

China, S Lanka sign 9 pacts as Lankan PM holds talks with Xi Jinping, Li Qiang

BEIJING/COLOMBO, Mar 27 (PTI)

CHINA and Sri Lanka on Wednesday signed nine new agreements as Prime Minister Dinesh Gunawardena met Chinese President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Qiang here amid Colombo's efforts to restructure its to revive its bankrupt economy.

In his meeting with Gunawardena on Wednesday, Xi called for consolidation of friendly relations between China and Sri Lanka which he said serves the fundamental interests and reflects the common expectations of the two peoples.

CHINA SENDS 1,500

China asks Nepal to speed up BRI

BEIJING/KATHMANDU, Mar 27 (PTI)

CHINA has urged the new dispensation in Nepal to finalise the implementation plan for its ambitious BRI projects that have struggled to make any headway due to

continuous political changes in the Himalayan nation.

The strategic partnership between the two countries was discussed during the meeting of Nepal's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Narayan Kaji Shrestha.

TONNES OF DRINKING WATER FROM TIBET TO MALDIVES: THE Maldives Government Tuesday announced that 1,500 tonnes of drinking water donated by China from the glaciers in Tibet has reached the archipelago

nation amidst an acute water shortage. The decision to provide Maldives with drinking water was reached during the official visit of China's Tibet Autonomous Region's Chairman, Yan Jinhai to the Maldives.

Army's battalion takes part in exercise 'Tiger Triumph' with US

NEW DELHI, Mar 27 (PTI)

A BATTALION group of the Indian Army, comprising more than 700 personnel, is taking part in the ongoing bilateral tri-service exercise - 'Tiger Triumph-24' - between India and the US, being held on the Eastern Seaboard.

The exercise from March 18-31 aims at developing interoperability for conducting Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations and refining SOPs to enable rapid and smooth coordination between the forces of the two countries.

The Indian Army's contingent, comprising one battalion group is taking part in the



second edition of the tri-service exercise, along with the Indian Navy and the Indian Air

force, sources in the defence establishment said.

The 14-day exercise is being

conducted in two phases with a harbour phase at Visakhapatnam, followed by a sea phase at Kakinada.

The primary focus of the exercise is to enhance interoperability, strengthen bilateral relations, and refine capabilities in HADR and sub-conventional operations.

"The exercise has witnessed the amphibious capabilities of the Indian Army in conventional and sub-conventional scenarios. The Indian Army is represented by an integrated battalion group in the exercise, with strength of over 700 Army personnel, showcasing newly procured or inducted weapons and state-of-the-art technological infusions," a

defence source said.

The Indian Army contingent is represented by components from infantry, mechanised infantry, Para (Special Forces), artillery, engineers and other supporting arms apart from assorted systems of multiple drones, anti-drone equipment, and ICVs (infantry combat vehicles), the sources said.

The harbour phase included communication checks to ensure seamless co-ordination between the participating forces.

"Personnel from both countries exchanged visits to each other's ships, fostering mutual understanding and collaboration. These interactions not only strengthened interper-

sonal bonds but also facilitated the exchange of best practices and operational techniques," the source added.

The sea phase which commenced on Tuesday involves a "strategic move to a simulated island country," setting the stage for a series of complex operations. The first major operation will be a ship-to-shore move, demonstrating the precision and co-ordination required for amphibious operations, they said.

This includes troops to swiftly disembark and establish a secure perimeter, showcasing their professionalism and readiness for challenging environments, the sources in the defence establishment said.

ELECTIONS THE EC WAY: Reaching the very last VOTER in India's remotest corner

NEW DELHI, Mar 27 (PTI)

TRAVERSING jungles and snow-capped mountains, wading through rivers with life jackets on, trekking for miles and carrying EVMS on horseback and on elephants, Election Commission teams reach the remotest corner and the most inaccessible spot to ensure no voter is left out.

Fanning out across the length and breadth of India, right from the world's highest polling station at 15,000 feet above sea level to a booth in a shipping container in an islet, the EC could well be moving mountains to conduct elections in the world's largest democracy. The idea, said Chief Election Commissioner Rajiv Kumar, is that "no voter is left behind".

"We will walk the extra mile so that voters don't have to. We will go in the snowed mountains and jungles. We will

go through horses and helicopters and on the bridges and even ride on elephants and mules just to ensure everyone is able to vote," Kumar said earlier this month while announcing the schedule for 18th Lok Sabha polls this month. In the upcoming Lok Sabha polls, 94 special polling booths

will be set up for internally-displaced persons of Manipur to vote at relief camps. Over 50,000 displaced people will be eligible to vote at these booths which will be set up in or near relief camps. According to Election Commission records, Tashigang in Himachal Pradesh's Lahaul and Spiti has the world's highest polling station located at 15,256 feet above sea level. "All 52 electors of the village turned

up to exercise their franchise on November 12, 2022, notwithstanding the freezing cold.

Himachal Pradesh had 65 polling stations at the height between 10,000 to 12,000 feet and 20 polling stations above the height of 12,000 feet from sea level," said an EC report. In Meghalaya, polling personnel had

to wear life jackets and were accompanied by divers to a riverine polling station in Kamsing village. "The village, which survives on betel nut farming and solar electricity, has the farthest

and non-motorable polling station of Meghalaya," reads an anecdote shared by EC.

In another hamlet with just one voter in Malogam in Arunachal Pradesh, election workers travelled 300 miles over four days across winding mountain roads and river valleys in 2019.

'No voter left behind'



Voters pose for photos after casting their votes at a polling station, in Ladakh.

(PTI file photo)

Presidents of France, Brazil announce \$1.1 bn investment plan for Amazon

SAO PAULO, Mar 27 (AP)

THE Brazilian and the French Presidents have announced a plan to invest one billion Euros (USD 1.1 billion) in the Amazon, including parts of the rainforest in neighbouring French Guiana.

The two countries' Governments said in a joint statement the money will be spread over the next four years to protect the rainforest. It will be a collaboration of State-run Brazilian banks and France's investment agency. Private resources will also be welcomed, Brazil and France said.

French President Emmanuel Macron and his Brazilian counterpart Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva are meeting this week to revive



Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, left, and French President Emmanuel Macron pose for photos on Combu Island, near Belem, Para state, Brazil, on Tuesday. Macron is on a three-day official visit to Brazil. (AP/PTI)

the relationship between the countries after years of frictions with former President Jair Bolsonaro, deepen co-operation to protect the rainforest.

Macron started his three-day visit to Brazil in the Amazon city of Belem, where he met his long-time ally Lula. The French President then took a boat to the Combu island to meet with Indigenous leaders.

Both Macron and Lula saw a protest by Greenpeace Brazil with banners that read "No oil in the Amazon." Brazil's Government has contemplated allowing the tapping of oil in a region close to the Para State, where Belem lies.

Lula said that Macron's visit is part of a global bid to beef up rainforest protections.

China will develop deep sea port and Colombo airport, says Lanka PM

'Beijing To Assist In Restructuring Of External Debt Too'

Colombo: Sri Lanka's PM said on Wednesday that China has pledged to develop the island nation's strategic deep sea port and the capital's airport after talks with his counterpart in Beijing. PM Dinesh Gunawardena said China — the island's biggest bilateral creditor — would "assist" Sri Lanka's restructuring of external debt, a key condition to maintaining a \$2.9 billion IMF bailout.

Beijing's position on debt restructuring has not been made public, but Lankan officials have said China was reluctant to take a haircut on its loans but could extend the tenure and adjust interest rates.

Lanka in 2022 ran out of foreign exchange to finance essential imports and declared a sovereign default on its \$46 billion foreign debt.

Months of protests forced then-president Gotabaya Rajapaksa out of office.

Gunawardena's office said Premier Li Qiang had promised China would "assist Lanka's debt restructuring process and help Lanka to develop its economy". Gunawardena said Beijing had offered "assistance to develop" Colombo International Airport and Hambantota port, the statement added.

A Japanese-funded expansion of Colombo airport had been on hold since Lanka's sovereign debt default. The south-



Lanka PM Gunawardena (L) with China President Xi in Beijing

Both sign 9 pacts

China and Sri Lanka on Wednesday signed nine new agreements as PM Gunawardena met Chinese President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Qiang. In his meeting with Gunawardena, Xi called for consolidation of friendly relations between China and Sri Lanka. China is willing to work with Sri Lanka to carry forward the spirit of the Rubber-Rice Pact, which is characterised by "independence, self-reliance, unity and mutual support," to consolidate political mutual trust... and advance Belt and Road cooperation, Xi said. PTI

thern sea port of Hambantota was handed to a Chinese state-owned company in 2017 on a 99-year lease for \$1.12 billion, sparking security concerns in Beijing's regional rival India.

India and the US are both concerned that a Chinese foothold at Hambantota could boost its naval advantage in the Indian Ocean. Lanka has insisted its ports will not be used for any military purposes, but New Delhi has objected to Chinese research vessels calling at Hambantota fearing that they could be used for espionage. AFP

Climate activist Sonam Wangchuk announces 'border march' to highlight realities in Ladakh

LEH, Mar 27 (PTI)

CLIMATE activist Sonam Wangchuk on Wednesday announced the agitation to demand statehood for Ladakh will be intensified and a 'border march' will be held on April 7 in the eastern part of the Union territory to highlight ground realities, including alleged encroachments by China. Wangchuk, who is part of the Leh-based Apex body that comprises social, religious and political organisations, said they are adopting the Gandhian approach in their agitation, which is vital to safeguard the fragile environment of the region and the indigenous character of its population.



"We are followers of (Mahatma) Gandhi's Satyagraha. We are demanding the fulfilment of the promises made to us by this (BJP) Government through its manifestos which led its candidates to win parliamentary polls (in 2019) and hill council polls in Leh (2020)," he told a gathering here.

The activist ended his 21-day-long hunger strike in support of the demand for statehood

for Ladakh and its inclusion in the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution on Tuesday evening. "The first phase of the hunger strike will be followed by a chain hunger strike by women, youths, religious leaders and elders. On April 7, we will launch a march to Changthang (in the east of Leh along the border with China) like Gandhi's Dandi March under the Civil Disobedience Movement," Wangchuk said. He said the Leh-based Apex body will lead the march to highlight the ground realities of Ladakh. Wangchuk alleged that nomads were losing prime pasture land to huge industrial plants to the south and Chinese encroachments to the north.

JAISHANKAR CALLS ON MALAYSIAN PM discusses cooperation in multiple sectors

KUALA LUMPUR, Mar 27 (PTI)

EXTERNAL Affairs Minister S Jaishankar on Wednesday called on Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and the two leaders exchanged views and discussed cooperation in the areas of trade, science and technology, education, agriculture, tourism, defence and also on regional issues including Myanmar.

Jaishankar, who is here on a two-day official visit, met Anwar at the Prime Minister's Office and the meeting lasted about an hour, the official Bernama news agency reported. In a statement issued after the meeting, the Prime Minister's

Office said that Anwar and Jaishankar exchanged views and discussed cooperation in the areas of trade, science and technology, education, agriculture, tourism, defence and digital, and also on regional issues including Myanmar. Earlier, Jaishankar met his Malaysian counterpart Mohamad bin Haji Hasan. The two foreign ministers held a "productive and frank discussion, including exchanging views on the multifaceted dimensions of Malaysia-India bilateral affairs as well as regional and international issues of mutual interest," the Malaysian Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in an official statement.



External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar with Prime Minister of Malaysia Anwar Ibrahim during a meeting, in Kuala Lumpur on Wednesday. (PTI)

KUALA LUMPUR, Mar 27 (PTI)

NORMALCY in bilateral ties with China will only be achieved based on the traditional deployment of troops and that will be the prerequisite for the relationship going forward with Beijing, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar said on Wednesday.

"My first duty to Indians is to secure the border, I can

'Normalcy in ties with China will only be achieved based on traditional deployment of troops'

never compromise on that," Jaishankar said while responding to a question on the current state of India's relations with China during his interaction with the Indian diaspora here in the Malaysian capital.

He said every country wants "good relations with its neighbours. Who doesn't? But every relationship has to be founded on some basis."

"We're still negotiating with

the Chinese. I talk to my counterpart. We meet from time to time. Our military commanders negotiate with each other. But we are very clear that we had an agreement. There is a Line of Actual Control. We have a tradition of not bringing troops to that line. Both of us have bases some distance away, which is our traditional deployment place. And we want that normalcy," he said.