

Press conference by External Affairs Minister Shri S M Krishna

January 07, 2011



Official Spokesperson (Shri Vishnu Prakash): A very good morning to all of you and welcome back. We start the New Year on an important and high note, with the press conference by the External Affairs Minister Shri S.M. Krishna. He is joined by Foreign Secretary Shrimati Nirupama Rao. I would like to invite the External Affairs Minister to make his opening remarks and thereafter he will be happy to take a few questions.

External Affairs Minister (Shri S.M. Krishna): Friends from Media,

Good morning to all of you.

At the outset, I would like to convey my greetings and very best wishes to you and members of your families for the year 2011.

As you are aware, 2010 was an eventful year in which Indian diplomacy scored on many fronts. We had intensive and productive high-level exchanges, to build synergies and deepen partnerships with friendly countries, both to our East and West, besides of course, our neighbourhood, which has always been a foreign policy priority. I would like to reiterate that the objective of Indian diplomacy is to foster an international environment which is conducive to our economic growth, strengthens our security and enhances our strategic options.

But MEA's activities are not restricted to external diplomacy alone. There is another and equally important dimension of looking after the interests of the common man or aam adami. Our youthful and aspirational population, representing a large and educated middle class, is taking excellent advantage of better connectivity and mobility, to travel abroad in ever increasing numbers. Over 11 million Indians travelled abroad in 2009 as against 4.42 million in 2000. They naturally expect and deserve efficient and quick services.

My Ministry's most public face is the passport office. We currently have 37 of them across the country. There are over 50 million Indian passport holders. Over five million passports are issued every year. This gives us an idea of the scale of the operations for issuing passports. In order to provide our citizens a world class service, we are in the process of completely transforming the manner in which passports are issued. Earlier in 2010, we started the Passport Seva Project which brings together the best of technology, government and the private sector. Seventy seven Passport Seva Kendras (PSKs) and 14 mini PSKs will be set up all over the country gradually in three phases. This will triple the number of passport counters to 1250, making the process of applying for passports convenient. PSKs in Bengaluru, Mangalore, Hubli, Chandigarh and some other places are already operational. Site selection for over 25 PSKs has been completed for Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

I have also mandated my officers to bring down the number of pending passport applications. Two main reasons for pendency of passport applications are incomplete applications and the lead time in securing police verification. My Ministry is introducing a practice of monthly Passport Adalats at all the 37 passport offices across India to speed up the process of issuance of passports. The first batch of Adalats will take place tomorrow. We are also committing additional manpower and technical resources to assist in this endeavour.

By the same token, we have now some 25 million people of Indian origin living and working abroad in the Gulf, UK, USA, Canada and Australia, among over 110 countries across the globe. They make significant contribution to the countries of their adoption, as well as to India, by building bridges in the knowledge sector and bringing investment and remittances. The cross-section of Indian community abroad includes technocrats, industrialists, businessmen, students and skilled and unskilled workers. I am happy and proud to note that the Indian diaspora is diligent, law-abiding and has seamlessly assimilated in the countries of domicile. Yet they do face occasional difficulties when they need my Ministry to provide them every possible and speedy assistance.

Take the case of unrest in Kyrgyzstan last June in which more than a hundred Indian students were affected. Our small Embassy in Bishkek rose to the occasion and arranged quick and safe evacuation of the students to Bishkek, their lodging and boarding and onward journeys back home.

On my instructions, a new Parliament and VIP Division has just been set up in the Ministry, to deal with all the important issues relating to MEA that come up in the Parliament or are raised by Hon'ble Members of Parliament with me. The Division would ensure that such issues are handled promptly and efficiently.

India is fortunate to have the second largest Muslim population in the world. Every Muslim dreams of undertaking Haj pilgrimage at least once in life time. One of the significant public responsibilities of my Ministry pertains to facilitation of this pilgrimage. In 2010 a record number of over 1,71,000 pilgrims went to Haj from India to Saudi Arabia. We managed to streamline the systems and arrangements, introduce transparency, efficiency and objectivity. Passports, accommodation, medical facilities and travel were arranged for the pilgrims. Nearly 900 flights were organized. For the first time ever, elections were held for zonal representatives of the Haj Committee. Here I would like to specially thank the Government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for their unstinted support in facilitating Haj pilgrimage by Indian citizens.

Let me now briefly turn to some of the recent and anticipated developments in our foreign relations.

In South Asia, the 25 year old SAARC process is maturing and gaining greater salience. Discharging our responsibilities in an asymmetrical and non-reciprocal manner, India has contributed pro-actively to initiating most of the major SAARC programmes and projects. The South Asia University in Delhi began its first academic session in 2010. Such initiatives, including in the spheres of connectivity and people-to-people relations, have served to catalyze intra-regional engagement as well as our bilateral relationships. We would like to see SAARC contribute more robustly to our vision of building a peaceful and prosperous neighbourhood.

India seeks cordial, cooperative and friendly ties with all its neighbours and would remain steadfast in this pursuit. We are very clear that first and foremost, every attention has to be paid to our immediate neighbourhood, as our destinies are interlinked. I am pleased that this sentiment is amply reciprocated with most of our neighbours. In successive public opinion surveys in Afghanistan, for example, India has consistently been rated very highly by the people of Afghanistan. This is a reflection of how India-assisted projects, worth US\$ 1.3 billion, are changing the lives of ordinary Afghans. As you know, I will be paying an official visit to Afghanistan from tomorrow.

The resettlement of the Internally Displaced Persons in Sri Lanka has been high on our priority. During my visit to Sri Lanka last November, I inaugurated the pilot project of building 1,000 houses near Jaffna for resettlement of IDPs, as also the railway line project at Medhawachiya. I also inaugurated our Consulates General in Jaffna and Hambantota which, I am confident, will greatly enhance people-to-people contacts between our two countries. We continue to urge the Government of Sri Lanka to initiate a structured dialogue with all communities, especially the Tamils and other minority communities, to address the issues that concern their future.

Our relationships with Bangladesh, Myanmar and the Maldives have witnessed an upward swing over the last several months. As a close and friendly neighbour, India remains committed to the successful completion of peace process and establishment of multi-party democracy in Nepal. Last year also saw a further consolidation of our traditionally strong relations with Bhutan.

With Pakistan, as the Prime Minister has repeatedly said, we stand ready to resolve all outstanding issues through a peaceful dialogue. We expect Pakistan to fulfill its repeated assurances given to us at the highest level to not allow the territory under its control for fomenting terrorism aimed against us, and to bring the perpetrators of the Mumbai terrorist attack to justice expeditiously. I have extended an invitation to my counterpart to visit India and earnestly hope that we can take the process of dialogue forward.

In our quest for enhanced energy security and greater regional cooperation, we signed on December 11, 2010 at Ashgabat agreements related to Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline project, during the TAPI Summit. The project involving construction of the 1680 kms pipeline, at an estimated cost of US\$ 7.6 billion in 2008, is expected to be completed by 2015. Besides making available 3.2 billion cubic feet of gas daily to three recipient countries, the initiative would also become an important confidence building measure among our countries and enhance mutually beneficial economic linkages.

We will continue to pursue our 'Look East Policy' with vigour during the year, which should see finalization of our comprehensive economic partnership arrangements with Japan and Malaysia as well as a Free Trade Agreement in Services and Investments with ASEAN. I am pleased that the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement, which was operationalized with the Republic of Korea on 1st January last year, has led to a 50% rise in bilateral trade in 2010, to about US\$ 18 billion. Early this year we look forward to welcoming President Yudhoyono of Indonesia - a strategic partner and traditional friend with which we have shared two millennia of close cultural and commercial ties. I am also pleased that the initiative to establish Nalanda University saw significant progress last year, including in the form of passage of the necessary Act by Parliament.

India will continue to actively engage China across a spectrum of issues in 2011. The high level exchanges in 2010 lent stability and ballast to one of India's most important and complex relationships. We have agreed that as strategic partners, we will enhance all round cooperation in areas including trade and commerce, science and technology and people-to-people exchanges while also tackling the areas of divergence.

The Gulf region is another major partner of India and we significantly enhanced high level exchanges last year. Prime Minister's visit to Saudi Arabia and the conclusion of the "Riyadh Declaration" put in place "a new era of strategic partnership" between our countries. India's two-way trade with the Gulf has soared to US Dollar 107 billion making the region our largest trading partner. Some 6 million Indians live and work in the Gulf region. We will remain focused on expanding our engagement with the region.

India is not only keeping her historic links with Africa intact, but also revitalizing the relationship by adding a larger dimension of economic cooperation. We will host a Ministerial level conference of 49 Least Developed Countries (LDCs), which include 33 African countries. The second India Africa Forum Summit will also take place later this year in an African nation. Our African partners are undertaking a consensual decision on the timing and venue of the summit.

Looking westwards, relations with Russia remain a strategic priority of our foreign policy. Russia is our time-tested partner and we now characterise our friendship as a 'special and privileged' strategic partnership. Prime Minister should be visiting Russia this year for the traditional annual Summit meeting, which would build on the concrete and substantive outcomes in key areas achieved last year consequent to the visits of Prime Minister Putin and President Medvedev to India.

India and the United States have in the recent years built a strong global strategic partnership. President Obama's visit in November has elevated our relationship to a qualitatively new level. We attach high importance to our partnership, both in the pursuit of achieving India's national development goals and for advancing global peace, stability and progress.

Prime Minister's participation in the annual India-European Union (EU) Summit in December 2010 paved the way for broader engagement with the EU. It was agreed that negotiations for a Broad-Based Trade and Investment Agreement would be concluded by the spring of this year. This Agreement would increase bilateral trade from around Euro 52 billion to Euro 100 billion over the next few years. A Joint Declaration for Cooperation on International Terrorism pointed to a more diversified engagement with EU.

International terrorism has been a core foreign policy concern for India for quite some time now. We have been victims of the most vicious kind of cross-border terror for over well two decades. It has had the backing of official agencies, and continues to be used against us as a political and economic weapon. Fortunately there is increasing realization today in the international arena that terrorism threatens the peace and security of the entire planet. India is working closely with her partners in improving sharing of information, countering terror finance and building capacity in our anti-terror mechanisms. Multilaterally, we piloted the Comprehensive Convention on

International Terrorism at the UN. We continue our efforts to encourage early adoption of this long overdue Convention.

Given our unique experience in the fight against the menace of terrorism, the UN Security Council elected the day before yesterday (on 5th January) India's Permanent Representative to the UN as the Chairperson of the Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee (CTC), established in 2001. India will work to further strengthen the international legal framework for counter-terrorism and increase international cooperation in the area by all the UN member-states.

India joined the UN Security Council (UNSC) for a two-year term (2011-2012) on 1st January 2011, polling the highest number of votes- 187 out of 190 UN members present and voting. While being actively and constructively engaged on all issues before the Council, our focus will be on our immediate and extended neighbourhood and on issues such as counter-terrorism, peacekeeping and peace building. We will also continue our efforts for the much needed UNSC reforms. The second round of text-based negotiations started in the UN in December 2010. This can be safely called a "take-off" stage for the UNSC reform process and is a significant development after many years of meandering discussions on the issue.

These are some of the thoughts I wanted to share with you in our interaction at the very beginning of this year. I stop here and will be happy to take a few questions. Thank you.

Question: Since India has serious security concerns on Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline, what about the TAPI pipeline? Are you not concerned about the ability of Pakistani to provide security to TAPI pipeline?

External Affairs Minister: There are two issues whenever we look at a project of this kind. One is the cost analysis and the second is the security that is needed, especially in dealing with the countries that I mentioned. I am sure that all the countries are responsible countries and they know the kind of stakes - economic, political as well as security related - that are involved in it, and I am hopeful.

Question: When is your next meeting with the Foreign Minister of Pakistan? And also Pakistan has stopped export of onion on Wagha Border. Have you taken up the issue with them?

External Affairs Minister: Talking about the onions first, we are in touch with the Government of Pakistan. We have initiated talks. Before not too long we are hopeful that we will find a solution to this problem thereby easing the pressure within our country for onions.

With reference to the other question about the visit of the Foreign Minister of Pakistan, I have extended an invitation and the indication given to me by Foreign Minister Qureshi was that sometime in the first quarter of 2011 he would be visiting Delhi and we are looking forward to it.

Question: South Africa has been formally invited to join the BRIC group of countries. When do you expect it can formally become a full member? And what does India think about further expanding this group of countries?

External Affairs Minister: As members of the BRIC we did very carefully analyse the pros and cons of enlarging it. We needed a country from Africa which was left out in the BRIC and we found South Africa was willing to cooperate with us. As a result of that there was an overwhelming consensus in favour of inviting South Africa to join BRIC.

Question: Could you say what you would like to be on the agenda when Mr. Qureshi comes to Delhi? Also, are you taking this one meeting at a time or do you hope this would be the first in a series of meetings over the course of the year? And if so, do you have any other tentative plan for that in the future?

External Affairs Minister: The Prime Minister is very very clear and we would like to engage Pakistan in a dialogue and there is no other alternative other than talking to Pakistan, keeping them engaged, and thereby sorting out the outstanding issues. When I was in Islamabad, there were a number of issues about which there was similarity of thinking. I am sure that that process will continue as and when Foreign Minister Qureshi comes to India.

Question: Sir, you talked about the passports, the new initiatives that you are taking. I just wanted to ask, when would Delhi get its new passport offices? Secondly, on the issue of Quattrocchi just yesterday the lower court observed that there seemed to be malafide intentions in Government not letting the case go ahead against him. So, keeping the Tribunal's Order in mind do you think his extradition should be sought all over again?

External Affairs Minister: The issue of extradition is a decision which is taken by the concerned Ministry. Only when a request is made after a decision is arrived at by the line Ministry, it is routed through the Ministry of External Affairs for extradition. So, as and when things happen we are willing to process it.

About the Passport Seva Kendra in Delhi, I am hopeful that by about June this year we should be able to get it going.

Question: Sir, you are leaving for Afghanistan you said. What deliberations will you have in Kabul? Looking at the terrorism scenario and the threat to our High Commission there, what talks will you have with your counterpart there?

External Affairs Minister: It is a fact that our Consulates and our High Commission are under constant attack in Kabul. As a result of these attacks we have lost precious Indian lives. We are working with the Government of Afghanistan so that they give our Consulates and our High Commission enough protection so that there are not going to be any more casualties.

Question: Mr. Foreign Minister, it is almost a year now since our Prime Minister has visited India. What about your Prime Minister or the Foreign Minister going to Bangladesh? Is such a visit in the offing?

External Affairs Minister: I think 2011 is the year for such visits. For these visits we are trying to work out mutual dates.

Question: Sir, with regard to the visit of Foreign Minister Qureshi to India you said that he has indicated he will come in the first quarter of this year. But given how things ended last July in Islamabad, do you think that there needs to be some work done literally from scratch again? Will there be other meetings perhaps of the Foreign Secretaries or Joint Secretaries before Mr. Qureshi gets here, because you have to go back to drawing board?

External Affairs Minister: Let us remind ourselves that even before Foreign Minister Qureshi and I met in Islamabad there have been a number of interactions between our Foreign Secretary and the Foreign Secretary of Pakistan. So, before Foreign Minister Qureshi comes into India I am sure that it is in the fitness of things that the two Foreign Secretaries meet and clear the ground for a very productive meeting at the level of Foreign Ministers.

Question: Sir, going back to the question on your Kabul visit, is there any current review of the kind of threat perception to the Indian Mission or the staff working in Afghanistan? And you will be meeting Mr. Baburam Bhattarai and Ms Sujata Koirala this afternoon. There were recent reports of China interfering with the parliamentary process in Nepal to the extent of actually pumping in money and buying MPs in a way. Is that an issue that concerns you that you would like to address?

External Affairs Minister: Yes, I am meeting Mr. Baburam Bhattarai in the next two hours. Nepal is a friendly country. We want a broad consensus for a political process there so that they would be in a position to write the Constitution. India is certainly keeping close contact with Nepal because of our civilisational and historical ties with that country. We wish them well.

On the question of review of threat perception, it is a threat which is there all the time. So, we are keeping the Government of Afghanistan informed of whatever threats that we get at our Embassy.

Question: Sir, Iran has said that they are ready to do business with India in Rupees. If they do it that way, then Indian exports to Iran can increase in exchange of energy. And, Sir, there is just a small question about you. Would you like to continue this work or given a choice would you like to take up bigger challenges?

External Affairs Minister: I think you have been very very sweet in putting that question to me. 'Bigger challenges' I like that. I think speculation is the exclusive prerogative of the ladies and gentlemen that I see in front of me. So, you keep speculating, we keep reading it, we keep watching it, and then take things as they

come along. Ultimately, I think it is the Prime Minister's prerogative. As a Constitutional Law student as one who was teaching Constitutional Law, I am sure I know it.

On the question related to Iran, depending upon the banking regulations of our own country, that will be taken care of.

Question: Does this mean that India-Iran-Pakistan pipeline is off now completely?

External Affairs Minister: Did I give that impression?

Question: You did not. But you were talking about TAPI. So, I am asking will we have both or is it off?

External Affairs Minister: The negotiations are going on; the talks are going on; and it is in the initial process. I think we will proceed.

Official Spokesperson: Thank you very much.

(Concluded)

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