electricity Authority and IL&FS as other partners for establishment of Dhalkebar-Bathanaha Section (Nepal Portion-about 39 kms.) of 400 KV D/C Muzaffarpur-Dhalkebar Transmission Line. The Board also approved investment approval for Transmission System associated with Simhadri-II Generation Project - Line connecting the Generation to the Grid at an estimated cost of Rs. 38.41 Crore, with commissioning schedule of within 18 months from the date of investment approval. The Stock closed the day at Rs.117.10, up by Rs.2.35 or 2.05%. The stock hit an intraday high of Rs.118.30 and low of Rs.115.10. The total traded quantity was

1048402 compared to 2 week average of 685891.

Nepal's Alpine Air To Link Kathmandu To KL In April

NEW DELHI, Jan 14 (Bernama) -- The Malaysian airspace is expected to be more congested this year with an increasing number of foreign airlines set to fly to the Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA). The latest is, Kathmandu-based Alpine Air Pvt Ltd, which is getting ready to begin its service from Nepal's capital to the KLIA. The private airline will launch its international flights beginning this month and Malaysia had been listed as a priority destination in its expansion strategy. "We plan to start the Kuala Lumpur operations in April. Initially we will fly four times weekly using the A320 aircraft." Labour and tourism traffic to Malaysia is very high and we will be focusing on both," Alpine chairman cum managing director, Surendra Malla told Bernama. About 300,000 Nepalese workers are currently working in Malaysia and tourist flow between both capitals is also on the rise. Unfazed by the economic slowdown, the company has leased two A320 and A319 aircraft from Bahrain Air, for its overseas venture. It also announced that it would invest US\$11 million (RM38.5 million) on the expansion plan. Malla said after Kuala Lumpur, the next destinations would be Guangzhou in China and major cities in India. Last month, Bangladesh United Airways launched its maiden flight to KLIA, aiming to capture the labour and tourism segment as well.

BHUTAN

China, Bhutan hold 19th border talks

NEW DELHI, Jan. 12 (Xinhua) -- China and Bhutan held from Jan. 11 to 13 their 19th border talks in the Bhutan capital Thimphu. Chinese Assistant Foreign Minister Hu Zhengyue held talks with head of Bhutan delegation, Minister of Economic Affairs Khandu Wangchuk in a friendly and frank atmosphere. Hu also met with the 4th King of Bhutan Jigme Singye Wangchuk and Prime Minister Jigme Thinley during his stay in Bhutan. Hu delivered the new year greetings from Chinese President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao. He said China highly cherishes its traditional friendship with Bhutan, and is willing to push forward relationship of good neighborliness with Bhutan in a continuous, stable and healthy way on the basis of Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence. Hu said China hopes the two sides continue friendly consultations on the basis of the past talks, and look for a just and reasonable solution to the border problem acceptable to both sides, in order to turn Sino-Bhutan border into a bridge of friendship. Bhutan leaders said Bhutan highly evaluates the tremendous achievements China has made in its development, and said Bhutan pays great importance to its relationship with China and is dedicated to solving the border problem with China as soon as possible. Bhutan government is firmly committed to the policy of "One China" and is willing to work with China to push forward exchanges and cooperation in all fields.

Kutshab goes to Vienna

15 January, 2010 - Bhutan's kutshab (ambassador) at the permanent mission of Bhutan to the United Nations, Geneva, Yeshey Dorji, presented his credentials to the federal President of Austria, Dr Heinz Fischer, on January 11. Kutshab Yeshey Dorji is concurrently accredited to Vienna, Austria. Kutshab Yeshey Dorji also called on the foreign secretary of the Austrian foreign ministry, Dr Johannes Kyrle, and other senior officials of the Austrian government. Bhutan is an Austrian development cooperation key country since 1989 and is

the only priority country for Austria in Asia. Cooperation between the two countries has been mainly in the energy, culture, tourism and RNR (forestry) sectors with HRD as a cross cutting area. Informal relations between Bhutan and Austria began in 1968 and diplomatic ties were established on May 8, 1989.

Bhutan refugees start over in Philadelphia

A family of ethnic Nepalese that fled Bhutan is put on a fast track to resettlement and self-sufficiency. Reporting from Philadelphia - The alarm clock's 3 a.m. ring awakened Rudra Kuikel and his eldest daughter, Thagi, in their lightly furnished south Philadelphia apartment. An hour later, they were headed to a packaged-food plant where father and daughter chopped lettuce for eight hours, netting \$50 each after taxes and paying \$5 each for transportation. The Kuikel family, ethnic Nepalese Hindus who once lived in Bhutan, includes wife Jasodha; son Indra, 19; daughter Tulasha, 13; Thagi, 22; and Rudra, 51. The family fled Bhutan in 1992 after new citizenship laws made it impossible for them to stay in the nation of 691,000 citizens, which straddles India's border with China. Rudra Kuikel was a subsistence farmer growing rice and corn. "At first we thought we would be able to return," he said. "But time kept going on, and it became clear we would not." The family arrived in Philadelphia in August through a resettlement program. About 103,000 ethnic Nepalese fled or were forced out of Bhutan in the 1990s into seven U.N.-run refugee camps in eastern Nepal. Critics have called Bhutan's policy ethnic cleansing. Bhutan's prime minister has called it "regularization" of a long-standing illegal immigration problem.

Almost two decades after entering the camps, where they lived in thatched huts with no indoor plumbing, the Kuikels and about 20 other refugee families who once lived in Bhutan are in Philadelphia. Here, they learn how to use seat belts, that red lights mean stop and that burned-out light bulbs can be replaced without having to replace the entire fixture. They are part of an international resettlement effort begun two years ago that sent more than 17,000 ethnic Nepalese to the United States, about 800 to Australia, nearly 700 to Canada, nearly 300 to New Zealand and about 600 to northern Europe. As legally admitted refugees, the ethnic Nepalese in the United States get one-time federal grants of \$450 per person to help with their first month's rent and other necessities. In the beginning, they are eligible for food stamps, Medicare and cash assistance through welfare, and they receive additional assistance from their resettlement agencies. Under the terms of their resettlement agreements, however, they are expected to become self-sufficient within eight months -- a tall order, especially in the current economy. After that time, their benefits dry up. "American culture is rooted in 'pull yourself up by your bootstraps,'" said Juliane Ramic, social services director of the Nationalities Services Center, the Philadelphia agency that coordinated the Kuikels' resettlement. "The Bhutanese, as a group, are really doing it, finding jobs in a bad economy, moving forward and learning as quickly as they possibly can." It is only a matter of time, she said, before they "move up on the labor ladder" to better-paying jobs. Ludy Soderman, director of multilingual family support for the Philadelphia School District, met the Kuikels at an orientation open house. "Life here is not easy" for them, Soderman said. "But you can see these kids have the light of learning in their eyes." Indra is a math whiz, taking Advanced Placement calculus as a high school senior and aiming for college. Tulasha is a bright but quiet eighth-grader. Rudra Kuikel says he hopes to have a house and a car someday, but for now he is happy to have secured his family's future. Indra has his eyes on a bigger prize. "I want to stay in the United States, get a good job and create a higher standard of living for my family," he said. "I want to be someone." Matza writes for the Philadelphia Inquirer.

Bomb on bus to Bhutan border

Kalchini, Jan. 11: An improvised explosive device recovered from a private bus parked in Hamiltonganj on the outskirts of Kalchini last night was defused by the CID's bomb squad this afternoon after four failed attempts to set it off with external charges. Police said a quartz clock was attached with wires to the IED and the time set at 3.04pm today. They said if the bomb had gone off at that time, the bus would have been on its way to Jaigaon — its regular route — with around 30 passengers from the Alipurduar bus stand. The distance between Alipurduar and Jaigaon is 60km and the bus covers it in about 90 minutes. The bus makes two trips from Jaigaon to Alipurduar and back. The bomb inside a one-foot-high tiffin carrier was discovered by the bus owner on a luggage rack inside the vehicle that was parked for the night near his home in Hamiltonganj, 2km from Kalchini. Jalpaiguri superintendent of police Anand Kumar visited the Kalchini police station — where the bomb was defused — along with additional superintendent of police Anup Jaiswal. "We have successfully opened the steel container in which the explosive with a timer device was kept. Its contents are being sent to the state forensic sciences laboratory in Calcutta. After it is examined we will be able to say about the nature of the explosive material and the kind of destruction there could have been had it burst," the police chief said. The police and IAF intelligence sources, however, said the IED was not unlike the ones used by the Maoists in the forests of south Bengal. They, however, did not detail any similarities. "The timer, or the clock, was packed inside a Plaster of Paris case intact with wires inside the steel container," said a source in the air force intelligence.

The members of the bomb squad from Siliguri arrived in Kalchini around 12.30pm today and set about trying to detonate the IED with the help of external charges in the compound of the police station. However, four attempts to make the IED go off failed. Later, the squad managed to open the steel container fully by hanging it high up on a tree and letting go off the rope that held it. The container fell 7ft down and smashed on the ground. The timer had been detonated earlier. Some wires of the timer that came out of the tiffin box through a crack had been snipped off before the container was broken open. Kumar said patrolling had been intensified in the area and extra vigil was being kept on bus stands and on passengers. "A few days ago, we had discussed the presence of too many outsiders in Jaigaon with the SSB (the border force). Patrolling and vigil are going to be intensified," said the Jalpaiguri police chief. The gateway to India from Bhutan is through Jaigaon that is part of the porous border. The possibility of the IED being kept in the bus after being smuggled into Jaigaon from Bhutan cannot be ruled out, a senior officer said. Around 7.30pm yesterday, the owner of the bus, Dibyendu Ghosh, discovered a school bag lying on the luggage rack of the vehicle that was parked for the night near his home. I immediately called up the Kalchini police station and told them about what I had found. Later on I took the bag and deposited it at the Kalchini police station, where it was kept under a pile of sandbags," Ghosh said. He said the IED was wrapped tightly with newspapers and black tape. "I was lucky that nothing untoward happened. I have asked the driver and the conductor of the bus to be extra vigilant from now on," the bus owner said. The district police chief said carrying the bag to the police station had been risky on the part of the bus owner. "I don't know about the nature of the explosive, but carrying it (to the police station) had been risky," said Kumar. The discovery of the IED set off panic as well as rumours in Kalchini. "I got frantic phone calls, asking me to come to Kalchini immediately from Alipurduar as there had been multiple blasts there," said Kalchini MLA Wilson Champromary. Wilson visited Kalchini police station, about 32km from Alipurduar, and found out that the IED was being defused. "I felt very relieved that nothing serious had taken place," the MLA said.

Loopholes in mining policy

The department of geology and mines's (DGM) 'first come first serve policy' of leasing mines, meant to benefit all sections of society and provide a level playing field, is favouring big businesses, industries and construction firms. Nearly all the current 89 mines under DGM, all issued under this policy, are owned by them. Since January 2008 to October 2009, 186 mines were applied for and almost all the applicants either already own mines or big businesses. The new mines applied for are coal, quartzite, dolomite, gypsum, limestone, marble, stone quarries, talc and granite. The major ones are 49 in Samtse, 25 in Dagana, 25 in Wangduephodrang, 23 in Chukha, 17 in Sarpang, 12 in Pemagatshel, 11 in Thimphu, nine in Paro and in other dzongkhags as well. A major problem is a lack of information for ordinary people and businesses that are not able to access the mineral deposit map of Bhutan, which has been already mapped out. "When industrial houses want mines, they come to us study the mineral map and then request us to find out the exact mineral location, which we do from our own budget and then, with due process, the company or individual gets the mine," said the officiating DGM director general, Yeshe Dorji. He admitted that DGM, due to lack of budget, had not been able to make people aware of mineral potential at the dzongkhag and local levels, but said that DGM would not deny information to those who came for it. To prevent a few from taking over most mines, the mines and mineral management regulation 2002 says that an individual or a company cannot have more than two mines.

However, this rule has been bypassed by members of the same company creating new companies to lease more mines. "This is a loophole which is happening and which we'll have to address while changing our rules in the future," said M K Pradhan, the chief mining engineer. Another major issue with the first come first serve policy of DGM has been the loss of revenue to government coffers due to mines being given without any auctions. The only three mines auctioned so far, the Eastern Bhutan coalfields, the Chunaikhola dolomite mines and Khothakpa gypsum mine, fetched the government Nu 1.315 bn. "Auctions haven't been done to allow even ordinary people to participate and besides we'd have to know the exact reserves and value of a deposit to have an auction," said Yeshe Dorji. However, observers say DGM could identify the locations beforehand and auction them. DGM officials also say that the government makes money through its annual royalty and license fee. However, the chunk of the Nu 180 mn royalty and fee made in 2008 still mainly flows from the annual instalment of the three auctioned mines. For other mines, the royalty rates have largely remained unchanged since 2002. According to a RAA report, almost all mines were not paying tax until recently, since they did not require trade licenses then.

Analysts back opening ports to neighbours

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's India visit has created a new era of opportunities and will help improve connectivity in the region, said analysts. They said the opening-up of Chittagong and Mongla seaports to the next-door neighbours would be of great benefits for Bangladesh not only in revenue earnings but also in facilitating intraregional trade and investment. Tourism and private sector cooperation will also get a boost, they said. Prof Mustafizur Rahman, executive director of Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), said the prime minister's visit to India has created spirits of goodwill and mutual trust between the two countries. Bangladesh's ports -- if they are opened for the use of India, Bhutan and Nepal's external trade -- will help Bangladesh earn revenue and create much-needed employment. Annisul Huq, president of the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI), also said making accessible the ports and railway for the neighbours will normally benefit Bangladesh and help increase intraregional economic activities. But Abdul Hafiz Choudhury, former president of Metropolitan Chamber of

Commerce and Industry, made cautious observations on allowing neighbours to use the ports, which he said are quite often unable to cater to the country's own needs. Dr M Rahmatullah, a transport and communications expert, said Mongla Port that remains almost unused for years would get new life with the latest development.

Three deals on fighting terrorism, organised crime and drug trafficking and two memoranda of understanding on power and cultural exchange were signed during the premier's visit. In other major developments, Bangladesh has allowed India to use its two seaports -- Chittagong and Mongla. India has also been permitted to extend its railway and river route up to Bangladesh's Akhaura and Ashuganj respectively, which India had been demanding for years. On the other hand, Bangladesh has received \$1 billion credit line from India to develop its railway and road infrastructure. India has also agreed to help Bangladesh strengthen the capacity of its testing institute for certification. India has also agreed to supply 250MW of power to Bangladesh. South Asia is one of the poorly connected regions in the world. Its intra-regional trade is only 3 percent, which is 58 percent under North American Free Trade Agreement, 62 percent in Europe and around 30 percent in Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

The World Bank and the Asian Development Bank have long been pushing the South Asian countries to increase regional cooperation for the sake of mutual benefits. "All the regional blocs gained from economic cooperation except South Asia," said the FBCCI president. He stressed diversifying Bangladesh's trade basket, which he said contains a few products. India should also be cordial in doing business with its neighbours, Huq said. He welcomed the decision of opening up of the ports, but called upon the government to be more careful about the fare to be charged on other countries' users. "There will be some income, no doubt. But we have to keep in mind that the existing port capacity is unable to cater to our needs," said Abdul Hafiz Choudhury. Choudhury also questioned India's poor commitment in addressing numerous non-tariff barriers (NTBs) it imposed on exports from Bangladesh. The FBCCI president also echoed Choudhury's views on NTBs. "No visible progress has been made in case of NTBs," he added. Rahman of CPD said: "A good start has been made. This is a process to go for further negotiations and treaties." Rahmatullah questioned ambiguity in terms of 'transit' to Nepal and Bhutan. "We want Nepal and Bhutan to do their external trade using our ports. Bangladesh's transit to Nepal and Bhutan won't benefit us. It needs to be made clear

Bhutan-India Regional Trade Fair in Gelephu inaugurated by Hon'ble Agriculture Minister

The Hon'ble Agriculture Lyonpo (Dr.) Pema Gyamtsho inaugurated the Bhutan India Regional Trade Fair organised by the BCCI at the Gelephu stadium on 8th January 2010.

In his speech, Lyonpo (Dr) Pema Gyamtsho said that the event was very useful to have been held in a place like Gelephu which is and would constantly gain its economic importance leading to a regional business hub owing to its proximity across the border. "The fair would serve as a catalyst to the close existing friendship between India and Bhutan and the cross border trade". Besides his many other useful notes, Lyonpo assured that the Ministry of Agriculture (MoA) would be rendering its fullest cooperation and any possible support in boosting the trade both within and outside the country. Indismart sets up base in Bangkok and Bhutan. Indismart, a Kolkata based firm in hospitality and education sector having two premium Hotel management institutes chains in Kolkata, Goa and Gurgaon under IIHM & IAM brands has signed two MOUs to set up hotel management institutes in Bangkok and Bhutan respectively. Indismart group has appointed a brand management firm to restructure

the group's branding. This has become necessary due to fierce expansion plans drawn up by the group. Indismart is planning to set up Hotel management institutes in various countries of South East Asia as part of their "Look east policy". Bangkok, being its first foreign venture the company is already in active talks with various resorts and hotels in countries like Sri Lanka, Nepal, Singapore, Bangladesh Thailand and Indonesia.

"I am confident of inking more deals of greenfield hotel management institutes under IIHM and IAM brands in all these countries in the current year. Our presence in several South East Asian countries will create a fabulous platform for cross country students. On one hand we have tied up with UK's leading institute, Napier University for a British degree and on the other we would be an Indian transnational institute," Dr. Suborno Bose, Chairman Indismart Group said

Biological E in pact with US firm

Hyderabad-based pharmaceutical company Biological E Limited has entered into an agreement with US-based biotechnology company VaxInnate Corporation to license its recombinant H1N1 pandemic swine flu vaccine.

Under this, Biological E would produce vaccine for India and other South Asian countries, including Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The vaccine is projected to enter clinical development in India in early 2010. Assuming positive clinical results, the vaccine could become available for emergency use in India by mid 2010, a company release said. Biological E has a capacity to produce over 300 million vaccine doses every month

MALDIVES

Maldives - President to speak on his upcoming visits to Abu Dhabi and India in his weekly radio address

In his weekly radio address, which will be broadcast on the Voice of Maldives at 10 am tomorrow, President Mohamed Nasheed will speak on his upcoming visits to Abu Dhabi and India. President Nasheed will begin his visits on Sunday. The President will also focus on this year's Poets' Day, which will be observed tomorrow, in recognition of the literary contributions of Late Ibrahim Shihab. Furthermore, he will also address the government's subsidy policy.

Maldives - Canadian High Commissioner presents his letter of credentials to the President

The High Commissioner of Canada to the Maldives Mr Bruce Levy has today presented his Letter of Credentials to President Mohamed Nasheed, at a ceremony held this afternoon at the President's Office. After the presentation of credentials, the President and the High Commissioner discussed bilateral relations between the two countries and ways of further strengthening these relations. Discussions were focused on enhancing developmental cooperation between the Maldives and Canada. The President also explored possibilities of getting Canadian volunteers to work in the Maldives. Speaking at the meeting, the President

noted the assistance provided by Canada, especially the previous Canadian High Commissioner, in the reform process. He further expressed confidence that Canada would continue its assistance to the Maldives. High Commissioner Levy said that he “admired the passion and commitment” of President Nasheed. He also noted that both Canada and the Maldives “have a lot in common” such as the issue of climate change. He said Canada too took climate change as an immediate challenge that need to be dealt with. The meeting was attended by Vice President Dr Mohamed Waheed, Special Envoy of the President Mr Ibrahim Hussain Zaki, President’s Political Advisor Mr Hassan Afeef and Minister of Foreign Affairs Dr Ahmed Shaheed.

Maldives - Weekly Radio Address: President speaks on government’s subsidy policy, planned trips abroad, DRP elections and Poets’ Day

In his weekly radio address President Mohamed Nasheed highlighted on government’s subsidy policy, his planned visits abroad, the DRP elections, and Poets’ Day being marked on Friday.

Government’s subsidy policy

In the address, President Nasheed said there were some confusions about government’s policy on providing subsidies. Speaking on electricity subsidy as an example, he said: “Government’s policy is to provide subsidies directly to the people...businesses will prosper with good management”. The government has restructured its electricity subsidies from a universal-based system to a targeted approach. The electricity tariff has been raised based on a cost-linked formula, while providing relief through the budget to the most vulnerable.

Emphasising that the government would assist those unable to pay their electricity bills, the President acknowledged that many people were not sufficiently informed about the new changes. “I hope that in the coming two to three weeks, this will become clearer so that the government could assist more people [who need subsidy],” said the President. On a related issue, President Nasheed said the utility companies established last year, evolved as efficient companies with notable improvements to electricity delivery. He said there were fewer instances of power outages during the past year compared to the year before.

Visits to Abu Dhabi and India

In his weekly address, the President also briefed on his planned visits to Abu Dhabi and India. President’s visit to Abu Dhabi is to participate in an energy summit at the invitation of the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi. From Abu Dhabi, the President will also visit India, where he will attend economic summits in Mumbai and Chennai. The President said he hoped the visits would open more business and investment opportunities for the Maldives.

DRP elections

In his weekly radio address, the President also spoke on the congress of Dhivehi Rayyithunge Party, to be held next month. The President said that he was pleased to see DRP was strengthening the party by having internal party elections. Internal democracy, he said, was very important for strengthening political parties. The President wished DRP success in improving internal democracy.

Maldives - President ratifies Clemency Bill

The bill proposed by the government to set guidelines for the President to grant pardons and commute sentences was passed by the People's Majlis .

Cruise sails to Maldives for solar eclipse

For 650 passengers and 300 crew members onboard M V Aquamarine, the millennium's longest solar eclipse was a different experience altogether -- viewing the 'ring of fire' from the Maldivian sea. In Maldives, the eclipse was supposed to be visible for 10.46 minutes. However, the cloudy sky played a spoilsport and the ring lasted only for 1.20 minutes. The eclipse started at 10.15 Maldives time and peaked at 12.25 before ending at 13.23. People, mostly amateur astronomers, scientists and students, waited on the cruise's deck from early morning with their telescopes, glasses and other viewing objects for the phenomenon. "The aim was to bring together the exciting sphere of astronomy, space services and unravel the wonders of the sky," Amit Verma, CEO of NGO Science Popularisation Association of Communicators and Educators (SPACE), told PTI.

No eclipse watching in the Maldives

Male, Jan 15 (IANS) Unlike in India, where thousands of people converged to watch the longest annular solar eclipse of the millennium Friday, most beaches and parks in this capital city of Maldives wore a deserted look as none of the residents came out to watch the eclipse, which was seen the best here. For Friday being a public holiday in this Islamic nation, the city in fact was very quiet with the majority of shops, colleges and offices closed. Special prayers are being held in mosques every Friday from 11 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. and everybody makes it a point to attend. Although people did know that there is a solar eclipse Friday, none of them looked excited about it. "I know that there is an eclipse Friday but nothing special about it. These keep happening and people here are not into eclipse-watch activities," Mohammed Nasir, a taxi driver, told IANS. In the island city spread over some four kilometre area, many people said they had never watched an eclipse. "There are no public watch activities organised here during the eclipse. Hence, people are not enthusiastic about it. I don't remember of having ever seen any eclipse," said Sharon Siddique, a college student.

Some of the hotels do organise eclipse watch for their guests but no outsiders are allowed. "An eclipse watch was organised at Holiday Inn Hotel and it was a gathering of some few tourists. It was beautiful to see the eclipse as sun looked like a bright ring," Sarah Harvey, a London-based writer vacationing in Maldives, told a visiting IANS correspondent. Actually its hard to find solar goggles or solar filters in Male as none of the shops sell them. "We did receive some requests for solar googlies and solar filters from hotels and people this time. But we could not cater to them as there is no demand for such items," said Ibrahim Umar Maik, a shopkeeper dealing in scientific gadgets. Annular solar eclipse occurs when the Sun and the Moon are exactly in line, but the apparent size of the Moon's shadow is smaller than the visible disc of the Sun. The covered Sun, therefore, appears as a 'Ring of Fire', with its rays spread out from the outline of the Moon.

The eclipse started in the Maldives at 10:15 a.m. (10:45 IST) and peaked at 12:20 p.m. (12:50

Weak Climate Accord Disappoints Student

Mary Shindler went a little farther than most students with her goal to help the earth — she went all the way to Copenhagen over winter break to take part in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. Shindler, a Charlottesville resident and

philosophy major, went to the U.N. Convention as part of the 19-member Sierra Student Coalition. Held Dec. 7 through Dec. 18 at the Bella Center in Copenhagen, the purpose of the convention was to try to create a binding agreement among more than 110 nations on climate change. Shindler was one of 2,500 youths from around the world to attend the convention. "The conference was one of the most physically and mentally intense experiences of my life," Shindler said. "We were up at 5 a.m. and working 20 hours a day setting policy, presenting interventions and organizing with other youth activists." Although Shindler described her experience working at the convention as eye-opening, disappointment was the ultimate outcome of the two-week effort at cooperation. "The participating nations ended up not coming anywhere close to a binding treaty," Shindler said. "They came out with a Copenhagen Accord, which didn't really say much." The Copenhagen Accord, which was the end result of 31 straight hours of negotiating, produced an agreement urging major polluters to make significant emissions cuts to keep world temperatures from rising above preindustrial levels. However, the accord does not require nations to abide by the emission output goals. The agreement also provided billions in climate aid to developing nations. According to Shindler, most of the disappointment and lack of cooperation came from developed nations, including the United States. The developed nations opposed plans to help less developed nations adapt to climate change, which increased the difficulty of negotiations by creating obstacles and objecting to proposals. "It was very frustrating," Shindler said. "The developing nations have caused this problem, and we really need to step up and take responsibility for it. We can't keep putting it off." Shindler described one day when negotiation tensions grew so high that the delegation from the Republic of Maldives, a small island nation in the Indian Ocean, stood up, angrily announced displeasure with the developed nations' proposal and stormed out of the Bella Center. Shindler and other youth representatives quickly organized an "approved action", similar to a protest, in the Bella Center with signs backing the position of the nation. "We supported them because the Republic of Maldives is a prime example of the how we are already seeing the effects of climate change," Shindler said. "Their country will probably be underwater in the next few years because of climate change, and they're trying to figure out a new plan for what to do with their people when it happens." One of the most memorable experiences of Shindler's trip was a dinner that Chinese and American youth representatives attended. Approximately 50 representatives from each nation talked about how their nations could better facilitate future economic and political discussions. "It almost brought me to tears to see and talk with the future leaders of the U.S. and China," Shindler said. "Some of the most intelligent and inspiring people were in a room together peacefully discussing how to work together." China and the United States have historically been at odds politically, with particular regard to issues involving climate change. The United States and China, the two leading emitters of carbon dioxide, disagreed on many key points about clean energy in Copenhagen. China wants to use coal as the main energy source to help build its economy, while the United States favors a more clean energy alternative.

"If we can do it, how come our leaders can't do it?" Shindler said laughing. "Just get out of the way and let us do it!" Shindler joined JMU's EARTH Club during her sophomore year, despite no previous involvement with environmental activism. She soon joined the Sierra Club, where she first heard about the UN Convention. The Sierra Club is an organization which works to protect the environment. The Sierra Club wasn't originally planning on sending a student delegate to the conference. But Shindler and Ethan Buckner, a Vassar College student, submitted a proposal during the summer, much past the April deadline. The Sierra Club accepted the pair. Each member raised \$2,500 to finance the trip, with contributions coming from a grant through the JMU Office of International Programs, the Climate Action Alliance of the Valley, the Sierra Club Shenandoah Valley Chapter of Harrisonburg and the Mother Nature Network. Plans for the trip were hastily arranged, with

confirmation for housing coming a mere week before the scheduled departure date. Despite the last-minute travel plans, the accompanying stress was worth it for Shindler.

“I love the idea that I can take an issue I am concerned with and actually do something about it and make a difference,” Shindler said. “I just hope that next year will be.

Research and Markets: Travel and Tourism - Maldives

The Travel and Tourism in Maldives report offers a comprehensive guide to the size and shape of the market at a national level. It provides the latest market size data (2002-2007), allowing you to identify the sectors driving growth. It identifies the leading companies and offers strategic analysis of key factors influencing the market - be they new legislative, technology or pricing issues. Background information on disposable income, annual leave and holiday taking habits is also included. Forecasts to 2012 illustrate how the market is set to change.

Korean Air to Fly to Maldives

Korean Air said Wednesday that it will provide charter flight services from Incheon International Airport to the Maldives, one of the most popular honeymoon destinations in the Indian Ocean for Koreans. The charter flights will be offered four times a week from April 25 to June 4, the airline said in a statement. Formerly, Koreans travelling to the island had to change flights in Singapore and the total travel time was around 15 hours. The new direct service from Korea's largest airline will reduce travel time to around 9 hours, the airline said. Korean Air plans to introduce regular flight services to the Maldives if demand for the flights to the island increases.