

India will continue to forge close relations with its neighbours

The Minister of External Affairs Pranab Mukherjee made a suo motu statement in Lok Sabha on foreign policy-related developments on March 3. Here are some excerpts from his statement:

I rise to apprise the House of developments related to foreign policy since the conclusion of the winter session last December. During this inter-sessional period, the government has made vigorous efforts to promote our objective of an external environment that enables India's accelerated development efforts and helps increase our strategic space.

Prime Minister paid an official visit to the People's Republic of China, our largest neighbour, from January 13 to 15, 2008. He was received with great warmth. PM and Premier Wen Jiabao signed a joint document on "A Shared Vision for the 21st Century between the Republic of India and the People's Republic of China", that reflects the congruence of interests that we share on regional and international issues, and our willingness to work together in those areas.

Prime Minister also took up the issue of trans-border rivers. The first meeting of the Expert Level Mechanism was held in September 2007. We have proposed to the Chinese side that we expand our cooperation in this area. We have also agreed to intensify high level exchanges with China. I will be visiting China this year and the Chinese Foreign Minister will also visit India. We will be holding the second annual defence dialogue as well as the second joint military exercise this year in an effort to continue deepening mutual understanding and trust between our Armed Forces. Our bilateral trade continues to show strong growth and both governments have revised the trade target to 60 billion dollars by 2010. Our Commerce Minister will visit China in April for the 8th meeting of the Joint Economic Group.

Hon'ble Members would also have followed the significant developments in Pakistan. India shared the anguish of the people of Pakistan at the tragic assassination of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto in a despicable terrorist act. We are gratified that in the recent elections in Pakistan, the people of Pakistan were able to express their wishes clearly and in a democratic manner on their own future. India wishes to see Pakistan



develop and prosper in a stable democratic order. The Government stands ready to resume the Composite Dialogue process as soon as a duly constituted government is in place in Pakistan. It remains our hope that we would be able to resolve outstanding issues and build a mutually beneficial relationship with Pakistan in an atmosphere free of violence and terrorism.

The security situation in Afghanistan remains a concern to us, but will not be allowed to affect our commitment to Afghanistan's reconstruction. We lost two of our personnel in a terrorist strike on a major road building project in Afghanistan in early January this year. Five of our personnel were also wounded in this attack, which also claimed the lives of twelve Afghan security persons. We extend our heartfelt condolences to all their families.

The international community must stand firmly with President Karzai and his Government as they face up to the twin challenges of a major threat from terrorism in the form of the Taliban, and seek to build a democratic and pluralistic polity.

Nepal is undergoing a critical transition. After two postponements, Constituent Assembly elections are scheduled to be held on April 10, 2008. The elections will offer all Nepalese, including those in the terai, a chance to have a say in their own future. Government is committed to assist in every possible way Nepal's transition to a democratic, stable, peaceful and prosperous state.

India is closely monitoring developments in Sri Lanka and is concerned about the recent upsurge in the violence and conflict in that country. As Hon'ble Members are aware, our policy towards Sri Lanka is based on the conviction that there is no military solution to the conflict. The way forward lies in a peacefully negotiated political settlement within the framework of a united Sri Lanka acceptable to all communities, including the Tamils. The interests of the Tamil community in Sri Lanka are a matter of particular significance to us in our dealings with Sri Lanka. With this in mind, we have welcomed as a first step the declared intention of the Sri Lankan government to fully implement the 13th Amendment. We are also fully conscious of the need to provide for the safety of our fishermen. While it is important for our fishermen to respect the International Maritime Boundary Line (IMBL), especially keeping in mind the on-going operations in Sri Lanka, we have impressed on the Sri Lankan Navy to act with restraint and for our fishermen to be treated in a humane manner.

I chaired the 29th session of the SAARC Council of Ministers that was held in Delhi from December 7-8, 2007. This session reviewed the progress made since the 14th Summit in April 2007 to move SAARC from declaratory to implementation phase. We decided to operationalise immediately the SAARC Development Fund. Other decisions taken related to establishment of the South Asian University, the SAARC Food Bank and for promotion of physical connectivity.

There were significant visits from countries outside our immediate neighbourhood, which have helped in strengthening our relationship with these countries. The recent visit of Russian Prime Minister Viktor Zubkov to Delhi (February 12-13) contributed to strengthening the strategic partnership with Russia. During his visit to New Delhi, the Russian PM inaugurated the "Year of Russia in India", which will be followed by the "Year of India" in Russia next year. Prime Minister Gordon Brown of U.K. visited India (January 20-21, 2008) for the 4th India-UK annual summit. President Nicolas Sarkozy of France was the Chief Guest at the Republic Day celebrations this year. This was the first visit by President Sarkozy to India and helped in deepening our strategic partnership.

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