

Beijing inks pact for free military assistance to Male

Male: China Monday signed a defence cooperation agreement with Maldives to provide free military assistance to foster "stronger" bilateral ties, weeks after President Mohamed Muizzu set a deadline for the withdrawal of the first group of Indian military personnel from his island nation.

Maldives defence minister Mohamed Ghassan Maumoon met with major general Zhang Baoqun, deputy director of the office for international military cooperation of China, to discuss enhancing defence cooperation between the countries. Maumoon and Zhang "signed an agreement on China's provision of military assistance gratis to the Republic of Maldives, fostering stronger bilateral ties," Maldivian defence ministry posted on X. The details of the defence cooperation agreement were not provided. Meanwhile, China has also gifted 12 eco-friendly ambulances to Maldives, Edition.mv news portal reported.

The visit of the Chinese military delegation took place days after Male allowed Xiang Yang Hong 03, a hi-tech Chine-



The pact was signed weeks after President Muizzu set a deadline for the withdrawal of Indian military personnel from Maldives

se research ship to make a port call for the "rotation of its personnel and replenishment." On Jan 5, Sri Lanka, while denying entry to the same ship, said it has declared a moratorium on foreign research ships entering its waters for a year amid concerns from India over Chinese research vessels docking in its neighbourhood and collecting data from the oceans for military purposes.

The visit of the Chinese military delegation to Maldives is taking place days after India confirmed its first civilian team of technical experts has reached the island nation to replace military personnel operating an advanced light helicopter in the country. PTI

3 underwater data cables through Red Sea cut amid Houthi attacks

Severed Lines Include Europe India Gateway; Rebels Deny Role

Dubai: An incident in Red Sea has cut three underwater sea cables providing internet and telecommunications around the world as the waterway remains a target of Yemen's Houthi rebels, officials said Monday. A statement by Hong Kong-based HGC Global Communications acknowledged the cuts but did not say what caused the lines to be severed. There has been concern about the cables being targeted in the Houthi campaign, which the rebels describe as an effort to pressure Israel to end its war on Hamas in Gaza Strip. Houthis have denied attacking the lines, however.

While global shipping already has been disrupted through Red Sea, a crucial route for cargo and energy shipments from Asia and Middle East to Europe, the sabotage of telecommunication lines could further escalate the month-long crisis. Meanwhile, a suspected Houthi attack targeted a new ship in Gulf of Aden.

The cut lines include Asia-Africa-Europe 1, Europe India Gateway, Seacom and TGN-Gulf, HGC Global Communications said. It described the cuts as affecting 25% of the traffic flowing through Red Sea. It described the Red Sea route as crucial for data moving from Asia onward to Europe and said it had begun rerouting traf-



Children look out of a window during the funeral of a Palestinian teen who was killed in an air raid near Ramallah in Israeli-occupied West Bank on Sunday

fic. HGC Global Communications described the Seacom-TGN-Gulf line as being two separate cables when it is actually one at the area of the cut, according to Tim Stronge, a subsea cable expert with TeleGeography, a Washington-based telecommunications market research company.

Responding to questions from AP, Seacom said that "initial testing indicates the affected segment lies within Yemeni maritime jurisdictions in Southern Red Sea". It said it was rerouting the traffic it was able to change, though some services were down.

Tata Communications, part of the Indian conglomerate and behind Seacom-TGN-Gulf line, told AP it "initiated immediate and appropriate remedial actions" after the line was cut. "We invest in various

cable consortiums to increase our diversity and hence in such situations of a cable cut or snag we are able to automatically reroute our services," Tata said.

In early Feb, Yemen's internationally recognised govt in exile alleged Houthis planned to attack the cables. The lines appeared to have been cut on Feb 24, with the organisation NetBlocks noticing internet access in the East African nation of Djibouti suffering from interruptions two days later. Seacom, one of the four cables cut, serves Djibouti.

But for their part, Houthis have denied targeting the cables. Houthis blamed the disruptions on British and US military operations but have made false claims in the past.

It remains unclear how Houthis could attack the subsea cables themselves. The rebels

2 Indian workers hurt in missile attack in Israel

A foreign worker was killed and two workers from India seriously wounded by an anti-tank missile attack in northern Israel Monday. The casualties, who were evacuated from agricultural land near the Lebanon border, had shrapnel injuries, ambulance service said. It did not confirm the nationality of the worker killed. REUTERS

are not known to have the diving or salvage capability to target the lines, which sit hundreds of metres below the surface. However, cables can be cut by anchors, including those dropped from ships that are disabled in attacks. A drifting ship with its anchor scraping the sea could be the culprit.

"Our team thinks it is plausible that it could have been affected by anchor dragging, due to the amount of marine traffic the region deals with and the low seabed in many parts of the Red Sea," Seacom said. "This can only be confirmed once the repair ship is on site."

There are 14 cables running through Red Sea, with another six planned, Stronge said. "We estimate over 90% of communications between Europe and Asia traverse submarine cables in Red Sea," he said. AP

Shehbaz Sharif takes oath as Pak Prime Minister again

■ By Sajjad Hussain

ISLAMABAD, Mar 4 (PTI)

SHEHBAZ Sharif on Monday took the oath as Prime Minister of Pakistan, taking over the country's reins for a second time since 2022, amidst staggering economic and security challenges.

President Arif Alvi administered the oath to the 72-year-old Shehbaz in a ceremony held at the Aiwan-i-Sadr, the presidential palace.

The ceremony was attended by the three services chiefs, senior officials, diplomats, leading business people, members of the civil society and media organisations. The caretaker premier Anwaarul Haq Kakar was also present.

The brief ceremony began with the recitation of the Holy Quran, followed by the oath-taking. The ceremony was attended by former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, Punjab Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz and other PML-N workers and Sindh chief minister Murad Ali Shah was also present on the occasion.

Shehbaz earlier served as Prime Minister of a coalition Government from April 2022 to August 2023 before Parliament



President Arif Alvi (R) administers oath of office to newly-elected Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif at the Presidential Palace in Islamabad on Monday. (AP/PTI)

was dissolved to hold general elections last month.

Alvi had in 2022 tacitly refused to give oath to Shehbaz by saying that he was not feeling well when he was elected as premier for the first time after ousting Imran Khan through a vote of no confidence. Then Senate Chairman Sadiq Sanjrani administered the oath to him.

It was speculated that Alvi may once again skip the official duty but he agreed.

The oath-taking ceremony comes days after the Pakistan

Muslim League-Nawaz and the Pakistan Peoples Party agreed on a power-sharing deal to form a coalition government.

On Sunday, Shehbaz comfortably won a majority in the newly-elected Parliament amidst sloganeering by the Opposition.

Shehbaz, the consensus candidate of the PML-N and the PPP, received 201 votes in the 336-member Parliament. His challenger Omar Ayub Khan of jailed former Prime Minister Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) secured 92 votes.

India steps into 2nd stage of N-power programme in PM's presence

KALPAKKAM, Mar 4 (PTI)

INDIA is a step away from entering the second stage of its nuclear programme with the initiation of core loading at the home-built 500 MWe Prototype Fast Breeder Reactor here, a move described as "historic" by the Government.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi witnessed the initiation of core loading at the Prototype Fast Breeder Reactor (PFBR), which generates more power than it consumes and uses the nuclear



waste -- Uranium-238 -- as fuel.

Many countries, including the US, Japan and France, have tried developing fast breeder reactors and have given up due to repeated failure to safely handle liquid sodium. Russia commissioned the BN-800 Fast Breeder Reactor in 2016. The Prime Minister toured the reactor vault and the control room of the PFBR along with National Security

Adviser Ajit Doval, Atomic Energy Commission Chairman A K Mohanty, Bhabha Atomic Research Center Director Vivek Bhasin and Indira Gandhi Centre for Atomic Research Director B Venkataraman. This 500 MWe fast breeder reactor has been developed by Bharatiya Nabhikiya Vidyut Nigam Limited (BHAVINI).

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Prime Minister Modi witnesses initiation of core loading of India's indigenous Prototype Fast Breeder Reactor, at Kalpakkam in Tamil Nadu on Monday. (PTI)

Exercise Dharma Guardian

Indian, Japanese Army troops exhibit skills



Japan Ground Self Defence Force personnel and Chetak Corps take part in the joint military exercise 'Dharma Guardian' at Mahajan Field Firing Range, on Sunday. (ANI)

RAJASTHAN, Mar 4 (ANI)

INDIAN and Japanese troops showcasing their abilities on the obstacle course during Exercise Dharma Guardian 2024.

The Indian Army's post on X on Monday highlighted the joint training effort between the two nations.

"Witness the seamless synergy between the troops of #IndianArmy & #JGSDF training together for a mission! #IndiaJapanFriendship @ModJapan_en."

Additionally, #DharmaGuardian_2024 emphasised the seamless cooperation between the

Indian Army and the Japan Ground Self-Defence Force (JGSDF). The exercise aims to enhance interoperability and mutual understanding, reflecting the deepening defense ties between India and Japan.

Amid the ongoing 5th edition of the India-Japan joint exercise 'DHARMA GUARDIAN' being held in Rajasthan, the Commanding General, Eastern Army, Japan Ground Self Defence Force, Lieutenant General Togashi Yuichi paid a visit to the exercise site to take stock of the progress made on Sunday.

He also rendered words of encouragement to both Japanese and Indian contingents, strengthening the camaraderie between the Armies and enhancing the collaborative efforts between the two Nations.

On Sunday, marking the 8th day of the joint exercise, both Armies participated together and demonstrated how they work together and bring down the target.

Personnel also performed a mock drill to capture the militants hiding in a house and used specially trained animals (dogs and eagles) for the task.

The joint exercise signifies the deepening of military cooperation between India and Japan and underscores their commitment to enhancing interoperability and mutual understanding.

New alliance in **Nepal**

PM Prachanda forms alliance with Oli's party, reshuffles Cabinet

■ **By Shirish B Pradhan**
KATHMANDU, Mar 4 (PTI)

IN A dramatic development, Nepal's Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda' on Monday reshuffled the Cabinet after terminating a nearly 15-month partnership with the Nepali Congress due to major differences between the top leadership of the two parties.



Prachanda with Sharma Oli

Prachanda formed a new alliance with former premier
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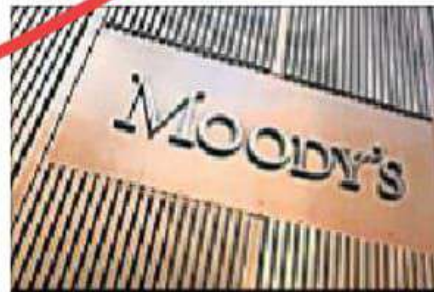
MOODY'S RAISES 2024 GROWTH FORECAST TO 6.8%; INDIA TO REMAIN FASTEST GROWING G-20 NATION

NEW DELHI, Mar 4 (PTI)

GLOBAL rating agency Moody's on Monday raised India's growth forecast for 2024 calendar year to 6.8 per cent on "stronger-than-expected" economic data and said that the country will remain the fastest growing among G20 countries.

In its Global Macroeconomic Outlook for 2024, Moody's Investors Service said with global headwinds fading, the Indian economy should be able to register 6-7 per cent real GDP growth comfortably. For 2025, the GDP growth is estimated at 6.4 per cent. Moody's had projected a 6.1 per cent growth for 2024 earlier.

"India's economy has performed well and stronger-than-expected data in 2023 has caused us to raise our 2024



growth estimate to 6.8 per cent from 6.1 per cent. India is likely to remain the fastest-growing among G-20 economies over our forecast horizon," Moody's said.

India's real GDP expanded by 8.4 per cent year-on-year in the fourth quarter of calendar year 2023, resulting in a 7.7 per cent growth for full-year 2023. The GDP grew by 8.2 per cent in the April-June quarter and by 8.1 per cent in the July-September quarter. Capital spending by the Government and strong manufacturing activity have

meaningfully contributed to the robust growth outcomes in 2023, Moody's said in its report.

The agency said high-frequency indicators show that the economy's strong September and December quarter momentum carried into the March quarter of 2024.

"Robust goods and services tax collections, rising auto sales, consumer optimism and double-digit credit growth suggest urban consumption demand remains resilient. On the supply side, expanding manufacturing and services PMIs add to evidence of solid economic momentum," Moody's said.

This year's interim Budget targets capital expenditure allocation of Rs 11.1 lakh crore or 3.4 per cent of GDP in 2024-25 (fiscal year 2025), 16.9 per cent above the 2023-24 estimates.