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India unites poor nations at global trade talks

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WTO negotiations," said Indian Commerce Secretary S.N. Menon. "On all aspects of negotiations, India has been able to safeguard the defensive interests of the developing world without giving up the demand for the removal of trade distorting measures by the developed world," Menon added. As trade ministers prepare for the next WTO meeting, tentatively fixed for March this year, India's apex chambers feel the alliance will play a vital role for an equitable outcome of trade talks. The alliance would effectively counter some developed coun-

tries' attempts to divide developing countries in the WTO context," said Amit Mitra, secretary general of the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry. "To form a coalition cutting across levels of development and interests through a process of inclusion, engagement and commitment would not only strengthen the multilateral trading system but also safeguard a number of legitimate concerns of the developing world in agriculture, services and industrial goods," he added. —Indo-Asian News Service

MESSAGE

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18. India has offered the opening of more land customs stations on the eastern and northern boundary of Bangladesh with India, which will help Bangladesh increase its trade with neighbouring Indian States a subject that has been under discussion at various fora and greatly encouraged by economists and intellectuals in Bangladesh. There is also the need to make better use of our riverine connectivity by having more Ports of Call, providing increased navigational facilities, and linking the Ports of Call to important cities by road.

19. There is a growing need for encouraging, if not insisting on movement of goods across our land borders through sealed containers. Containerized movement of goods through the riverine route, land route and railways between India and Bangladesh will considerably reduce the existing heavy burden on the Petrapole-Benapole land route. It will result in faster, safer and more secure movement of goods between our two countries, and lead to greater realization of revenue by our respective governments. It would eliminate several artificial obstacles and hindrances to greater bilateral trade, that are today described by the euphemism of non-tariff and para-tariff barriers.

20. We strongly believe that it is only through dialogue held in the spirit of mutual trust and give and take that outstanding issues can be resolved. During 2005, there were a series of meetings between senior officials such as Foreign Secretaries (June 2005), Home Secretaries (October 2005) as well as the regular meetings between Director Generals of BSF and BDR (April & October 2005). A Parliamentary delegation led by our Minister of

State for Parliamentary Affairs, Shri BK Handique also visited Bangladesh in July 2005.

21. Senior Indian Cabinet Ministers visited Dhaka in 2005, demonstrating the high priority attached by India to its relations with Bangladesh. Our External Affairs Minister visited Dhaka in August 2005, followed by our Minister for Petroleum & Natural Gas in September 2005, and by our Minister for Water Resources also in September. Our Chief of Naval Staff visited Bangladesh in December 2005, at which time two Indian naval ships also made a goodwill visit.

22. Border management and prevention of illegal cross-border activities is critical for maintaining peace and tranquility along our borders and facilitating legitimate movement of goods and people. During our bilateral high level meetings, India has conveyed that we are building a fence along the India-Bangladesh border, in the spirit of friendship and better understanding. India has clarified that the fence is not a defensive structure, but is aimed at better border management through stopping smuggling, insurgent/terrorist activities, trans-border crimes, drug trafficking, etc. India has pointed out that along 93% of our 4000 kilometers common border, the fence is being constructed at a distance of 150 yards from the Zero Line. It is only in 7% of the border (293 kms in different sectors) that the fence has to be constructed within 150 yards of the Zero Line, due to presence of villages, human settlements or geographical features. India has informed Bangladesh about the areas in which the fencing will be carried out within 150 yards of the Zero Line and sought its cooperation. This in

no way violates the informal 1975 Border Guidelines. We have seen that in those areas where the fence is in place, there has been a sharp decline in illegal cross-border activities.

23. Water is an emotive and complex issue on which our two countries must continue to engage in finding a just and equitable solution. However, constructive dialogue on this subject often gets vitiated by the manner in which this issue is politicised and exaggerated in Bangladesh. Asian Development Bank figures reveal that while India's Annual Water Resources (AWR) availability amounts to less than 1900 cubic metres per capita, per annum, Bangladesh has Annual Water Resources of almost 9000 cubic metres, per capita, per annum. More significantly, water resources utilisation in terms of total Annual Water Resources is only 1.2% in Bangladesh, while it is 26.2% in India. Therefore, the problem in Bangladesh is not one of shortage of water resources, but rather one of water resources management. Measures such as augmenting lean season flows, prudent ground water management, extensive use of dredging and desiltation techniques, as well as creating the water reservoir capacity necessary to overcome lean season problems, while strengthening flood control measures to minimize devastation and loss of life during the monsoons will enable Bangladesh to meet these environmental challenges. India has offered to cooperate with Bangladesh in many ways to enhance its capability to manage water resources. The Ganges Water Treaty is an example of how dialogue based on trust, friendship and cooperation can result in a positive, mutually beneficial outcome. Since its signing in 1996, India has

adhered fully to its obligations under this Treaty.

24. There are intense and deepening people-to-people contacts between Bangladesh and India through students, training programmes, cultural activities, media visits and the very active Seminar/Track-2 dialogue circuit. These should be further encouraged. During the last year, we organised a series of cultural events such as film shows, yoga classes, photography and painting exhibitions (on Mahatma Gandhi and on the 1971 Liberation War). We were successful in arranging several performances of classical Indian music and dance by our leading artists.

25. India has been following a liberal visa policy for citizens of Bangladesh. The Indian High Commission issues nearly half a million visas each year (at Dhaka, Chittagong and Rajshahi) to Bangladeshi nationals for purposes of business, pilgrimage, to avail of the excellent and cost effective medical care in India, for undertaking studies in our world class educational institutions or simply for tourism. To make our visa services even more accessible, we have now outsourced the visa application process to the State Bank of India. Their Visa Application Centre started functioning in December 2005.

26. In conclusion, I would like to convey to all readers my very best wishes for a successful, happy and prosperous 2006.

Veena Sikri
Veena Sikri
High Commissioner of India to Bangladesh

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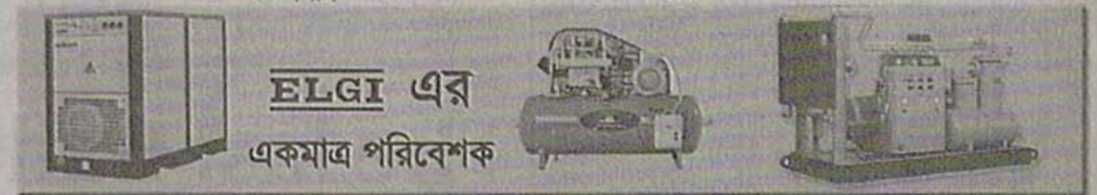
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