

ENVIRONMENT SCAN - 18 APR 2016

CHINA, BANGLADESH, SRI LANKA, NEPAL, MALDIVES, BHUTAN, AMERICA, ASEAN

Border Issues Top Manohar Parrikar's List in China Visit.

Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar in Beijing on Monday pressed the Chinese military leadership on border transgressions stressing the need to resume the process of clarifying the Line of Actual Control (LAC).

Parrikar, who met his Chinese counterpart General Chang Wanquan at the PLA headquarters in Beijing, also conveyed India's displeasure at China blocking the listing of Jaish-e-Mohammed chief Masood Azhar at the UN Security Council sanctions committee, expressing that "what happened in the UN was not the right direction that they have taken on terrorism because having a common line is in the interest of India and China both".

A similar message was conveyed by External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj when she met Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi along the sidelines of the Russia-India-China trilateral in Moscow.

The focus of the defence minister's visit was, however, the boundary issue and ensuring stability along the undemarcated LAC. While India has been pressing China to resume the process of clarifying the LAC over which differing perceptions in certain areas have led to what Indian officials describe as transgressions, Beijing has been reluctant.

China has viewed the LAC clarification as a diversion from the boundary talks - of which the 19th round will be held on Wednesday when NSA Ajit Doval travels to Beijing. "We are insisting it should be done in order to really ensure a very stable border. Because all the issues take place because of perception," he told reporters.

Both sides did agree to increased confidence building measures, including adding new border personnel meeting points. After two new points in Daulet Beg Oldie in Ladakh and Kibithu in Arunachal were opened last year, they are looking at a sixth point in the middle sector.

Parrikar described the process of "actual marking" the LAC as "one of the preconditions of smooth border operations". "Without that everything goes by perceptions which has caused problems sometimes."

Parrikar said both sides moved closer to operationalising hotlines between military commands to enable faster addressing of any incidents. China officially responded to a draft memorandum put forward by India and the issue now appears close to be finally settled, officials said.

On Tuesday, the defence minister will meet Chinese Premier Li Keqiang before travelling to Chengdu as one of the first visiting foreign officials to see the PLA's new headquarters of its recently set up Western Theatre Command, which is in charge of the entire India border.

While the main focus of Parrikar's talks on Monday was on enhancing border management, the defence minister also raised issues that have recently emerged as prickly differences in ties.

On China's infrastructure projects in PoK, Parrikar said India has made its stand very clear and expressed its strong reservations to Chinese activity in PoK. China, he said, has noted the concerns and explained the projects as economic ones not aimed at India from a defence or military perspective.

China Lands Military Plane on Disputed South China Sea Reef.

China has landed a military aircraft on one of its manmade islands in the disputed South China Sea. It is thought to be the first time China's military has publicly admitted to landing a plane on the artificial island, known as Fiery Cross Reef on Sunday. State media said the plane evacuated three injured workers from the reef.

China and several of its neighbours are locked in a territorial dispute over the South China Sea, which Beijing claims almost in its entirety.

China has previously landed civilians planes on Fiery Cross Reef, sparking criticism from Vietnam, who also claims the territory, and the US. Beijing says it is building artificial islands and structures on reefs for civilian purposes, but other countries have expressed concern over the possibility of the facilities being used for military purposes.

China, Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei all claim areas within the South China Sea. China turned Fiery Cross Reef into an artificial island through a massive dredging operation, and constructed buildings and an air strip.

Rival countries have wrangled over territory in the South China Sea for centuries, but tension has steadily increased in recent years. In February, Taiwan and the US said China had deployed surface-to-air missiles on another disputed island, called Woody or Yongxing Island, in the Paracels.

China responded by saying that the US was militarising the South China Sea through its air and naval patrols. The US, which officially takes no position on the territorial disputes, describes the patrols as "freedom of navigation" operations to ensure access to key shipping and air routes

To Counter Beijing, Washington Flexes Military Muscle in South China Sea

Over the last week in Asia, US defence secretary Ash Carter has visited two aircraft carriers, revealed new military agreements with India and the Philippines, and generally signaled that the Obama administration has decided to lean more heavily on military power to counter China's territorial ambitions in the region.

But the newly-muscular approach on display during Carter's tour represents a gamble. While it sends a message that the United States will work with its allies to challenge Beijing's expanding presence in the disputed South China Sea, it also plays into fears within the Chinese leadership about US efforts to halt China's rise.

That may mean that the more the Pentagon steps up in the region, the more China may feel it needs to accelerate its military build-up, including the construction of new islands equipped with radar and airstrips in contested waters.

With a mix of showmanship and concrete initiatives during a six-day visit to India and the Philippines, Carter left little doubt that the United States intended both to strengthen alliances and move more hardware and troops here to counter China's growing military reach.

On Friday, he rode a helicopter to a symbol of American power projection in the Pacific, a Nimitz-class nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, as it cruised through the South China Sea near waters claimed by the Chinese.

Before visiting the carrier John C Stennis, he marked the end of 11 days of military exercises between the United States and the Philippines and said some US troops would stay behind "to contribute to regional security and stability".

He also said the United States had begun joint patrols of the South China Sea with the Philippine navy and would soon do the same with the country's air force.

Earlier in the week, Carter toured an Indian aircraft carrier, the first time a US defence secretary had boarded such a ship, and said the United States would help India upgrade its carriers. He also revealed a new logistics agreement and said the two nations would work together on other military technologies.

Together, the measures announced by Carter hint at a potential US military resurgence in a part of the world where China believes it is destined to surpass the United States in influence. The Obama administration seems to be betting that China will back off rather than continue making moves that lead its neighbors to embrace the US military.

More than once during the last week, Carter cited China's actions as the driving force behind tensions in the region and, implicitly, the reason for its neighbors' increased engagement with the Pentagon.

But some analysts warn that China could react to the Pentagon's moves by taking more aggressive actions, challenging America's commitment to the region in a high-profile game of chicken and egg raising the risk of a military conflict.

On Friday, China also disclosed that its most senior uniformed military commander had visited the disputed Spratly Islands, which appeared intended to signal Beijing's resolve in the South China Sea, most of which it considers Chinese territory.

BANGLADESH

Col Saikat roy

Khaleda gets bail in 5 cases:

April 06, 2016 (Wednesday)

BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia yesterday secured bail in five cases, including a sedition case. The four other cases are Jatrabari arson attack and killing cases, Gatco graft case and the case filed over a crude bomb attack on a procession led by Shipping Minister Shahjahan Khan.

Khaleda was also exempted from appearing in court in the cases linked with the Jatrabari arson attack and the crude bomb attack.

April 16, 2016

Bangladesh PM says writing against religion won't be tolerated:

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has said hurting religious sentiments of others by writing something is not acceptable.

“We perform our religious rituals. But why should we tolerate anyone writing filthy words against our religion?” she questioned. She said writing something against religion as part of freethinking has become a “fashion” nowadays. “I don't consider such writings as freethinking but filthy words.

Why would anyone write such words? It's not at all acceptable if anyone writes against our prophet or other religions.... I hope no one would write such filthy words.”

The PM was addressing the Awami League leaders and workers on the occasion of Pahela Baishakh at the Gono Bhaban on Thursday.

Hasina questioned why the government would take the responsibility of an untoward incident if that occurred due to such writings.

About the killings out of vengeance for such writings, she said Islam does not permit it and Almighty Allah does not bestow the duty of trial on them (killers).

“If anyone doesn't abide by the guidance of Almighty Allah and his prophet and thus kills people, it is 'Shirk'. I hope no one would get involved in such an activity,” she added.

She hoped the pace of socio-economic development in various fields will continue. She noted that her government for the first time in the country's history has introduced Baishakhi allowance for the public servants.

Mentioning that the Bangalis observe the first day of the Bengali New Year as Pahela Baishakh with festivity, she said some term it “Hinduism”.

“Despite being Muslims, we're Bangalis also. We should not forget that we've liberated our country after fighting against the occupation forces as Bangalis. It's not like that we can't be Muslims, being Bangalis.”

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'Bangladeshi secular bloggers should "control" their writings':

Monday, April 11, 2016

Bangladeshi secular bloggers should "control" their writings, the country's home minister said on Sunday even as he asserted that home-grown militants and not the Bangladeshi branch of al Qaeda are responsible for the grisly murder of a 26-year-old secular blogger.

Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan's statement came days after Ansar al-Islam, the Bangladeshi division of al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), claimed responsibility for the killing of blogger Nazimuddin Samad last week.

He had been on a hit list of 84 atheist bloggers that a group of radical Islamists prepared and sent to Bangladesh's interior ministry.

Samad, a graduate student, was on his way home from evening classes on April 06, 2016 Wednesday when three to four people circled him.

"First the attackers hacked Samad with machetes, then shot him," Dhaka Senior Assistant Police Commissioner Nurul Amin had said.

Samad's death marks the sixth time a Bangladeshi writer of atheist material has been killed in 14 months.

There have been systematic assaults in Bangladesh over the past six months specially targeting minorities, secular bloggers and foreigners.

Last month, a 65-year-old Christian convert was hacked to death in the northern Bangladeshi town of Kurigram by three motorbike-borne unidentified assailants.

Last year, Bangladesh-born US blogger and science writer Avijit Roy, 42, was attacked just yards away from a book fair in Dhaka. A month later, fellow blogger Washiqur Rahman, 27, was hacked to death in broad daylight near his home in Dhaka's Tejgaon area.

The subsequent victims were Ananta Bijoy Das, 33, a banker and a founder of a group called the Science and Rationalist Council; Niloy Chakrabarti, 40, who wrote online under the pen name Niloy Neel and publisher Faisal Arefin Dipan, 43, who published a bestselling book by Roy.

Khan said the issue is not freedom of expression but tolerance of other religions.

"The bloggers, they should control their writing," he told CNN.

"Our country is a secular state. ... I want to say that people should be careful not to hurt anyone by writing anything -- hurt any religion, any people's beliefs, any religious leaders," Khan said.

Bangladeshi authorities have previously denied that foreign terror groups such as al Qaeda or ISIS have taken root in the majority-Muslim country. Instead, they have often claimed homegrown extremists are responsible for such attacks.

According to the SITE Intelligence group, a US-based monitoring organisation, Ansar al-Islam, a Bangladesh branch of al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent or AQIS, said in a statement posted online yesterday that its members carried out the attack in "vengeance".

"This operation was conducted to teach a lesson to the blasphemers of this land whose poisonous tongues are constantly abusing Allah...The religion of Islam and the Messenger...Under the pretext of so-called 'freedom of speech'," Mufti Abdullah Ashraf, a spokesman for Ansar al-Islam, said in the statement according to SITE Intelligence Group. The group has effectively declared war against atheist writers who dare to challenge al Qaeda's strict interpretation of Islam.

Islamic State planing to carry out attacks in India through mujahideens in 'Bengal', 'Wilayat Khurasan':

Thursday, April 14, 2016

New Delhi: The Islamic State is planning to launch attacks in India with the help of local terror groups based in Bangladesh and Pakistan, a report said on Thursday.

In an interview to IS's online magazine Dabiq, 'amir' of the terror group fighters in Bangladesh, Shaykh Abu Ibrahim al-Hanif made the revelations.

According to al-Hanif, Bangladesh, which is referred to as 'Bengal' by ISIS, is considered to be strategically important for the deadly terror group, a Hindustan Times report said.

Hanif said with the help of Wilayat Khurasan (branch of the militant Islamist group active in Afghanistan and Pakistan), and 'Bengal', ISIS could easily carry out strike across India with the help of local mujahideens.

Last month, the US had expressed concern over the presence of dreaded Islamic State terror group in Bangladesh after the militant group claimed responsibility for several terror attacks in the country.

Hasina pushes for SAARC food bank:

April 08, 2016

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday stressed the need for speedy implementation of the initiatives taken for setting up Saarc Food Bank and Saarc Seed Bank.

“Since it is essential for tackling any kind of disaster, I would like to urge the South Asian leaders to take necessary steps to establish the Saarc Food Bank as soon as possible. Let the Saarc Food Bank be a friend in need so that no one dies of starvation in our region,”. “In this august conference, it should be our commitment to ensure food and nutritional security across the South Asia region,” she said.

The PM was addressing the inaugural session of the 3rd Meeting of Saarc Ministers of Agriculture at a city hotel, reports UNB.

Hasina hoped the ministers and experts attending the conference will make recommendations that would help eradicate poverty from this region through increasing agri-production in a sustainable manner.

Citing that there is a high risk of adverse impact of climate change on Saarc countries, the premier said: “We won't be able to prevent natural disasters, but we can minimise the loss of lives and property by removing the causes of disasters and improving the post-disaster management.”

“We don't want a single human being to starve and suffer from malnutrition. We want to meet the basic rights of every citizen. But it's not possible for an individual country to achieve this; rather a joint effort is required.”

The agriculture and foreign ministries of Bangladesh jointly organised the event.

G7 OUTREACH MEET : ABE INVITES HASINA:

April 09, 2016

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has been formally invited to the Outreach Meeting of the G7 nations, a grouping of seven advanced economies, to be held in Japan in May.

He said the meeting would be held in the central Japanese city of Ise-Shima in Mie Prefecture. Except Bangladesh, six other developing countries -- Lao PDR, Vietnam, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Sri Lanka, and Chad -- are expected to take part in it.

The Outreach Meeting will be held as part of the G7 summit slated for May 26-27. The agenda for this year's summit will likely focus on maritime security, anti-terror measures, and the refugee crisis.

The UN secretary general and presidents of the World Bank, ADB and IMF are also set to participate in the meeting.

ULFA threatens to blow up Bangladesh gas transmission line Report;

Wednesday, April 13, 2016

The anti-talk faction of separatist outfit ULFA has threatened to blow up Bangladesh's largest gas transmission pipeline, prompting authorities to order an intensified security vigil, a media report said on Wednesday citing an Indian intelligence tip-off.

The Paresh Barua-led faction of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) recently issued the threat to blow up the transmission line of the Bibiyana gas field, which supplies 45 per cent of the gas, the mass circulation Samakal newspaper in a lead story, basing it on information given by Indian intelligence agencies.

The article said Indian intelligence agencies recently unearthed the plot tapping a telephone conversation of Barua with an ULFA commander when he asked him to blow up the pipeline in Bangladesh.

The 119 kilometre-long Bibiyana pipeline is Bangladesh's largest transmission line that supplies gas to the national grid from the Bibiyana gas field in northeastern Habiganj, bordering Assam to central Dhunat sub-district, operated by US oil giant Chevron.

Officials of state-run Petrobangla, which contracts out the gas plants to foreign and local oil companies, said they received the information last week and took up the issue with concerned government authorities and cautioned Chevron.

Bengal government failed to check infiltration: Rajnath:

Wednesday, April 6, 2016

Union Home Minister Rajnath Singh Wednesday said infiltration is on in Bengal and the state government has "failed" to check it.

"Infiltration is taking place from Bangladesh and the state government has failed to check it. The state's border with Bangladesh will be sealed and infiltration checked if BJP is voted to power in Bengal," he said at an election meeting here.

"If voted to power, we will also change the situation in Bengal," Singh said, adding the situation has "improved" in states where BJP is in power.

BJP committed to sealing Indo-Bangla border : Reiterates Amit Shah:

April 10, 2016

BJP national president Amit Shah has reiterated the BJP's commitment towards sealing the porous India-Bangladesh border while asserting terming protection of identity and culture of the indigenous people will also be the priority of his party.

"The BJP is committed to seal the India-Bangladesh border. We are going to seal the border as soon as possible. The execution of the land swap deal between the two countries has already eased the process," he said at a press conference in Guwahati yesterday.

"Assam Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi had once said that there is not a single Bangladeshi in Assam. The statement of the chief minister of a state indicates the government's attitude towards the issue," he said.

Bangladesh jute sector gets Tk 1,000cr boost:

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday asked the finance ministry to allocate Tk 1,000 crore to the textiles and jute ministry for arrear salaries and wages of jute mill workers and modernisation of the state-owned jute mills to make them profitable.

Out of the total amount, Tk 600 crore will be spent on arrear salaries and wages of the jute mills employees while the rest on modernising the age-old jute mills owned by Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation (BJMC), he added.

The allocation came against the backdrop of the ongoing agitation by jute mill workers in Khulna.

CHANGES TO HAJJ POLICY APPROVED:

The cabinet approved a proposal for amending the National Hajj and Umrah Policy-2016 and Hajj Package-2016 following the Saudi government's decision to cut the number of hajj pilgrims this year.

As per the Saudi government's decision, the total number of hajj pilgrims from Bangladesh will be 1,01,758, Cabinet Secretary M Shafiul Alam told reporters after the meeting. Earlier, the number was fixed at 1,13,868.

Under the revised policy and package, the number of hajj pilgrims under government management would be 10,000, up from 5,000. Besides, a total of 91,758 pilgrims would perform hajj under private management.

SRI LANKA

Col Saikat Roy

Jayalalithaa threatens to take back Katchatheevu from Sri Lanka:

April 15, 2016

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister and AIADMK General Secretary J Jayalalithaa today vowed to retrieve Katchatheevu island ceded to Sri Lanka and restore the traditional fishing rights of Tamil Nadu fishermen in Palk Bay, if elected to power.

Addressing an election rally at Aruppukottai in Tamil Nadu, Jayalalithaa said the arrest of Tamil Nadu fishermen under the pretext of cross-border fishing by Lankan navy is still continuing. Stating that ceding of Katchatheevu to Sri Lanka was the main reason for the continuous arrest of Tamil Nadu fishermen, the chief minister said, “whenever our fishermen were arrested, I exert pressure on the Centre for their release.”

Taking a jibe at DMK President M. Karunanidhi, she accused him of doing nothing in 1974, during his tenure, when Katchatheevu was transferred to Lanka.

“Instead, Karunanidhi then said the fishermen indulged in cross-border because of their greedy attitude. Had he (Karunanidhi) moved the Supreme Court (SC), citing the Berubari judgement, by which the SC ruled against ceding of the area to East Pakistan, Mr Karunanidhi could have got an interim stay on the Katchatheevu issue,” she lamented.

Jayalalithaa recalled that the Apex Court in 1960 on Berubari issue had held that any land belonging to India could be ceded to another country only with the approval of Parliament and with a constitutional amendment. Hence, Berubari still remains an integral part of India.

Bangladesh objects to Sri Lanka's continental shelf claim:

Bangladesh has objected to Sri Lanka's claim of the continental shelf beyond 200 nautical miles from its coast baseline.

Sri Lanka on 8 May 2009, submitted to the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS), its claim on the limits of the continental shelf beyond 200 nautical miles from the baselines from which the breadth of the territorial sea is measured.

According to a senior official of the Bangladesh Foreign Ministry, the government has analyzed Sri Lanka's submission and it has appeared that Sri Lanka has also claimed some portion of the Bangladesh continental shelf, which was objected, Dhaka Tribune reports.

"It also appears that Sri Lanka has claimed an outer continental shelf entitlement in an area that is 350 nautical miles more from the baseline from which the breadth of its territorial sea is measured and more than 100 nautical miles from the 2,500 meters isobaths, and thus beyond the constraints line established by Article 76(5) of the convention," the objection note said.

The official said the government in due course of time will continue to block the Sri Lankan claim to protect Bangladesh's interest.

He said according to the UN laws, a country can have the continental shelf rights up to 350 nautical miles or 100 nautical miles from the 2,500 meters depth, which one is higher.

But, Sri Lanka from its baseline claimed about 1,000 nautical miles, which is India and Bangladesh's continental shelf territory, the official said.

He said the Lankan government tried to negotiate with the Bangladesh government but it did not agree.

"Sri Lanka also claimed a portion of Indian continental shelf and they should complete negotiation with them first," he said.

According to the United Nations CLCS website, India and the Maldives also objected to the Sri Lanka's claim.

Bangladesh also objected to the continental shelf claims of India and Myanmar.

US think tank lists Sri Lanka among Asia's top 10 FDI hotspots:

Fri, Apr 15, 2016

The United States-based think tank IHS Global Insight has listed Sri Lanka as one of the top 10 foreign direct investment (FDI) destinations in Asia.

The other Southeast Asian countries that are also projected by IHS to be the FDI hot spots in the region, are China, India, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Vietnam, Myanmar, Malaysia, The Philippines and Thailand.

"Over the next decade, Asia Pacific is forecast to be the fastest growing region of the global economy and the region that offers the biggest potential gains for foreign direct investment," IHS said in a release Thursday.

"The Asia Pacific region will grow at an average annual rate of 4.5 per cent per year, boosted by rapid growth in consumer spending in China, India and Southeast Asia," said IHS Chief Economist Asia Pacific Rajiv Biswas.

"A key source of strength for Asia Pacific is the rapidly growing size of the economic region, which now accounts for around one-third of world GDP, generating strong intra-regional trade and investment flows."

Amongst the South Asian economies, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh are expected to show rapid growth over the next decade.

According to the think tank, the new Sri Lankan government has embarked on sweeping economic reforms, with its first budget containing considerable economic liberalization measures.

The Sri Lankan economy is projected to grow at an average annual pace of 5.6 percent per year over 2016-2020 while key growth industries are expected to include logistics, tourism, agricultural products, IT-BPO industries and construction.

Sri Lanka Opposition Leader hopes new constitution will allow a federal solution to devolve power:

Sat, Apr 16, 2016

Sri Lanka's Leader of the Opposition and the major Tamil party, Tamil National Alliance (TNA), R. Sampanthan has expressed hope that the proposed new Constitution would allow the merger of North and East and a federal rule to distribute power to provinces within a unitary state.

The Opposition Leader, pointing out that the present government is more inclined to allow a federal solution which does not divide the country, has asked the members of the Northern provincial Council representing TNA not to engage in actions that will sabotage the government's resolve, the BBC Sinhala Service reported.

Sampanthan expressed these views participating in a discussion during a three-day visit to Jaffna. Chief Minister of the Northern Province C.V. Wigneswaran reportedly did not attend the discussions due to illness.

Many of the TNA members present in the discussions focused on what could be done in the event if the government did not support a federal structure.

The TNA leader has said that further decisions can be made based on what path the government takes.

Many members of the Northern Provincial Council have indicated that if the government's assistance is not received for the national problem through the constitutional reforms, then it is necessary to seek help from foreign countries to mount a strong influence on the government.

Many government officials, and representatives of voluntary organizations have met the Opposition Leader during his visit to Kilinochchi and Jaffna.

A group of rehabilitated former LTTE cadres also met the Opposition Leader to discuss their problems in finding employment. They have brought to the Opposition Leader's attention of the problems they are facing, including unemployment and economic problems and asked Mr. Sampanthan to provide the opportunity to get involved in politics through the Tamil National Alliance.

Sri Lanka to respond to U.S. human rights report after thorough analysis:

Fri, Apr 15, 2016

The Sri Lankan government said it will express its views regarding a report released by the United States Department of State on the country's human rights situation last year after studying the report thoroughly.

Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Dr. Harsha De Silva has said that the government will express its views on the report on Sri Lanka in the 2015 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices published by the U.S. Department of State after a thorough analysis.

The executive summary of the report on Sri Lanka said while the government arrested a number of military and police personnel and other government officials implicated in human rights violations, widespread impunity continued last year for the crimes committed during the armed conflict and other crimes committed following the end of the conflict.

"Widespread impunity continued in Sri Lanka last year for the crimes committed during the armed conflict and other crimes committed following the end of the conflict, particularly for cases of torture, sexual violence, corruption, and human rights abuses," it said.

The report noted that the government arrested and detained a number of military, police, and other officials implicated in old and new cases that included the killing of parliamentarians and the abduction and suspected killings of journalists and private citizens.

While listing a number of measures the current government of President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Rani Wickremesinghe has taken to address the past human rights abuses and accountability as well as to promote reconciliation, the report said arbitrary arrest and detention occurred although at a decreased rate relative to 2014.

State Minister of Finance, Lakshman Yapa Abeywardena speaking to journalists at an event held in Kandy said the State Department report should be studied extensively.

He said that the international community has commended the progress Sri Lanka has made in governance as the situation surrounding human rights in Sri Lanka has changed. He attributed the change to the positive measures taken by the present government in comparison to the previous regime to improve the rights record.

Minister Abeywardena further said that the previous government failed to engage with the international community to resolve misconceptions but now Sri Lanka's approach has changed.

Regardless of the findings in the report, during the recent past, there has not been anything serious on the matter of democracy and human rights in Sri Lanka, so there is no need for fear, the State Minister said.

He said the Europe has commended the new government's engagement in protecting human rights and the establishment of democracy in the country.

Indian Navy's First Training Squadron arrives at the Port of Colombo:

Fri, Apr 15

Sri Lanka Navy in accordance with naval traditions welcomed the arrival of Indian Navy's First Training Squadron comprising Indian Naval Ship (INS) Tir, INS Sujatha and Coast Guard Ship ICGS Varuna, at the Port of Colombo today (15) on a training visit.

Arrangements have been made to carry out branch specific training programs, covering a wide spectrum of activities, for the Sri Lankan naval personnel onboard INS Sujata and ICGS Varuna.

The primary aim of First Training Squadron, which forms a part of India's Southern Naval Command, is to impart sea training to Indian naval and coast guard trainees. However, it has also been providing training to personnel of friendly foreign navies for over four decades.

The three Indian ships are scheduled to depart Sri Lanka on 19th April 2016 after conducting a joint-naval exercise (PASSEX) with the Sri Lanka Navy.

Sri Lanka Navy to provide security to Straits of Malacca and Singapore:

Sat, Apr 16

Sri Lanka Navy will initiate a broader maritime security program to provide security in the region from Maldives to Straits of Malacca and Singapore.

Navy Media Spokesperson Captain Akram Alavi said the program was initiated based on a proposal forwarded by Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe.

The Navy will deploy several vessels to strengthen the security in the region to prevent illegal activities taking place through sea along the busiest straits used for international navigation.

The Straits of Malacca and Singapore are the main seaway connecting the Indian Ocean with the South China Sea and together are the shortest route for tankers trading between the Middle East and Far East Asian countries.

Captain Alavi said three ships belonging to the Navy will undergo training in Maldives and Indonesia at present and the Navy is expecting to obtain four more vessels in the near future for deep sea monitoring. SLNS Samudra has currently commenced the relevant training in Indonesia, he said.

Sri Lanka Navy's program is scheduled to conclude in 2020.

Sri Lanka Navy divers training with U.S. Navy in Guam in underwate Mine Removal

Sat, Apr 16, 2016

A twenty member Sri Lanka Navy diving squad is presently undergoing diving training with the US Navy sailors from the Explosive Ordinance Disposal Mobile Unit (EODMU) 5 in Guam.

The Navy divers are undergoing training with the US divers to acquire skills and knowledge required to remove unexploded underwater ordnances left by the LTTE in tanks and lagoons in the North and East, the Navy said.

NEPAL

Col Saikat Roy

Dahal, Poudel stress unity among all parties for constitution implementation

Apr 17, 2016

UCPN (Maoist) Chairman, Pushpa Kamal Dahal, spoke with Nepali Congress senior leader Ram Chandra Poudel on Sunday and sought latter's support in the constitution implementation process.

NC leader Poudel called on Dahal at latter's residence in Lazimpat. On the occasion, Dahal reminded Poudel on a need to forge unity and working alliance among the parties – which collaborated in constitution making – to facilitate constitution's implementation.

Nepal's Constitution was issued with agreement among the major parties to sideline various obstacles and hindrances, Dahal noted, stressing the importance of working alliance among the big parties to address the dissatisfaction of the Madhes-centric parties.

Dahal further emphasised that all the parties must work together as complete exercise of the constitution yet remains as a big challenge.

It is not the right time to distinguish between the government and the main opposition, Dahal viewed, renewing his appeal to NC for support, said Dahal's Press Coordinator, Surya Kiran Sharma.

Poudel responded agreeing to Dahal that consensus among the major parties was the prime necessity of the hour and said his party was prepared to lend support. He assured Nepali Congress will not remain as a stumbling block, Poudel's aide Chiranjibi Adhikari said.

Shrestha asks Qatar to give Nepalis free visa, free ticket:

Apr 17, 2016

UCPN (Maoist) leader Narayan Kaji Shrestha has requested the Qatar government to help Nepal send migrant workers to the emirate in a free-visa-free-ticket arrangement.

“The Nepal government is seriously working to send workers to Qatar without charges for visa and [air] ticket,” said Shrestha, requesting Minister Nuaimi to monitor Qatari companies which arrange for Nepalis to work in the oil-rich country.

Minister Nuaimi informed that the Qatari government has amended laws for the welfare of migrants and made it mandatory for companies to pay workers through banks.

Migrants going to work in Malaysia, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman can avail of the free-visa-free-ticket provision.

However, they need to pay for pre-departure training, orientation, health check-up and welfare fund premium.

CoAS Chhetri to visit America:

Apr 15 2016

Chief of Army Staff (CoAS) General Rajendra Chhetri is visiting the US from April 24 on the invitation of US Army. The visit is expected to be a week-long or could be even longer, according to a source.

A Cabinet meeting on Thursday had approved Chhetri’s travel plan. He had earlier visited India in Jan-Feb and China in March.

CoAS Chhetri is expected to meet UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon during the visit. Defence Ministry has said that his visit is a friendly one.

MALDIVES

Col Saikat Roy

First award in Dr. Kalam’s honor – to President Yameen

April 16, 2016

President Abdulla Yameen has received award set up in honor of former Indian President Dr. A P J Abdul Kalam.

Yameen received the first award handed out in International Alliance category.

The award was presented to Yameen during his two-day state visit to India last week.

Dr. Kalam Smrithi Award is handed out by Kalam Smrithi Organization – set up by well-wishers of the late Indian president and pioneer scientist.

Other categories the award is handed out on includes Leadership Excellence, Educational Leadership and Science Education.

BHUTAN

Col Saikat Roy

India hands over Nu 7.7 billion for hydroelectric projects:

April 15, 2016

The ambassador of India to Bhutan, Jaideep Sarkar, handed over cheques worth Nu 7.7 billion to the economic affairs minister, Lekey Dorji, on April 13.

Of the total amount, Nu 7.4 billion is for the Mangdechhu hydroelectric project authority and Nu 370 million for the Punatsangchhu I hydroelectric power project. The economic affairs minister is the chairman of both projects.

The economic affairs minister and the ambassador also discussed the progress of the ongoing bilateral hydropower projects of Punatsangchhu I and II, and Mangdechhu, which they agreed was satisfactory. They also agreed to work together to ensure the projects are completed on time.

In the last financial year, the Government of India released a total of Nu 39.6 billion for the three inter-governmental hydropower projects comprising both loan and grant.

In addition, the Government of India has also disbursed Nu 246 million for the Kholongchhu hydroelectric project during the year.

Drukair's aircraft damaged by hail:

April 17, 2016

A Drukair aircraft with 103 passengers aboard was damaged after flying through hail while on approach to Guwahati airport in India yesterday.

The flight, KB 140, which was on the way to Bangkok via Guwahati, landed safely.

AMERICA

Gp Capt GD Sharma, VSM (Retd)

Why did India sign logistic support agreement with United States:

US Defence Secretary, Ashton Carter and India's Defence Minister, Manohar Parikkar in a press conference on 12 Apr 16 announced that, two countries in principle has agreed to sign Logistic Support Agreement with a new name Logistic Exchange Memorandum of Agreement. While the agreement may take few weeks for a formal signature. Two questions come in one's mind. First, India never joined a power block and by joining this agreement would we lose our autonomy? Second, why India after resisting this agreement for nearly ten years has agreed to sign now?

While the fine print of the agreement would take few weeks for formal signature, a careful look of the similar agreements shows like Acquisition and Cross Servicing Agreement (ACSA), which US has signed with many of its NATO allies that it allows the contracting parties reciprocal use of Logistic support, supplies and services. Food, water, billeting, transportation (including airlift), petroleum, oils, lubricants, clothing, communication services, medical services, ammunition, base operations support (and construction incident thereto), storage services, use of facilities, training services, spare parts and components, repair and maintenance services, calibration services, and airport and seaport services on re-imburement basis.

However, It was confirmed by the US Defence Secretary in a TV interview that the India -US agreement would have a limited scope. It is valid for peace and during natural disasters only and not during operations, secondly, it does not relate to the location of weapons system Thirdly, it does not involve permanent deployment of US forces or setting up US bases in India. With this in view, the actual terms of agreement are likely to be different than the standard ACSA. When

agreement in question is signed with these provisions perse, does not indicate India entering a military alliance with US as alleged in some quarters.

The agreement by itself is not targeted against any country but, it will take India US strategic partnership a step ahead. The current geo-political situation with assertive china has probably led to the current move. The Chinese veto on India proposal in United Nation to seek proscription of Assad Masood , leader of Pak-based terror outfit Jaish- e – Mohammed has provided precursor for this move . China showed that will not hesitate to support the terror outfit to suit its interest, when the world over, the war against global terrorism is in progress. China taken note of this agreement and indirectly hinted during Defence Minister, Manohar Parikkar's visit of Beijing, saying that India has always maintained a strategic autonomy. By this signaling, we have not lost any ground on own autonomy but, gained strategically. This could also help ' make in India' process with American could be more willing now to set up defence industry in India and also transfer technology .

Since United States is already engaged with India through strategic dialogue, exercises, weaponsale, the benign nature of the agreement, in question may not greatly bother Russia our other close partner.

ASEAN

Brig Jai singh Yadav, VSM

US Sends Destroyer, Spy Plane to Indonesia Naval Exercise:

The United States is one of several countries participating in a string of naval engagements in Indonesia last week.

Indonesia kicked off its biennial Multilateral Naval Exercise Komodo (MNEK) 2016 in Padang Indonesia on April 12 with an opening ceremony and the arrival of ships from 35 countries in the city for an international fleet review

The second iteration of Exercise Komodo includes a harbor phase with a fleet review as well as a sea phase training scenario where participating navies will collaborate to boost information sharing and maritime cooperation.

The United States is one of the countries participating in Komodo 2016, which also features all 18 ASEAN-Plus nations (the 10 ASEAN countries plus Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, Russia, South Korea and the United States).

According to a statement on U.S. involvement issued by Task Force 73 – a U.S. Navy task force of the Seventh Fleet which coordinates exercises for Southeast Asia – during the harbor phase, U.S. Navy Seabees from Naval Mobile Construction Battalion (NMCB) 4 planned to work alongside naval engineers on a civil-military project, while sailors from the Arleigh Burke class guided missile destroyer USS Stockdale (DDG-106) and Patrol Squadron (VP) 8 were scheduled to participate in community service projects at Padang Beach and a cultural exchange with students at Andalas University.

During the sea phase, U.S. assets and personnel participating will include the USS Stockdale as well as a P-8A Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft. The P-8A Poseidon has received significant attention over the past few years due to its growing involvement in the South China Sea, from aerial incidents with China to rotational deployments in Singapore.

Also participating will be the Seabees from NMCB 4 and staff from Task Force 73 and Destroyer Squadron 7.