

Commerce Secretary visits Norway to discuss early implementation of trade pact with EFTA bloc

NEW DELHI, Nov 23 (PTI)

COMMERCE Secretary Sunil Barthwal has visited Norway to discuss the possibility of an early implementation of a free trade agreement between India and the four-nation European bloc EFTA, an official statement said on Saturday.

The agreement, officially dubbed as Trade and Economic Partnership Agreement (TEPA), was inked in March. The implementation date has not yet been finalised.

The European Free Trade Association (EFTA) members are Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, and Switzerland.

"The visit was aimed at furthering the objectives of and unlocking the large market in



EFTA countries for Indian exports of goods and services and push for early implementation of USD 100 billion investment," the Commerce Ministry said.

Barthwal met Tomas Norvoll, State Secretary of the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Fisheries of Norway for discussions on promoting trade and investments, mobility for Indian pro-

fessionals, re-energising existing institutional mechanisms and the next steps for the TEPA ratification.

In a separate statement, the Ministry said over the past decade, India's seafood exports have doubled to USD 7.3 billion in value and 17.81 lakh metric tonnes in volume terms.

With 500 EU-approved firms, India's seafood processing capacity continues to expand, making the EU India's second-largest seafood market, with annual purchases of USD 0.95 billion.

Additionally, India is the EU's second-largest shrimp supplier, holding an 8 per cent market share and contributing 12 per cent of the EU's squid imports.

At least 37 killed in sectarian violence in Pak's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province

PESHAWAR, Nov 23 (PTI)

AT LEAST 37 people have been killed and over two dozen others injured in tribal sectarian violence in northwest Pakistan's restive Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province during the last 24 hours, police said on Saturday.

The clashes between Alizai and Bagan tribes in Kurram district, bordering Afghanistan, took place following Thursday's attack on a convoy of passenger vans near Parachinar in which 47 people were killed.

Top ranking officials from the administration and police have rushed to the area in a helicopter.

"At least 37 are dead as at now (but) the death toll is still rising," an official tasked with collecting details of the carnage told the media here.

More than 30 people are injured, he added.

The tribes are targeting each other with heavy and automatic weapons, police said.

Homes and shops have been damaged in the fighting and people from various villages have fled to safer locations.

All educational institutions in the district remained closed on Saturday, confirmed Muhammad Hayat Hassan, chairman of the Private Education Network.

Videos shared from the area showed at least six bodies of the attackers and some charred bodies of the victims. Police also said that there were reports of six women taken as captives but "due to limited connectivity, information and communication is scant to ascertain anything more."

Gunfire continued in Balishkhel, Khar Kali, Kunj Alizai and Maqbal through the day, police said, adding, currently there is intermittent firing from at least three areas in the district, while the Thall-Sada-Parachinar Highway remained closed from traffic towards Kohat district.

As officials struggled to reinforce peace in the volatile region, communication from the elders of both the tribal sects suggested further intensified attacks.

A high-level government delegation comprising Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Law Minister, Chief Secretary and Inspector General of Police, has departed for Kurram tribal district by helicopter, officials said.

The delegation aims to calm the security situation in the district which has been marred by extreme sectarian violence.

ENDGAME: RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR?

The next two months are going to be crucial for the enduring peace and tranquility in the world. Even China should take lead in ending the Russia-Ukraine war. India too has to play most proactive role to bring peace in the neighbourhood and in the Global South.

BY LT GENERAL
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THIS week, Russia launched an Inter-Continental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) in the central east region of Ukraine for the first time in the 33-month long war. These ICBMs which have the range of 5800 km are designed to carry nuclear warheads, was essentially a powerful message to the US led NATO with Ukraine being a pawn in the larger global battle. Coming on the heels of revised nuclear doctrine announced by Russian President Vladimir Putin which formally lowers the nuclear threshold for employing the nuclear weapons, the move has dangerous implications.

Russia has threatened the use of tactical nuclear weapons and if used in a distress situation by Russia, then it would lead to massive escalation of the conflict, well beyond the continental boundaries.

It is important to analyse the turn of events post the election of Donald Trump as the next US President-designate. As promised by Donald Trump that his priority post assuming the appointment would be to end Russia-Ukraine war, the stand was reiterated by him in his post-election speeches and statements. This stand was welcomed, though in different degrees by both Ukraine and Russia.

In fact, there was a news of tele conversation between Trump and Putin but Russia denied a day later. This notwithstanding, back-channel diplomacy would be going on to reach some sort of agreement before Mr. Trump officially becomes President on 20 January 2025. There is also a talk of a formal ceasefire in the

ongoing war. So, it is but natural for Mr. Putin to consolidate his gains in the war before the formal negotiations commence. At the same time, Ukraine would like to regain lost territory to the extent feasible.

In this backdrop, US President Biden announced another 275-million-dollar aid to Ukraine.

Surprisingly, the military package includes long range missiles and anti-personnel mines. Anti-Personnel mines are banned globally but US ostensibly wants to halt the Russian onslaught to capture as much territory of Ukraine, before the ceasefire. US also closed its embassy in Kiev fearing long range missile attack but reopened it after cautioning its people. It is well known that the present US President Biden fully supported the Ukraine war waging effort with multiple aid packages in the last 33 months. It is also believed that such military aid has only helped the US defence industry and thus business of war has also thrived in this conflict.

Mr. Trump is thinking differently in his second term. His focus is on 'America First' and the priority on domestic policies. With clear majority in the Senate and the House of Representatives, he is in a position to transform the US outlook to world affairs, besides regaining the unchallenged superiority in the world. His focus would be to contain the rise of China as its nearest competitor. Being a businessman, he does not believe in freebies. Therefore, NATO nations under him would have to bear the cost of any future conflict. He would not like to bleed US any further in a sense-

less war between Russia and Ukraine because the war has not diminished the stature of Russia and Mr. Putin much. With the active support of China and North Korea, the Russians now have regained the edge militarily and economically.

Mr. Trump was able to revive the relations of US with the maverick regime of North Korea in his last term. He is well aware that North Korea may jump into nuclear war, even at tactical level, on behest of Russia. With the long range of nuclear missiles, it may be difficult to clearly point out which country fired the missile. For example, in the instant ICBM case, Russia called it a test missile which went haywire. For Mr. Trump, the end of Russia-Ukraine war or at least ceasefire would give him some elbow room to focus on Israel's conflict in the middle east. It is in the middle east that the stakes of US are much high, in the near and long term. Even with the best and noble intentions of Mr. Trump, it is still possible for the Russia-Ukraine war to escalate to unmanageable levels. The danger lies in both Zelenskyy and Putin to count their gains or losses and look at the future. Mr. Zelenskyy has become the poster boy of a particular faction of the west but there is a limit to stretch it beyond a point. The people of Ukraine have suffered a lot and rebuilding the nation should be a priority of the world leaders.

Prime Minister Modi has been at the forefront of negotiating peace between Russia and Ukraine. Now that the conflict is delicately poised towards the end, his role becomes even more critical.

Given his global credibility, PM Modi has to constantly remind both the warring factions to exercise restraint even under duress. The nuclear dimension of the war must be nipped in the bud. NATO nations and Ukraine should also be aware of the conflict spiraling beyond control with a small mistake or miscalculation. President elect Mr. Trump would be aware of Mr. Modi's efforts to end the war and both the global leaders should connect to redouble the efforts to declare ceasefire and end the war subsequently.

The conflict situation in the world has once again exposed the vulnerability and weakness of the United Nations, particularly the UN Security Council. If the collective efforts of key players like the US and emergence of India as the leader of the Global South are able to bring near normalcy in the world by mid of the year 2025, then India had good chance to be on the high table of UNSC.

The next two months are going to be crucial for the enduring peace and tranquility in the world. Even China should take lead in ending the Russia-Ukraine war. All the stakeholders interested in maintaining enduring peace, rule of international law and global conventions have to be on watch to prevent slipping away the golden opportunity. India too has to play most proactive role to bring peace in the neighbourhood and in the Global South with its diplomatic, military and economic might. The golden opportunity to end the conflict between Russia and Ukraine is certainly in the global interest.

It is important to analyse the turn of events post the election of Donald Trump as the next US President-designate. As promised by Donald Trump that his priority post assuming the appointment would be to end Russia-Ukraine war, the stand was reiterated by him in his post-election speeches and statements. This stand was welcomed, though in different degrees by both Ukraine and Russia.

Sri Lanka's new Govt gets IMF approval for fourth tranche of USD 3 bn bailout package

COLOMBO, Nov 23 (PTI)

SRI Lanka's new NPP Government on Saturday got the International Monetary Fund approval for a staff-level agreement to secure the fourth tranche of the nearly USD 3 billion bailout package.

"Once the review is approved by the IMF management and completed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) executive board, Sri Lanka will have access to about USD 333 million," a statement issued by the global money lender here at the end of the third review said.

Altogether, the IMF has extended the island nation an Extended Fund Facility (EFF) of USD 2.9 billion.

On Thursday, President Anura Kumara Dissanayake, who heads the National People's Power (NPP), affirmed his administra-

tion's commitment to continue the IMF bailout programme initiated by the previous government led by Ranil Wickremesinghe. Dissanayake, despite his pre-presidential election rhetoric to renegotiate with the global lender to water down tough conditions laid down for the recovery, backed the deal in his inaugural address to the newly convened parliament after his party's landslide victory in the parliamentary polls last week.

In the run-up to the September presidential election -- at which Wickremesinghe was defeated -- Dissanayake was critical of the bailout, especially its rigid reforms, which the party claimed made the then incumbent 75-year-old president unpopular.

Sri Lanka tapped the IMF for a facility at the height of the economic crisis under the presidency of Gotabaya Rajapaksa,

the president who was made to flee the country by months-long public protests. Mid April of 2022 Sri Lanka announced its first-ever debt default.

The negotiations with the IMF began thereafter and the Wickremesinghe's government clinched the bailout, a year later in March 2023. On Saturday, the IMF said, "The new government's commitment to the programme's objectives has enhanced confidence and ensures policy continuity."

The IMF stressed that Sri Lanka's reform agenda was delivering results. "The economy expanded on average by four per cent in the four quarters ending June 2024," the Washington-based money lender said.

It said Sri Lanka reaching an agreement with private bondholders has put debt on a path of sustainability.

India's first Constitution Museum inaugurated

SONIPAT (Haryana), Nov 23 (PTI)

INDIA'S first Constitution Museum was inaugurated at the OPJindal Global University here on Saturday by Law Minister Arjun Ram Meghwal and Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla.

Addressing a gathering at the varsity, Speaker Birla said this marks a historic milestone and credited the university's Chancellor Naveen Jindal, who is also a BJP MP, for doing such work. This museum will acquaint present and coming generations with our Constitution, how it was framed and what discussions and debates took place then.

He said India's Constitution is acting as a guide to the world.

Notably, the museum is designed to provide a deep and engaging exploration of the Constitution's essential elements and key provisions for the citizens to know demonstrating how its values and ideals have shaped the nation.