

**12.05 hrs.**

**(ii) Developments in Nepal and present status of Bilateral Relations with Pakistan and Afganistan\***

MR. SPEAKER : Now, Item No.19.

MD. SALIM (CALCUTTA – NORTH EAST): Sir, I have a small submission to make on this.

MR. SPEAKER: You have not given any notice.

MD. SALIM : Sir, the hon. Minister is going to lay a statement on the current situation on Nepal and on the bilateral relations between Afganistan and Pakistan. This is very important and so the Lok Sabha should find some time to discuss this matter.

MR. SPEAKER: I agree with you. I am sure the Government will provide an opportunity for this.

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI E. AHAMED): Sir, on behalf of Shri K. Natwar Singh, I beg to lay on the Table a copy of the statement (Hindi and English versions) regarding developments in Nepal and the present status of bilateral relations with Pakistan and Afganistan.

\*Sir, there has been a broad national consensus on our foreign policy since independence. This consensus has enabled our country to play an influential and effective role in world affairs. Our Government shall continue to nurture this precious legacy and build upon it as we face a rapidly transforming international environment.

As the Hon'ble Members are aware, the UPA Government has laid great stress on our relations with our neighbours. Hence, I would like to take the House into confidence and make a statement on recent developments in the neighbourhood,

\* Also placed in Library, See No. LT 1648 A/2005)

specifically developments in Nepal and my recent visits to Afghanistan and Pakistan.

As close friends and neighbours, India and Nepal share a unique relationship of friendship and cooperation underpinned by ties of language, culture and kinship. It is inevitable that developments in one country affect the other. We are committed to supporting all efforts aimed at restoring political stability and economic prosperity in Nepal.

Hence India is deeply concerned at the recent developments in Nepal following the dismissal of the multiparty government by His Majesty King Gyanendra on 1 February. An emergency has been imposed in that country, fundamental rights have been suspended and several political leaders, journalists, human rights activists and intellectuals have been detained. Some leaders have crossed over into India.

Media censorship continues. Telecom services have been curtailed. Indian television news channels are not being carried by Nepalese cable service providers. M/s United Telecom Ltd., an Indian joint venture company providing telephone services has not been allowed to operate since the imposition of the emergency.

The prolonged Maoist-sponsored bandh since 12 February has disrupted normal life causing enormous hardships to the people of Nepal. It also affected industrial activity. It was called off only on 26 February. Political parties have decided to launch a joint agitation against the actions of the King from 8 March.

The developments in Nepal constitute a serious setback to democracy and bring the monarchy and mainstream political parties in direct confrontation with each other. This can only benefit the forces that not only wish to undermine democracy in Nepal but the institution of monarchy as well. As a result, the task of both India and Nepal to address their shared security concerns has become difficult and complicated. We continue to believe that the principles of multi-party democracy and constitutional monarchy, enshrined in the country's constitution will be adhered to in order to ensure political stability in the country.

The Government of India responded promptly and unambiguously to the developments in Nepal. We have in a fraternal spirit called for the early restoration of multiparty democracy, immediate release of political leaders and lifting of restrictions on their constitutional rights and removal of media censorship. We have stressed the need and importance of forging a national consensus between the two constitutional forces, namely political parties and constitutional monarchy, to effectively deal with the political and economic challenges facing the country. Our views

have been conveyed by our Ambassador to H.M. the King of Nepal.

Following the developments in Nepal, we recalled our Ambassador in Kathmandu to New Delhi for consultations. He has since returned to Kathmandu and will reiterate our views to the Nepalese leadership.

We are also in touch with other countries, to exchange views and share assessments in order to evolve a coordinated response of the international community to the developments in Nepal.

In view of the current disturbed conditions in Nepal, the question of military supplies to Nepal is under constant review.

India is concerned that a further deterioration of the situation in Nepal will result in spill-over effects across the open border, particularly in the neighbouring States. We have taken steps to strengthen security in border areas. The Sashastra Seema Bal which is responsible for guarding India-Nepal border has been asked to step up vigilance and patrolling along the border.

Our links with Afghanistan go back many centuries. India-Afghanistan relations are underpinned by historical ties, cultural commonalities and continuous contacts between the peoples of the two countries.

I visited Kabul on 15 February 2005. I met President Karzai, Baba-e-Millat Ex-King Zahir Shah and Foreign Minister Dr. Abdullah. The Ministers of Health and Defence were also separately present at the ceremonial events organized in connection with the inauguration of the new surgical block of the Indira Gandhi Hospital, which has been reconstructed with our assistance and handing over of 49 vehicles to the Afghan National Army respectively.

We welcomed President Karzai's re-election in the presidential election held in October 2004. The people of Afghanistan, especially women, defied the threat of terrorism and turned out in large numbers to exercise their vote.

As Hon'ble Members are aware, we are running several projects in virtually all parts of Afghanistan. These sectors include hydro-electricity, road construction, agriculture, industry, telecommunications, information & broadcasting, education and health.

In my discussions with the Afghan leaders, they expressed keen desire for further deepening of relations in every field and were generously appreciative of our assistance programmes. President Karzai described these as among the most effective.

Subsequently President Karzai came on a working visit from 23-25 February 2005. He called on the President and had talks with the Prime Minister. During the discussions, the two sides reviewed bilateral ties in a comprehensive and cordial manner. President Karzai was accompanied by eight Cabinet Ministers, who had bilateral meetings with their Indian counterparts. Raksha Mantri, Minister of Information and Broadcasting, Minister of State for Civil Aviation and I separately called on President Karzai.

Two MOUs were signed during the visit. These included an MOU on Cooperation in the field of Civil Aviation. This is aimed at building capacity and strengthening the institutional structure of Afghan civil aviation sector. The MOU on cooperation in the field of Media and Information calls for greater interaction between media persons and radio and TV organizations of the two countries.

India announced its commitment to fund and execute the construction of a power transmission line from Pul-e-Khumri to Kabul and a sub-station at Kabul, which has been described as a foremost priority project by President Karzai himself. It will bring electricity all the way from Uzbekistan to Kabul and a segment within Afghanistan, a distance of 200 kms., over some of the most difficult terrain, would be undertaken by India. This will take India's commitment for Afghanistan's reconstruction to US \$ 500 million.

Afghanistan today suffers from acute shortage of skilled and semi-skilled manpower. In the coming period, we also intend to focus on vocational training.

The situation in Afghanistan is gradually stabilizing. We have also been able to consolidate further our relations with the people and Government of Afghanistan.

I visited Pakistan from February 15 to 17 2005. It was the first visit of an Indian Foreign Minister to Pakistan in almost 16 years. I met President Musharraf, Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz, and held extensive discussions with my counterpart, Foreign Minister Khurshid M. Kasuri.

During my visit, agreement was reached with Pakistan to commence a bus service between Srinagar and Muzaffarabad. Honourable members would recall that the proposal for the Srinagar - Muzaffarabad bus was first

announced on October 22, 2003 by Shri Yashwant Sinha, the then External Affairs Minister.

Agreement was also reached on starting a bus service between Lahore and Amritsar, including to religious places such as Nankana Sahib. Pakistan also agreed to work towards the early restoration of the Khokrapar-Munnabao rail link. These links would significantly enhance people-to-people contacts, which have provided palpable support to the present process.

The Srinagar Muzaffarabad bus service is expected to commence on 7 April 2005. Dates for the Amritsar-Lahore bus service and the Khokrapar-Munnabao rail link will also be finalized.

On the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad bus service, let me clarify that all Indian and Pakistani nationals would be permitted to use this route across the LoC. Each side will designate its authority for receiving application forms for travel and for issue of travel permits at the checkpoint. On the Indian side, the designated authority is the Regional Passport Officer, Srinagar. The procedure adopted is without prejudice to our stated position on the issue of Jammu & Kashmir. The display of mutual flexibility has enabled the two sides to take a significant step in responding to humanitarian considerations, particularly the opportunity for divided families to meet each other with relative ease and convenience.

We have also agreed to look at a pipeline through Pakistan subject to satisfaction of our concerns related to security and assured supplies. This would also contribute to widening of our economic inter-linkages.

During my visit to Islamabad, following additional agreements were reached:

- (i) Between now and July, agreements will be finalized on Pre-notification of Missile Tests, MOU between Indian Coastguards and Pakistan's Maritime Security Agency, and MOU between Narcotics Control Authorities.
- (ii) Discussion would be initiated on agreements on reducing Risk of Nuclear Accidents or Unauthorized Use of Nuclear Weapons and Preventing Incidents at Sea.
- (iii) Further measures to alleviate the situation of civilian prisoners and apprehended fishermen would be taken. I impressed upon the Foreign Minister of Pakistan the need to release the apprehended fishermen along with their boats, and to expedite their return.
- (iv) It was agreed to continue with efforts for early re-establishment of our respective Consulates General in Karachi and Mumbai.

The issue of Baglihar Hydroelectric Power Project in J&K was raised by Pakistani leaders. We pointed out to them that the project was fully in consonance with the Indus Waters Treaty of 1960, to which we remain committed. I also conveyed that the last round of bilateral technical discussions had registered progress in our view, and if the discussion had been continued there could have been even greater convergence of views. While expressing our willingness to return to bilateral discussions, I said that Pakistan's reference to the World Bank to seek the services of a neutral expert was premature. Members are aware that the project is of great significance for the economic development of J&K, and we intend to continue with the project.

On my way back, I visited Lahore where I addressed a group of media persons and prominent citizens at a meeting organised through SAFMA (South Asia Free Media Association). I called on the Governor of Punjab, Lt. Gen. (rtd) Khalid Maqbool, while the Chief Minister Chaudhary Pervez Elahi graciously hosted a lunch for me. At the lunch, I had a useful discussion with Chaudhary Shujaat Hussain, President of Pakistan Muslim League.

The atmosphere in all these meetings was relaxed, friendly and positive, with emphasis on commonalities, and importance of people to people contacts.

My visit took place in the overall context of improving bilateral relations with Pakistan. We intend to impart further momentum to the present process.

As Honourable Members are aware, significant developments have taken place in India-Pakistan relations since April 2003. Relations have been restored at the level of High Commissioners, transport and communication links have resumed, one round of the Composite Dialogue has been completed. A series of technical level and Composite Dialogue related meetings have been held on schedule. Another round was initiated during the Foreign Secretary level talks in December 2004 in Islamabad.

People to people exchanges are taking place across the spectrum in large numbers. There has been a resumption of visits by pilgrim groups. Our High Commission is currently issuing close to 7,000 visas per month. This month, we expect to issue an additional 8,000 visas, over and above this number to cater to the requirements of those coming

to watch the India- Pakistan cricket series in India.

The ceasefire has held for more than a year. The bilateral process has been given impetus through maintenance of high level contacts: PM met President Musharraf in New York in September 2004; Pakistan PM Shaukat Aziz visited New Delhi on November 23-24, 2004.

Some progress has also been achieved on the humanitarian issue of fishermen and civilian detainees. During the Foreign Secretary level talks in December 2004, it was inter-alia agreed that both sides would give consular access to all prisoners under their custody. Following the visit, Pakistan has provided consular access to approximately 100 civilian prisoners and 650 fishermen in January and February 2005. We are continuing to press Pakistan on the issue of 54 missing defence personnel.

On the Sir Creek issue, a Joint Survey of the boundary pillars in the horizontal segment of the International Boundary in the Sir Creek area has also been successfully concluded in January 2005.

Thus meaningful progress has been achieved and the Government intends to continue with the present process in an atmosphere free from terrorism and violence. Government have made it clear that the process is critically dependent on the fulfillment of January 6, 2004 commitment of President Musharraf not to permit any territory under Pakistan's control to be used to support terrorism in any manner.

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