

All-weather road gives a strategic fillip to Ladakh

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SRINAGAR

The latest feat of the Border Roads Organisation (BRO) in Ladakh, connecting Himachal Pradesh and Leh through the Nimmu-Padam-Darcha road, has come as a shot in the arm for security forces stationed in the region, and added significantly to India's strategic depth in the hostile border neighbourhood.

The BRO's breakthrough, achieved on March 27, has paved the way to open up the far-off Zaskar Valley for the safest ordnance depot, away from the prying eyes of China and Pakistan, officials privy to the development told *The Hindu*.

The Nimmu-Padam-Darcha road allows surface movement from Leh to Lahaul-Spiti through the world's highest tunnel at Shinku La Pass at 16,580 feet, which is under construction.

"It will be the first all-weather road connecting Ladakh to the rest of the country," an official said.

The tunnel is likely to be completed by 2025.

Maintaining logistics in



New avenues: Construction work of Shinku La tunnel under way near the Zaskar river in Ladakh. PTI

the absence of all-weather roads to the region, especially during Ladakh's harsh winters, has always been a concern to security strategists. At present, security forces stock ration and ammunition months in advance to maintain a vigil on the borders. China, on the other hand, has already developed all-weather road networks close to the Line of Actual Control.

'Much faster, safer'

Once the Shinkula tunnel is thrown open in western Ladakh's Zaskar Valley, the mobilisation of troops to Ladakh will be much faster and less exposed than the current routes passing close to the northern and eastern areas, surrounded by Pakistan and China.

"It will make defence preparedness much safer,"

another official said.

However, there are murmurs of discontentment among local people. "On one hand, I am happy to learn that BRO India has connected the strategic Nimmu-Padam-Darcha road in Ladakh recently. However, I am really concerned that it might change the landscape of Zaskar, the land of rich culture and heritage," climate activist Sonam Wangchuk said in a post on X.

Advocate Mustafa Haji, a social activist from Kargil, said the construction of four lanes on the Kargil-Zaskar section is "completely needless, unless it is part of a bigger plan".

"Not to mention the number of trees that will have to be cut in the Suru Valley for this project," Mr. Haji pointed out.

Leh Apex Body cancels border march in Ladakh

Says will continue peaceful agitation

LEH, Apr 6 (PTI)

THE Leh Apex Body (LAB) Saturday withdrew their proposed march to the Changthang border with China on April 7, saying it is doing so in the interest of people even as it accused the administration of turning Leh into a “war zone”.

The LAB said they have already achieved their objective of creating awareness

among the people of the country about the plight of farmers. They said the farmers are losing prime pasture land to huge industrial plants in the south and “Chinese encroachments” in the north.

They said they will continue their peaceful peaceful agitation in support of their various demands, especially statehood for Ladakh and its inclusion in the sixth schedule of the Constitution.

Navy chief awards **unit citation** to **INS Sharda** for anti-piracy ops

NEW DELHI, Apr 6 (PTI)

NAVY Chief Admiral R Hari Kumar has awarded an 'On-the-spot Unit Citation' to INS Sharda for successful conduct of anti-piracy operations at sea, officials on Saturday said.

The ship was involved in the safe release of all 19 crew members (11 Iranian and 8 Pakistani) of Iranian fishing vessel "Omari" which was held hostage by pirates off the east coast of Somalia, the Indian Navy said.

Admiral Kumar, during his vis-

it to Southern Naval Command, Kochi, awarded the 'On-the-spot Unit Citation' to INS Sharda for successful conduct of anti-piracy operations, it said.

The ship was tasked to investigate the Iranian fishing vessel "Omari" that was likely hijacked by pirates, the Navy said.

"Based on surveillance inputs of naval RPA, the ship intercepted the vessel and maintained a covert trail throughout the night. During early morning hours of February 2, the ship's integral helo and subsequently Prahar team was launched," the

statement said.

The ship's "aggressive posture" coerced the pirates to safely release the crew and boat. The swift and decisive actions of the ship resulted in the rescue of hijacked fishing vessel and its crew from Somali pirates, the statement said.

The relentless effort of the ship, mission deployed for anti-piracy operations saved precious lives at sea upholding the Indian Navy's resolve to enhancing the security and safety of seafarers in the Indian Ocean Region, it added.



India's exports register healthy growth to European, Latin American nations in 2023

NEW DELHI, Apr 6 (PTI)

INDIAN exporters made further inroads in European and Latin American nations in 2023, registering healthy growth in countries such as Romania, Montenegro, Austria, and Guatemala, an official said on Friday.

India's merchandise export rose 2.1 per cent to the European Union (EU) in 2023 despite headwinds being faced by large developed markets like the EU and the UK due to high cost of living, weak external demand, and monetary tightening, the commerce ministry official said.

"India's export trade expansion has been impressive in spite of global challenges in 2023," the official said.

India's merchandise exports have recorded healthy growth in European nations like Romania, Czech Republic,



Montenegro, Finland, the Netherlands, Portugal, Luxemburg, Iceland, Ireland, and Austria.

"The growth points towards India's trade resilience and growth despite prevailing uncertainties and deceleration of the economies in Europe," the official added.

Similarly, in Latin American countries, India's exports reg-

istered high growth in 2023 in Cuba, Uruguay, Paraguay, Guyana, Peru, Mexico, and Guatemala. "With continued social unrest, oil production cuts and tight policy settings, the growth of Middle-Eastern countries has weakened. However, India's merchandise export growth to major Middle-Eastern countries remains positive," the official said.

Operating conditions in India remain subdued in Q4 of FY24, says **GCPL**

NEW DELHI, Apr 6 (PTI)

GODREJ Consumer Products Ltd on Friday said operating conditions in India continue to remain subdued in the fourth quarter of FY24 but its business continued to deliver strong underlying volume growth at high single digit with broad-based growth.

In its quarterly update for Q4 FY24, the company said at a consolidated level (organic), it expects to deliver underlying volume growth of "high single digit and sales growth of mid-single digit driven largely by currency volatility".

"Operating conditions in India continue to remain subdued. Our India organic business continued to deliver strong underlying volume



growth at high-single-digit with growth being broad-based across both home care and personal care," Godrej Consumer Products Ltd (GCPL) said.

While demand in household insecticides has been subdued due to an extended winter in the North and East, GoodKnight Agarbatti launch was well received by consumers, it said, adding that "Park Avenue and KamaSutra brands delivered in-line with category seasonality.

Reported underlying volume growth continues to be in double-digit".

On Indonesia business, the company said it continues to consistently deliver strong performance with double-digit volume growth and sales growth. The GAUM (Godrej Africa, USA, and Middle East) organic business delivered high single-digit volume growth along with double-digit constant currency sales growth, the company said.

However, due to the devaluation of Nigerian currency Naira in January, sales in rupee terms will see a double-digit decline, it added.

"At a consolidated level (organic), we expect to deliver underlying volume growth of high single-digit," it said,

INDIA-SINGAPORE bilateral trade grew 18.2% to USD 35.6 bn in FY 2022-23

SINGAPORE, Apr 6 (PTI)

THE bilateral trade between Singapore and India rose to USD 35.6 billion in 2022-23, a growth of 18.2 per cent on the year, a senior diplomat at the Indian High Commission here said on Saturday.

Singapore is India's eighth largest trade partner (2022-23), with a share of 3.1 per cent of India's overall trade, T Prabakar, the First Secretary (Commerce) at the High Commission said.

He was addressing the Institute of Company Secretaries of India (ICSI) Third International Conference being held in Singapore from April 5-6. Trade between Singapore and India saw a growth of 18.2 per cent in the year and rose to USD 35.6 billion in 2022-23, Prabakar said.

"Our imports from Singapore in FY 22-23 were USD 23.6 bil-



lion, a growth of 24.4 per cent, and exports to the city-state totalled USD 12 billion, up 7.6 billion in the previous financial year," he told some 100 delegates at the conference.

In terms of India's exports, Singapore is the sixth largest export destination in the world, and in terms of imports, the city-state is the eighth largest source for India globally during 2022-23. It is not only in merchandise trade that India-Singapore ties are growing, Prabakar said, adding that FDI (foreign direct investment) equity inflows into India from

Singapore during 2022-23 stood at USD 17.2 billion. The cumulative FDI inflows from Singapore to India stood at USD 155.612 billion from April 2000 to December 2023, accounting for 23 per cent of the total FDI flows into India, he said.

Giving an overview of India-Singapore relations, Prabakar pointed out that Singapore is also amongst India's largest sources of External Commercial borrowings.

He also highlighted a wide range of strategic cooperation between the two nations in new fields, such as technologies, AI and green energy.

The two-day conference discussed a wide range of trade and technology issues, with ICSI members seeking insights into Singapore's law related to businesses that can be complementary to corporate and small enterprises in India.

'Press Hamas to clinch pact on Israeli hostages in Gaza'

WASHINGTON, Apr 6 (AP)

PRESIDENT Joe Biden on Friday wrote to the leaders of Egypt and Qatar, calling on them to press Hamas for a hostage deal with Israel, according to a senior administration official, one day after Biden called on Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to redouble efforts to reach a cease-fire in the six-month-old war in Gaza.

The official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss the private letters, said Biden's national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, will meet on Monday with family members of some of the estimated 100 hostages who are believed to still be in Gaza.

The letters to Egyptian

President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and Qatar's ruling emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, come as Biden has deployed CIA Director Bill Burns to Cairo for talks this weekend about the hostage crisis.

White House officials say negotiating a pause in fighting between Israel and Hamas to facilitate the exchange of hostages held in Gaza for Palestinian prisoners held in Israel is the only way to put a temporary cease-fire into effect and boost the flow of badly needed humanitarian aid into the territory.

Biden, in his conversation with Netanyahu, "made clear that everything must be done to secure the release of hostages, including American citizens".

Europe mulls halt to arms sales

LONDON, Apr 6 (AP)

THE words coming from some of Israel's closest allies have been startling in their vehemence: "appalled," "outraged," "no more excuses."

The Israeli military's killing of seven aid workers in Gaza has triggered unprecedented criticism from European leaders, who are stepping up calls for a cease-fire and in some cases halting arms sales to Israel as the war's toll mounts.

VISTARA chief says over 98 pc pilots have signed new contract

NEW DELHI, Apr 6 (PTI)

VISTARA CEO Vinod Kannan on Saturday said the airline hopes to stabilise operations for this month by this weekend and that more than 98 per cent of pilots have signed the new contract.

The full service carrier faced significant disruption in operation earlier this week due to the non-availability of crew and many flights were cancelled.

In a statement, Kannan said the situation has already improved with its on-time performance improving for the last three days.

"We hope to stabilise our operations for the rest of April 2024 by this weekend," he said.

Referring to the new contract for pilots, he said some pilots have some concerns and queries regarding the contract.



The airline is engaging with them to clarify and resolve the concerns, Kannan said and added that "over 98 per cent of pilots have signed the new contract". Vistara has around 1,000 pilots.

A section of pilots have raised concerns about the new contract that will result in pay revi-

sion, sources had said earlier.

According to Kannan, the airline is addressing the current situation on a war footing and continuing to hire more pilots. The airline is also carefully scaling back operations slightly to provide the much-needed resilience, and a buffer in the rosters, he noted.

China may misuse AI to sway poll outcome in India, US: Microsoft

NEW YORK, Apr 6 (PTI)

CHINA is likely to deploy Artificial Intelligence-generated content via social media to sway public opinion to boost its geopolitical interests during elections in countries like India, South Korea and the US, tech giant Microsoft has warned.

Voting for 543 Lok Sabha seats in India will take place between April 19 and June 4, spread across seven phases. South Koreans will go to the polls in a general election on April 10 while the US will hold the Presidential election on November 5.

“With major elections taking place around the world this year, particularly in India, South Korea and the United States, we assess that China will, at a minimum, create and amplify AI-generated content to benefit its interests,” Clint Watts, General Manager, Microsoft Threat Analysis Centre, said in a blog post.

Despite the chances of such content in affecting election results remaining low, China’s increasing experimentation in augmenting memes, videos, and audio will likely continue - and may prove more effective down the line, he said.