

India, US trade deal 'very near to finalising': Commerce Secy

NEW DELHI, Jan 15 (PTI)

INDIA and the US are "very near" to finalising the trade agreement, and it would be announced when both sides are ready, Commerce Secretary Rajesh Agrawal said on Thursday. The negotiating teams of both sides are discussing virtually all pending issues, he said.

"Its very near, but we can not put a deadline because that will happen when both sides are ready and they feel that this is the right time to announce," he told reporters here.

The talks between India and the US had never broken down, and both sides remained engaged, he added. In the last week of December, Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal held a virtual meeting with US Trade Representative Jamieson Greer.

The December meeting between Goyal and Greer happened after the visit of a delegation led by Deputy USTR Rick Switzer on December 10 and 11.

In his arrival speech on January 12, the

US Ambassador to India Sergio Gor asserted that both sides are actively engaged to firm up a trade deal. The imposition of steep 50 per cent tariffs by the Trump administration has strained the bilateral relations.

Apart from the additional import duty issue, relations witnessed a severe strain

on many other issues, including Trump's claim of ending the India-Pakistan conflict in May last year and Washington's new immigration policy.

"The United States and India are bound not just by shared interests, but by a relationship

anchored at the highest levels. Real friends can disagree, but always resolve their differences in the end," Gor has said.

The Ambassador has noted that India and the US are actively engaged on the proposed bilateral trade deal days after Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick suggested Washington was not very keen to seal the deal soon. Agrawal also said the bilateral trade between the countries is registering positive growth.



Around 80% of 114 Rafale jets to be built in India

New Delhi pushing for maximum possible localisation of planes

NEW DELHI, Jan 15 (ANI)

IN The proposed deal for buying 114 Rafale fighter jets for the Indian Air Force, around 80 per cent of the combat aircraft are planned to be built in India.

The project would also see some of the manufacturing facilities getting shifted from France to India.

The Indian side is also discussing with French officials for maximising the localised content in the deal with plans of setting up the Maintenance, Repair and Overhaul (MRO) facility within India to maximise the serviceability of the planes, Government sources told ANI.

The sources said the two sides will negotiate the cost of the project further. The French price offer has taken into account the inflation rate increase in



prices at around four per cent per annum.

Sources said that with a large number of parts and systems of the Rafales to be built in India, there is also a possibility of the French Dassault Aviation using an Indian entity for export orders and offer-

ing Indian facilities as a hub for MRO for countries in the region operating the Rafale and other Dassault aircraft.

Sources said in the present circumstances, the Rafale has been found to be the best suited to meet Indian Air Force requirements for fighter aircraft, as the

serviceability is around 90 per cent, which is much higher than any other aircraft in the world, including the American F-35. The Indian Air Force has been pushing for the case to buy 114 Rafale fighter jets for a long time after it was selected in a multi-vendor tender.

The Indian Air Force is grappling with the issue of depleting fighter aircraft squadrons and the indigenous project is also getting delayed due to issues with engines as well as integration of foreign-made equipment with the LCA Mark 1A aircraft. Already faced with two active fronts in Pakistan and China, Bangladesh is also fast becoming a security challenge. Amid this situation, the number of fighter aircraft squadrons required by the Indian Air Force is going beyond the long-accepted requirement of 42 squadrons.

Trump claims killing of Iran protesters 'has stopped' even as Tehran signals executions ahead

WASHINGTON, Jan 15 (AP)

PRESIDENT Donald Trump said Wednesday made a vague statement that he's been told "on good authority" that plans for executions in Iran have stopped, even as Tehran has indicated fast trials and executions ahead in its crack-down on protesters.

The US President's claims, which were made with few details, come as he's told protesting Iranians in recent days that "help is on the way" and that his administration



would "act accordingly" to respond to the Iranian government. But Trump has not offered any details about how the US might respond and it wasn't clear if his comments Wednesday indicated he would hold off on action.

"We've been told that the killing in Iran is stopping -- it's stopped -- it's stopping," Trump said at the White House while signing executive orders and legislation. "And there's no plan for executions, or an execution, or executions -- so I've been told that on good authority."

UK shuts Tehran embassy as tensions soar, diplomats withdrawn

TEHRAN, Jan 15 (IANS)

THE UK has temporarily closed its embassy in Tehran and withdrawn all diplomatic staff, citing a worsening security situation as tensions escalate following Iran's violent crack-down on protests and mounting speculation over possible US military action.

Confirming the move on Wednesday (local time), the UK Foreign Office said, "We have temporarily closed the British Embassy in Tehran. This will now operate remotely."

It added that British staff had been withdrawn due to the prevailing security situation.

The decision comes at a time of heightened regional instability, with reports indicating that US President Donald Trump is considering potential military strikes against Iran.

'We are preparing for future wars; indigenisation key for self-reliance'

JAIPUR, Jan 15 (PTI)

ARMY Chief General Upendra Dwivedi on Thursday said the institution is moving forward as a future-ready force and underscored the need for indigenous equipment, calling it a "strategic necessity".

"The Indian Army is moving forward as a future-ready force, possessing well-trained soldiers, modern equipment, and multi-domain operational capabilities. Technology is being used to make the soldier even more capable," he told reporters in Jaipur after the Army Day parade.

He said that there has been a clear shift in the Indian Army's thinking in the last few years.

The Operation Sindoor established a "new normal" according to the Army chief. "It demonstrated the Indian Army's ability to respond with speed, coordination and precision. The operation reflected a mature and confident force, capable of safeguarding national interests through measured, firm and responsible action," he said. "We are not just addressing current challenges but also preparing for future wars. New structures are being created in this direction, which are being equipped and trained according to future needs," he said. He said that new units like the Bhairav Battalion and Shakti Baan Regiment have been raised.

"This reflects the creation of an agile, responsive, and mission-oriented Army, aligned with future challenges," he said.

He said that today's parade showcased a beautiful blend of tradition and transformation.

"The Nepal Army Band reflected our strong ties, while the new units demonstrated the Army's emerging strength," he said.

"The Indian Army is fully prepared at all times for any kind of attack. We are fully prepared for future warfare. We demonstrated this in the parade. Such preparations will continue to increase in the coming days," he said, adding that the Indian Army will continue to adapt itself with time and will bring about the necessary changes.



An Indian Army contingent marches during the 78th Army Day Parade celebration, at Mahal Road, in Jaipur, Rajasthan on Thursday. (PTI)



Lt Rashmi Choudhary with Smerch Multi Rocket Launcher System during the 78th Army Day parade. (PTI)



Capt Pukharaj Kaushik with BrahMos Missile System during Army Day Parade in Jaipur. (PTI)



Army paratrooper show skills during Army Day Parade. (PTI)

He said that with the display of 'Made in India' equipment, the parade reflected that the foundation of transformation is self-reliance.

"The Indian Army needs equipment in the future that is designed and developed in India.

Indigenisation is not just a goal; today, it has become a strategic necessity," he said.

General Dwivedi said that special emphasis is being placed on resources that are useful for both military and civilian purposes, contributing to the overall development of the country.

On organising the parade in Jaipur, he said Rajasthan is a land where many heroes have made history and therefore the land was chosen for the Army Day parade.

He said the Russia-Ukraine conflict has underlined that the duration of any war cannot be predicted in advance, and future

conflicts could last either a few days or stretch into years.

Technology increases efficiency, but it does not mean that it replaces manpower, Dwivedi said, adding that smaller units are more successful because new units have greater speed and agility.

"The Bhairav Battalion has been created to fill the gap between the Ghatak and Special Forces. New organisations have been established. More changes will also come. The battlefield is changing rapidly, and we need to move quickly to keep up," he said.

Ailing astronaut returns to Earth early in NASA's first medical evacuation

CAPE CANAVERAL (US), Jan 15 (AP)

AN AILING astronaut returned to Earth with three others on Thursday, ending their space station mission more than a month early in NASA's first medical evacuation.

SpaceX guided the capsule to a middle-of-the-night splashdown in the Pacific near San Diego, less than 11 hours after the astronauts exited the International Space Station.

It was an unexpected finish to a mission that began in August and left the orbiting lab with only one American and two Russians on board. NASA and SpaceX said they would try to move up the launch of a fresh crew of four; liftoff is currently targeted for mid-February.

NASA's Zena Cardman and Mike Fincke were joined on the return by Japan's Kimiya Yui and Russia's Oleg Platonov. Officials have refused to identify the astronaut who had the health problem or explain what happened, citing medical privacy.

While the astronaut was stable in orbit, NASA wanted them back on Earth as soon as possible to receive proper care and diagnostic testing. The entry and splash-



NASA astronaut Zena Cardman being helped out of the SpaceX Crew-11 capsule after they re-entered the Earth in a middle-of-the-night splashdown near San Diego, California on Thursday. (PTI)

down required no special changes or accommodations, officials said, and the recovery ship had its usual allotment of medical experts on board. It was not immediately known when the astronauts would fly from California to their home base in Houston. Platonov's return to Moscow was also unclear.

NASA stressed repeatedly over the past week that this was not an emergency. The astronaut fell sick or was injured on Jan. 7, prompting NASA to call off the next day's spacewalk by Cardman and Fincke, and ultimately resulting in the early return. It was the first time NASA cut short a spaceflight for medical reasons. The Russians had done so decades ago.

The space station has gotten by with three astronauts before, sometimes even with just two. NASA said it will be unable to perform a spacewalk, even for an emergency, until the arrival of the next crew, which has two Americans, one French and one Russian astronaut.

US pauses immigrant visa from 75 'high-risk' countries

■ The pause on immigrant visas does not apply to tourist or work visas

■ By Yoshita Singh

NEW YORK/WASHINGTON, Jan 15 (PTI)

THE Trump administration's latest pause on immigrant visas for individuals from 75 "high-risk" countries, including Bangladesh and Pakistan, does not apply to tourist or work visas and will impact those wishing to live permanently in the US.

The State Department on Wednesday issued a list of 75 countries that will face a pause in immigrant visa processing from 75 countries, saying



migrants from these nations take welfare from the American people at "unacceptable rates".

The move, the latest in the crackdown by the Trump administration on immigration, is aimed at curtailing the entry of foreigners likely to rely on public benefits while living in the

US.

"President Trump has made clear that immigrants must be financially self-sufficient and not be a financial burden to Americans. The Department of State is undergoing a full review of all policies, regulations, and guidance to ensure that immi-

grants from these high-risk countries do not utilise welfare in the United States or become a public charge," the State Department said in a statement.

Effective January 21, the Department of State is pausing all visa issuances to immigrant visa applicants who are nationals of countries including Afghanistan, Albania, Antigua and Barbuda, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bahamas, Bangladesh, Barbados, Belarus, Bhutan, Brazil, Burma, Cambodia, Cuba, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Libya, Nepal, Pakistan, Russia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Somalia, Syria, Thailand, Uruguay, Uzbekistan, and Yemen.