

The Indian Express, 1 March 2006

N-deal hopes take off as Bush boards Air Force One (Pranab Dhal Samanta)

NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 28: As US President George W Bush boarded Air Force One at 1.25 pm (Washington time), India and the United States began inching towards a closure on the nuclear deal. What Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran called a "short distance" this evening spanned three themes: number of reactors to be put under safeguards, nature of these safeguards and assurances on fuel supply to the reactors. Parallel to this, both sides were also working to close the Container Security Initiative under which select Indian ports will be upgraded to check clandestine traffic of nuclear material. And a reciprocal understanding (called Acquisitions and Cross-Services Agreement) allowing "logistical support" to each other's defence forces.

The Hindu, 1 March 2006

Delhi Declaration still relevant, says Mikhail Gorbachev (Vladimir Radyuhin)

MOSCOW: President of the erstwhile Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, believes that the ideas of the Delhi Declaration on the principles of a nuclear weapon-free and non-violent world are more relevant today than 20 years ago when it was signed. The Delhi Declaration, issued by Rajiv Gandhi and Mr. Gorbachev on November 27, 1986, called for the complete destruction of nuclear arsenals before the end of the century, and asserted the importance of solving problems in a non-violent way. It reflected high expectations of a better world after the end of the Cold War, which has since been betrayed, Mr. Gorbachev concedes. The United States, which emerged as the world's only superpower after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, "does not know what to do with its status," and "is suffering from a victor's complex," Mr. Gorbachev said.

The Indian Express, 1 March 2006

'Nuclear deal will be Bush's great contribution to end our isolation'

WASHINGTON, FEBRUARY 28: Contending that the separation plan under the Indo-US nuclear deal is not a "dividing" issue, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has said an agreement on this would be President George W Bush's "great contribution" to ending India's isolation from the world nuclear order. The Prime Minister, in an interview to Charlie Rose telecast on the Public Broadcast System (PBS), hoped that the agreement on the nuclear pact could be finalised before American leader's arrival in New Delhi tomorrow. "I recognise the US (government) has to sell this deal to the Congress. But we also have a Congress. And I have always told our Parliament - as I mentioned it to the President - this deal is not about India's strategic programme, what is in discussion is our civilian nuclear programme."

The Indian Express, 2 March 2006

Top officials hold meet over N-deal

New Delhi, March 2: In efforts to wrap up the civilian nuclear pact, top Indian and American officials met late on Wednesday night, to iron out any remaining differences, a day ahead of a summit meeting between President George W Bush and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in New Delhi. Shortly after Bush's arrival, on a three-day visit, his National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley and Under Secretary of State Nicholas Burns held talks with their counterparts M K Narayanan and Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran. Prior to the meeting, Narayanan and Saran met for about an hour. Officials of the two countries met at about 2145 hours and the meeting continued late into the night, sources said. They were discussing the follow-up agreement on the July 18 deal on civilian nuclear cooperation reached during the visit of the Prime Minister to Washington. All officials, who are keen to wrap this up, were in touch even prior to the American entourage's arrival.

The Hindu, 2 March 2006

Australia will not supply uranium till India signs NPT (K. Venugopal)

Canberra: Australia will not supply natural uranium to India as long as it does not sign the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT), Alexander Downer, Australia's Minister for Foreign Affairs, said in an interview here on Wednesday. He was responding to a question whether Australia saw a role for itself as a supplier of uranium to India in the event of the United States and India coming to an agreement that would help lift international sanctions on the Indian nuclear energy programme. Speaking to a couple of visiting Indian journalists ahead of Prime Minister John Howard's trip to New Delhi next week, Mr. Downer recalled that the foundation of his country's policy on nuclear supplies was that it would export uranium only to countries that had signed the treaty. Since India had not signed the NPT, and was not going to do so soon, the export could not happen.

The Hindu, 3 March 2006

IAEA chief welcomes Indo-U.S. understanding

NEW DELHI: International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director-General Mohamed ElBaradei welcomed the announcement of a civilian nuclear cooperation understanding between India and the United States on Thursday. "This agreement is an important step towards satisfying India's growing need for energy, including nuclear technology and fuel, as an engine for development. It would also bring India closer as an important partner in the non-proliferation regime," Dr. ElBaradei said in a statement posted on the IAEA website. "It would be a milestone, timely for ongoing efforts to consolidate the non-proliferation regime, combat nuclear terrorism and strengthen

nuclear safety," the IAEA chief said hours after the India-U.S. understanding was announced. "The agreement would assure India of reliable access to nuclear technology and nuclear fuel. It would also be a step forward towards universalisation of the international safeguards regime," Dr. ElBaradei said.

The Hindustan Times, 3 March 2006

Abandon nuclear weapons, China tells India

Beijing, March 2 : China urged India to abandon nuclear weapons and strengthen atomic safeguards as President George W Bush and the Prime Minister Manmohan Singh sealed a controversial nuclear pact on Thursday. Under the deal signed while Bush visited Delhi, the United States offered India nuclear fuel and technology in return for India agreeing to put a wall between its civilian and military nuclear facilities and place its civilian programme under international inspections. Some US lawmakers and nuclear experts have criticised the deal, saying it weakens international safeguards, especially the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which India has refused to join. China added its voice to these misgivings on Thursday. India should sign the NPT and also dismantle its nuclear weapons, a spokesman for China's Foreign Ministry, Qin Gang, told a news briefing in Beijing. "As a signatory country, China hopes non-signatory countries will join it as soon as possible as non-nuclear weapon states, thereby contributing to strengthening the international non-proliferation regime," he said.

The Hindustan Times, 3 March 2006

After N-deal, US offers fighter aircraft to India

The United States has offered to sell India advanced fighter aircraft as the next step in rapidly growing defence cooperation between the two countries. "The United States is committed to providing state-of-the-art fighter aircraft in response to India's requirements for a multi-role combat aircraft," the Pentagon said in a statement on Thursday, as the two countries clinched a deal on civilian nuclear cooperation in Delhi. "We have indicated our intention to offer both the F-16 and the F-18, both combat proven aircraft," it said. It also offered to provide additional capabilities as they enter the American force. "As additional capabilities enter our force, we will work with the Government of India to make them available. Our proposal will also address India's interest in technology transfer and indigenous co-production", the Pentagon said. "It is our goal to help meet India's needs in the defence realm, and to provide important capabilities and technologies that India seeks. We are on a path to accomplish this."

The Hindu, 4 March 2006

Japan hails deal (P. S. Suryanarayana)

SINGAPORE: Japan has hailed the nuclear deal between India and the United States. Japanese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Tomohiko Taniguchi said, "it should be welcomed that India's nuclear activities are going to undergo strict International Atomic Energy Agency inspections, though the area is limited to civilian use." Mr. Taniguchi told The Hindu over the telephone from Tokyo that the accord "is an important step forward." India being "one of the most important strategic partners for Japan, we would encourage India to further comply with the [international] non-proliferation regime." Asked why India was being asked to show "further compliance" despite an impeccable non-proliferation record, Mr. Taniguchi said New Delhi, as "a new member" of the international non-proliferation regime, would now need to "build confidence among other colleagues." So, there was still a little more way to go, he said.

The Hindu, 4 March 2006

We have China with us, says Musharraf; America has succeeded in "pocketing" India, says Minister (B. Muralidhar Reddy)

ISLAMABAD: As details of India-U.S. deals on the civilian nuclear cooperation and other areas began to sink in, Pakistan on Friday sought to remind its special relationship with China and warned that any effort to project New Delhi as a counter to Beijing could trigger an arms race. "We have our own options. I mean we have a relationship with the U.S. and we would continue to have it. It is a unipolar world, so the relationship will always be there. But we have a relationship with China as well. I went to China just now and we have a strategic relationship with China," President Pervez Musharraf told a gathering. Information Minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmed was direct in his comments. He said Washington had succeeded in "pocketing" New Delhi. Implied in the comment was the suggestion that the U.S. would bank on India to pursue its strategic interests in the region.

The Times of India, 6 March, 2006

Pak Opposition, media slam Bush visit

ISLAMABAD, March 5: Disappointed that no major concessions were announced during US President George W Bush's visit to Pakistan, Opposition parties have said it did not bring any tangible gains on Kashmir, nuclear energy and defence while the media slammed it as a "dull affair" with Washington "tilting" in favour of India. Deputy secretary-general of the MMA Liaquat Baloch termed the Bush visit "most disappointing" and said the American president has left Islamabad "out in the cold" on the Kashmir issue while giving a clear edge to India over Pakistan in bilateral dealings. He said that opposition's stance had been vindicated by President Bush's visit and called upon General Musharraf to step down after what he termed as total failure as far as the country's

foreign and defence policies were concerned.

The Hindusan Times, 6 March, 2006

Manmohan to ask Howard to back Indo-US N-deal

SYDNEY, March 5: As Australian Premier John Howard began his four-day visit to India, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was on Monday quoted as saying that he would ask him to back the Indo-US nuclear deal and lift the ban on sale of Uranium to New Delhi. "I very much hope Australia, as a member of the Nuclear Suppliers' Group, would endorse what I and US President George W Bush have worked out. This is an arrangement which helps the cause of nuclear non-proliferation. India has an impeccable record of not entering into any unauthorised arms proliferation," Singh said in an interview to the The Australian newspaper. "I hope Australia will be an important partner in this. We are short of uranium. We need to import uranium and our needs will increase in years to come," the Prime Minister said. Singh added that he would like to buy uranium from Australia to feed his country's "growing appetite" for the raw material. Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer had last week ruled out changing their policy of not selling uranium to India as it has refused to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. But in an interview before leaving Sydney for New Delhi on Sunday, Howard was more accommodating as he said Australia would "study" the deal and "if there are things that should additionally be done that are in Australia's interests then we'll do them." Singh also "plans" to ask for Howard's support in getting the US-India deal accepted by the international Nuclear Suppliers' Group, the newspaper said. Singh's comments will put Australia under pressure to choose between the new US-India partnership of democracies, and Canberra's traditional adherence to the non-proliferation treaty, which has no method of including any part of India's growing nuclear programme in the international regime, it said. The Prime Minister also called for increased defence co-operation between India and Australia.

The Hindu, 7 March, 2006

Indo-Pak bonhomie now touches foreign affairs

NEW DELHI, March 6: Amid growing bonhomie between India and Pakistan, it is now the turn of future foreign policy managers of the two countries to interact and exchange ideas. A group of 16 Indian Foreign Service (IFS) probationers on Monday went to Pakistan on a six-day visit as part of a new exchange programme in the field of foreign affairs. Under the 'Mission Orientation' visit, the IFS probationers will visit the Pakistan Foreign Service Academy and interact with the future policy managers of that country. The group will also visit Pakistan's think-tanks -- Institute of Strategic Studies and Institute of Policy Studies -- and have an interaction with its members. The probationers will visit the Indian High Commission in Islamabad to understand its functioning. They are also expected to travel to Takshila, one of the oldest centres of learning, before returning via Wagah after a brief stay in Lahore. The programme has been launched on a reciprocal basis and a decision in this regard was taken during the Pakistan visit of the then External Affairs Minister Natwar Singh in October last year. The programme is aimed at enhancing contacts and linkages between the two countries in various fields.

The Hindu, 7 March, 2006

India announces schedule for peace talks with Pak.

NEW DELHI, March 6: India on Monday announced a schedule for peacetalks with Pakistan aimed at resolving a range of issues between the nuclear-armed rivals, including withdrawing troops from the world's highest battlefield, the Siachen Glacier. The talks are part of the third round of a sweeping peace process between the two countries. They will begin later in March and be spread over four months, concluding in July with discussions between Foreign Ministers, the Indian Foreign Ministry said in a statement. In January, the two sides held a round of discussions on Kashmir, a Himalayan land divided between them but claimed by both. The rivals have fought two wars over the region since independence from Britain during the bloody partition of the subcontinent in 1947. In the third round of talks, the first meeting on promoting trade and economic ties will be held in Islamabad on March 28. This will be followed in April with discussions on a dam that India is building in Kashmir that Islamabad says will reduce water supplies to Pakistani farmers downstream, the ministry said. Talks on the Siachen Glacier are scheduled to be held in New Delhi on May 23. Other issues to be discussed at a separate meeting include terrorism and drug trafficking. On July 21, Foreign Ministers of the two sides will review progress made in the third round of talks, the ministry said.

The Indian Express, 7 March, 2006

India is the responsible one: US

WASHINGTON, March 6: Dismissing any parallel between Indian and Iranian atomic programmes, senior official Nicholas Burns on Monday said that with the signing of a historic civil nuclear deal with the US, New Delhi was moving towards obligations with international atomic energy agency. But during an address to the heritage foundation, the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, who played a key role in clinching the agreement signed during President George W Bush's India visit, also warned that it might take "several weeks or even months" before Congress approved it. While Tehran is trying to extricate itself from the obligations to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), India is moving towards it, he said, adding, "India is the responsible

one, Iran is the irresponsible one."He also rejected the argument that the deal somehow enhanced India's weapons programme. "India has a strategic programme" that existed even before this deal was worked out, he said adding the "future intentions are to build up the civilian sector for electricity".Burns also spoke generally of the relations between India and the US, with the interests of the two countries intersecting in a number of ways."India is a major power in Asia... One of our critical partners, not just in South Asia but in Asia," Burns said making the point that expanding strategic relationship with India was good for American global interests.

The Times of India, 7 March, 2006

High-level Japanese defence delegation in India

NEW DELHI, March 6: Continuing the series of recent high level defence exchanges between Tokyo and New Delhi, a top level Japanese Defence delegation headed by Gen Tsutomu Mori, Chief of Staff Japanese Ground Self Defence Forces, has commenced a four day visit here.Mori on Monday held discussion with his Indian counterpart Gen JJ Singh on "army to army issues". His visit assumes significance in the wake of the recent high level meeting held in US Pacific command, where participants, including Japan, voiced concern over safety of passage in the crucial Malacca straits.Tokyo as well as Washington want India alongwith Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia to play a more active role in policing the straits, through which the bulk of the world crude containers pass.Mori, according to defence ministry sources will also hold discussions with the Naval Chief Admiral Arun Prakash and Air Chief SP Tyagi and Defence secretary Shekhar Dutt. He will also call on the Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee.

The Hindu, 8 March, 2006

No curb on nuclear facilities: Manmohan

NEW DELHI, March 7: Asserting that India's ability to sustain a minimum credible nuclear deterrent remains adequately protected, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on Tuesday assured Parliament that the India-U.S. nuclear deal and the `Separation Plan' of civil and military nuclear facilities will not adversely affect the country's strategic programme.In identical statements in both Houses of Parliament, the Prime Minister said no constraint has been placed on India's right to construct new facilities for strategic purposes."The integrity of our Nuclear Doctrine and our ability to sustain a minimum credible nuclear deterrent is adequately protected," Dr. Singh said.The Prime Minister announced that the CIRUS (Canadian-Indian-U.S.) reactor would be permanently shut down in 2010. The fuel core of the Apsara reactor was purchased from France and the Government was ready to shift it from its present location and make it available for placing under the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards in 2010.Both CIRUS and Apsara reactors are located at the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC). "We have decided to take these steps rather than allow intrusive inspections in a nuclear facility of high national security importance. We are determined that such steps will not hinder ongoing research and development." In his 25-minute suo motu statement on `Discussions on Civil Nuclear Energy Cooperation with the United States: Implementation of India's Separation Plan,' Dr. Singh outlined the salient elements of the Separation Plan, dwelt on the additional steps to be taken by the U.S. to guard against any disruption of fuel supplies to India and stressed the need to ensure energy security for the future.Dr. Singh said the Separation Plan does not come in the way of the integrity of India's three-stage nuclear programme, including future use of the country's thorium reserves.

The Hindu, 8 March, 2006

Foreign Secretary clarifies on Kalam's visit to Myanmar

NEW DELHI, March 7: Foreign Secretary Shyam Sharan told a press conference on Tuesday that President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam's visit to Myanmar was not prompted by rivalry between India and China to gain influence over the region. ``It will not be accurate to describe the visit by an Indian head of state to Myanmar after a long time in these terms. There are very good reasons why India must remain engaged with Myanmar," he said while speaking to newsmen on Mr. Kalam's six-day visit to Myanmar and Mauritius which begins on Wednesday.India's engagement with Myanmar came up during the talks between Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and U.S. President George Bush with India explaining the importance of a close relationship between the two neighbours. Mr. Saran said while remaining engaged with Myanmar, India in meetings with its top leadership had made known its views on the current situation in that country.On the prolonged detention of Aung San Suu Kyi, Mr. Saran conceded she was respected in India and had a certain international standing. ``Her welfare and release would be very helpful in the process of [restoring] democracy," he said.Myanmar was important to India as it shared a long land border with four ``sensitive" States in the North East, both countries were involved in energy exploration on Myanmar's coastline opposite India's eastern sea board and Myanmar could be India's bridgehead to the South-East Asian nations. Mr. Kalam's visit will touch on most of the ongoing projects in this regard. India was discussing an agreement for evacuation of natural gas that will be produced in the exploration blocks.``It could be a pipeline directly to the North East or the gas could be converted into liquid natural gas for transportation by sea. Some agreement on this could be struck," said Mr. Saran.The economy and viability of projects in the North East would improve with the development of a multi-modal project for reviving shipping links from the ancient port of Sitwe to Kolkata and Chennai on one side and use of river and highway to enter into Mizoram on the other.The President would also discuss the setting up of a ground station in Myanmar to receive

data from Indian satellites for use in crop forecasting.

The Indian Express, 8 March, 2006

N-deal doesn't recognise India as nuclear weapon state, says Burns

WASHINGTON, March 7: The US has made it clear that the Indo-US nuclear deal does not amount to recognition of India as a nuclear weapon state. "India has a strategic programme. The US and other countries have not recognised that programme. This agreement does not recognise that programme," said Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Nicholas Burns while launching a campaign to drum up support for the deal from sceptical lawmakers. Burns, who played a key role in clinching the deal, said the pact would bring India into the "non-proliferation mainstream" and dismissed any comparison between the Indian and Iranian programmes. Giving a preview of the Bush Administration's decision, he said here yesterday that the deal was good for India and America, and brought "India into the non-proliferation mainstream." The agreement finalised during Bush's visit to New Delhi last week "will allow India for the first time in the life of its nuclear programme... To be able to submit itself in a transparent way for international inspections. We think this is a major gain for the non-proliferation community." Burns said that all civilian reactors built by India in future would come under international safeguards. "On a deal as esoteric, frankly and as complex as this one, members of the Senate and House are going to want to see the details and a full explanation, and how we intend to give them," he said.

Hindustan Times, 9 March, 2006

White House defends India-US nuclear pact

WASHINGTON, March 8: The White House has struck back at critics of the US-India nuclear deal, denying that the agreement would fuel a South Asia arms race or set a bad example for Israel, Iran, or North Korea. US President George W Bush made the new accord the centrepiece of his recently concluded trip to India and Pakistan but faces an uphill battle to get it through the US Congress, where critics have vowed to defeat it. The White House released a statement on Wednesday aimed at quieting some of the more serious charges over the deal. It denied that the deal would accelerate the nuclear rivalry between India and Pakistan, saying Washington "has no intention of aiding" New Delhi's atomic weapons programme or of concluding a similar cooperation deal with Islamabad. "We do not intend to pursue a similar civil nuclear cooperation initiative with Pakistan," said the White House. It also dismissed any notion of a double-standard that might embolden nuclear ambitions in Tehran or Pyongyang. "It is not credible to compare the rogue regimes of North Korea and Iran to India. Unlike Iran or N Korea, India has been a peaceful and vibrant democracy with a strong nuclear non-proliferation record," the White House said. Iran and North Korea signed and ratified the NPT, but "broke the very non-proliferation commitments they claimed to follow" and both are "state sponsors of terrorism," it said.

Hindustan Times, 9 March, 2006

India, Chile sign trade agreement

NEW DELHI, March 8: India and Chile on Wednesday signed a Preferential Trade Agreement as part of initiatives to increase trade and investment between the two countries. "The PTA strategically positions Chile to access and to capitalise on the Indian market and its technological assets. This marks a watershed in ties between the two countries as it will impart a new dimension to our trade relations in times to come," Commerce Minister Kamal Nath said. The agreement, signed by Commerce Secretary SN Menon and Chilean Ambassador Jorge Heine, provides tariff preferences ranging from 10 to 50 per cent on 178 products to Chile and a similar range of preferences on 296 items to India. It would benefit 98 per cent of items being exported by Chile to India and 91 per cent of the goods being exported by India to Chile. The Indian products, which would benefit include textiles, chemicals, pharmaceuticals, engineering and agricultural machinery while Chilean products include copper, newsprint, iodine, fish meal and salmon. The two sides have also discussed the draft reports of the Joint Study Group and agreed to submit their findings to consider further action on a Free Trade Agreement. Chile is a major Latin American country with a GDP of \$76.3 billion and a trade of \$53.2 billion during 2004. India-Chile trade during 2004-05 stood at \$447 million.

Hindustan Times, 9 March, 2006

India to have abundant nuclear fuel: Kalam

NEW DELHI, March 8: Noting that India has a large quantity of thorium, President APJ Abdul Kalam on Wednesday said that in the next five to seven years the country will have abundant nuclear fuel "and the route is thorium". India will have to tap solar power, bio-fuel and nuclear fuel to meet its requirement of 20,000 MW of energy by 2030, Kalam told reporters. Kalam conveyed this on board Air India One 'Tanjore' en route Yangon, the first leg of his two-nation five-day visit to Myanmar and Mauritius. The country was generating 7,000 MW of energy currently and has to add 1,000-1500 MW every year, he said. Pointing out that the uranium reserve was limited, he said thorium, which was available in large amount, would have to be used for energy purpose. "Our scientists are working very hard (on how to extract energy from Thorium)", he said adding that thorium was not fissile material. Kalam expressed confidence that in the next five to seven years, India would have abundant nuclear fuel.

The Times of India, 9 March, 2006

Bangladesh PM coming to India on three-day visit

NEW DELHI, March 8: Bangladesh Prime Minister Khaleda Zia arrives in New Delhi on March 20 on a three-day official visit, one that will give both the countries a chance to repair a relationship that has gone sour in recent years. The visit by Zia, the first in her four years in power, will provide the much-needed opportunity to iron out differences over an entire gamut of issues, including the demarcation of the 4,000 km border, militancy and illegal migration, trade and trans-shipment of natural gas, that continue to cast their shadow over bilateral ties. Although the visit has a substantial agenda, it will be primarily a "goodwill visit" aimed at bridging the trust deficit and creating the right atmosphere to resolve all contentious issues, a senior Bangladesh diplomat said. Above all, both sides are keen to downplay differences and want to inject some warmth in the relationship that has suffered due to very few high-level visits by leaders of the two countries, sources said. Zia arrives with at least four of her senior ministers. In her talks with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, whom she last met at the 13th South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) summit in Dhaka, Zia is also expected to touch on regional issues like boosting synergies among SAARC nations through implementation of the South Asia Free Trade Area (SAFTA) and the stability of the region. Dhaka is likely to focus on the whopping trade deficit, estimated to be over \$2 billion, and will press New Delhi for removing tariff and non-tariff barriers to boost trade between the two countries. "More trade can generate tremendous goodwill among the two countries. Bangladesh is more than willing to do business with India on mutually beneficial terms," a diplomat, who did not wish to be named, said.

The Hindu, 10 March, 2006

Pranab on a three-day visit to Oman

NEW DELHI, March 9: In a move to boost exports of Indian armament systems in the Gulf, Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee is undertaking a three-day visit to Sultanate of Oman from today. Heading a high-level defence delegation, including top brass from Navy, Air Force and Army, the Minister in the course of his visit will hold discussions with top leadership of the country on defence cooperation. The visit is part of high-level exchanges between the two countries coinciding with celebrations of the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relationship between India and Oman. "The visit is indicative of the commitment of the leadership of both countries to consolidate and strengthen the existing relations including closer cooperation in the defence sphere," a Defence Ministry spokesman said. The minister will also be meeting members of Indian community.

The Hindu, 10 March, 2006

Nuke deal will not affect strategic programmes:Kakodkar

NEW DELHI, March 9: Atomic Energy Commission Chairman Anil Kakodkar on Thursday said the Minimum Credible Nuclear Deterrent (MCND) will be kept intact as per the country's original Nuclear Doctrine. "The separation plan of civilian nuclear plants will not adversely affect country's strategic programme and there will be no capping of our strategic programme," he asserted recalling the statement made by Manmohan Singh in Parliament. The proposed separation plan ensures enough fissile material and other inputs to meet the current and future requirements of country's strategic programme, based on "our assessment of the threat perception," he said adding "no constraints whatsoever is placed on our right to construct new facilities for strategic purposes." "The integrity of India's nuclear doctrine and our ability to sustain a Minimum credible nuclear deterrent is adequately protected. Our nuclear policy will continue to be guided by the principles of restraint and responsibility," he reiterated. "The separation plan does not come in the way of the integrity of country's three-staged indigenous nuclear development programme," Kakodkar added.

The Indian Express, 10 March, 2006

Change law for India, Bush tells Cong

WASHINGTON, March 9: The Bush administration on Thursday submitted to Congress its proposal to change US law to allow the sale of nuclear technology to India, said congressional sources. The sources said the administration wants the first of two needed legislative steps enacted by May, but said this would be difficult because the bill raises questions about an already complicated and controversial nuclear deal. Approved in principle last July and confirmed in more detail last week by President George W Bush and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, the agreement would end a three decades-old ban on US civilian nuclear technology sales. But it must first be approved by the US Congress. The 45-member Nuclear Suppliers Group, which oversees nuclear transfers, also must alter its regulations so foreign countries can supply India, whose rapid economic growth has created huge energy demands. India is currently barred under US and international law from acquiring foreign nuclear technology because it refused to sign the nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty and developed nuclear weapons.

The Assam Tribune, 10 March, 2006

India, Myanmar sign accord on petroleum

YANGON, March 9: Taking bilateral cooperation to a higher plane, India and Myanmar today signed three agreements in petroleum, space and education sectors in the presence of President APJ Abdul Kalam and Chairman of the State Peace and Development Council Senior General Than Shwe here, reports PTI. The Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in Petroleum Sector pertains to transport of natural gas from

Arakan port of Myanmar either through a pipeline Via North East or Bangladesh. India has been pressing to build a pipeline from Myanmar through Bangladesh to meet a yawning energy supply gap. The option of converting the gas into Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) for shipping it is also under consideration as it would be cost-effective, considering that the distance was not too much. The MoU was signed by Joint Secretary in the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas Prabh Das and Director-General of Energy Planning Department of the Ministry of Energy of Myanmar, sources said. Another MoU on cooperation in Buddhist studies was inked by Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran and Brig General Thura Aung Ko, Deputy Minister for Religious Affairs, Myanmar. A Framework Agreement on mutual cooperation in the field of Remote Sensing was concluded for setting up of a ground station in Myanmar. The station will receive remote sensing data from IRS satellite for various uses including agriculture purposes like survey of soil and minerals. The documents were signed on the second day of the three-day visit of Kalam to Myanmar, the first-ever by an Indian head of state. Relations between Myanmar and India began warming up rapidly since late 1990s. India has strengthened cooperation with Myanmar in a number of fields including the military sector. On the economic front, India remains committed to achieving the target of increasing bilateral trade to one billion US dollars with Myanmar by 2006. Trade between the two countries has expanded significantly over the last few years. New Delhi is also considering a proposal for setting up a rail link with Myanmar through the North-Eastern states and a feasibility study has already been completed by the Indian Railways.

The Hindu, 11 March, 2006

India, Pakistan to discuss gas price with Iran next week

NEW DELHI, March 10: India and Pakistan will discuss price of gas they plan to import from Iran through the Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline when officials of the three nations meet for the first time on the over 7 billion dollar project next week. The Indian side would be led by Petroleum Secretary, M S Srinivasan, at the tripartite official-level meeting in Teheran from March 13 to 15. "We will discuss gas pricing, project structure and the tripartite Government-to-Government Framework Agreement," Srinivasan told reporters here. So far, discussions have been held on various technical, commercial, financial, legal and other project-related issues by two separate Secretary-level bilateral Joint Working Groups (JWGs) with Pakistan and Iran. "This is the first time we will be discussing price of gas," he said. A tripartite meeting of the technical teams from the three countries was held in New Delhi in January to discuss various parameters of the project. As the domestic availability of gas was not adequate to meet the country's demand, India has been pursuing import of gas, both liquefied natural gas (LNG) and through transnational pipelines from Iran, Turkmenistan and Myanmar. The Iran-Pakistan-India pipeline project envisages a line of about 20,000-km length from Assaluyeh in Iran to the India-Pakistan border.

The Times of India, 11 March, 2006

India pledges \$2 million to UN disaster fund

UNITED NATIONS, March 10: India has committed \$2 million to a UN fund that aims at combating natural disasters, specially "neglected humanitarian emergencies", which do not figure high on the media radar. Minister of State for External Affairs Anand Sharma announced India's contribution to the new Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) at a high-level meeting held here on Thursday. UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan launched the fund in the presence of diplomats from nearly 40 countries. "India is convinced of the need for continuing international engagement in the post-disaster period, for restoring livelihoods, building resilience and reducing vulnerability," said Sharma. "We also expect the fund to address the tragedy of what has been termed as 'neglected emergencies'. For too long, emergency aid commitment has been subject to the so-called 'CNN effect'," said the minister. The CERF was approved by the UN General Assembly in December last year. The fund has been set up to provide a more timely response to humanitarian emergencies and help save lives in sudden disasters by cutting down the time required for raising resources in the immediate aftermath.

The Hindu, 13 March, 2006

Basic framework of India-China border talks "within next two-three rounds"

KOTTAYAM, March 12: The second phase of the seventh round of India-China border talks began at Kumarakom near here on Sunday on a positive note, with both sides confident of giving a final shape to the basic framework for settlement in the near future. Briefing the media before the talks began here on Sunday, National Security Adviser M.K. Naryanan said he hoped to wrap up the basic framework "within the next two or three rounds." The Chinese Special Representative Dai Bingguo, who joined him a short while later, said he expected the talks to conclude "as early as possible." The Indian Ambassador to China, Nalin Suri and his Chinese counterpart Sun Yu Xui were also present during the briefing. The 21-member contingent, consisting of 11 Chinese members and 10 Indians, arrived here from Kochi by 12.30 p.m. After the traditional welcome, the two delegations were presented with a brief display of Kalaripayattu, the traditional Kerala martial art. The first round of talks, which began by 3 p.m., was over by 5 p.m. The delegations had their dinner in a houseboat on the Vebanad Lake. A brief recital of Kathakali awaited them on their return. The two sides would have their second round of talks at Kumarakom on Monday morning, after which they would go to Kochi.

The Hindu, 13 March, 2006

India, Mauritius to ink deal on hydrocarbon exploration

PORT LOUIS, March 12: Building on its long-standing ties with Mauritius, India has offered to help resuscitate two of the three distressed pillars of its economy. In turn, Mauritius has agreed to explore the possibility of allowing India to explore oil and gas in its exclusive economic zone. Both sides also discussed a long-term strategy to help Mauritius diversify into new sectors that would cushion the impact of the shrinking textile and sugar sectors and expand space for tourism, the sole sector that is performing well. India agreed to rush five lakh doses of mosquito repellent to help combat a dengue-like mosquito transmitted disease that has caused a scare. "The proposed agreement on hydrocarbon exploration could be a different ball game. It can potentially be a major industry as the off-shore here holds rich reserves of oil and gas," said Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran while briefing newsmen about the discussions between President A. P. J. Abdul Kalam and Mauritius Prime Minister Navinchandra Ramgoolam here on Sunday. Mr. Kalam assured that India would be a very reliable partner in making the transition smooth and creating new sources of prosperity. With the brunt of the economic decline in textiles and sugar being largely borne by people of Indian origin, he indicated India's willingness to double the earlier commitment of sourcing 10 lakh garment pieces from Mauritius. In the long term, both countries would attempt to move to the upper end of the textile range. This intent would be reflected in the Comprehensive Economic Cooperation and Partnership Agreement expected to be signed by the middle of the year, said Mr. Saran. In the sugar sector, India would assist in research and development. The President also dwelt on introduction of new sugarcane varieties that would yield more fibre to be used for ethanol and generating power.

The Hindu, 13 March, 2006

Depoliticise India-Bangladesh issues: envoy

DHAKA, March 12: Indian High Commissioner to Dhaka Veena Sikri has called for depoliticising the long-standing issues between India and Bangladesh and looking at them with utmost seriousness. "The issues should be looked at in a serious way. If the politicians want to solve the problems, they should look for a solution through dialogue. And constant engagement in dialogue is the only way for a good solution," she said in an interview to BDNEWS, a news agency of Dhaka, ahead of Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's visit to India, which begins on March 20. Ms. Sikri said the Bangladesh Prime Minister and her Indian counterpart Manmohan Singh would discuss all aspects of the bilateral relations. She hinted that both sides were looking forward to signing a number of trade agreements. There would also be a long-term extension of the agreement on water transit. As for the bilateral Free Trade Agreement (FTA) proposed by India, she said Bangladesh had unbalanced trade with many other countries, but that did not become a political issue. India put forward the proposal in good faith. "I think open discussion is the only way to solve the problem." The envoy said she acknowledged the concerns raised by Bangladesh over the FTA. "If you have any other proposal, we are ready to discuss. Now the Bangladesh Prime Minister will meet our Prime Minister and we will discuss it and we hope, a substantial outcome will be there." On Bangladesh's concerns over trade deficit and removal of non-tariff and para-tariff barriers, she said the problem arose when "you do not look for a long-term solution." Replying to a question on sharing of common river waters, the High Commissioner said that after the signing of Ganges water sharing treaty, India looked forward to resolving similar issues with the same spirit. Bangladesh was a water surplus country, but faced the problems of water management and siltation, areas where India could help.

The Indian Express, 13 March, 2006

Rejecting Indo-US won't stop Iran going nuclear

WASHINGTON, March 12: Even if US Congress rejects the Indo-US civil nuclear deal citing possible harm on efforts to halt Iran's suspected atomic weapons programme, it would have no effect on Tehran's decisions, an expert has said, while warning that such a "futile gesture" would have a devastating effect on Indo-US ties. "Were Congress somehow to reject the Administration's deal in some effort to maintain a consistent principle on non-proliferation, it would have no effect on Iran's decisions. But that futile gesture would have a devastating effect on US relations with India," said Robert Kagan, senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. "In our less-than-ideal world, where we are often told America needs good friends and allies, that would be a terrible bargain," he wrote in today's The Washington Post. He said some in Congress would argue that the Indo-US deal "harms efforts to halt Iran's nuclear weapons programme because it erects a double standard: We are willing to let India do what we are not willing to let Iran do." But "the notion that the Indian deal will set back prospects for a diplomatic deal with Iran assumes that such prospects exist. All available evidence suggests otherwise." "The Iranian government appears committed to building nuclear weapons and will not be deterred by threats -- except possibly the threat of removal by military means -- or won over by blandishments. It has risked international isolation and economic sanctions and even the remote threat of US air and missile strikes to keep its programme going." "Are we supposed to believe that the main obstacle standing in the way of a happy resolution to the Iranian nuclear crisis is now the Indian deal?", he wrote.

The Times of India, 14 March, 2006

India, China upbeat over border talks

KOTTAYAM (KERALA), March 13: Indian and Chinese officials on Monday discussed their decades-old border dispute at a scenic resort near here, with both sides hopeful of finalizing a "basic framework" soon to resolve the

issue. India's National Security Adviser M.K. Narayanan and Chinese Vice Minister Dai Bingguo discussed the details of a possible resolution of the border row at the Taj Garden Retreat at Kumarakom on the banks of the picturesque Vembanad lake. "Talks are progressing well. It may take another two to three rounds to finalize a basic framework, but we are on course," said an Indian official on the third and final day of the seventh round of talks that opened in New Delhi on Saturday and then shifted here for two days. The basic framework would include a "political settlement" to resolve the disputed 3,550-km border from a strategic perspective. "The actual delineation of the border can happen only after the basic framework is agreed upon between the two sides," the official said. Narayanan said: "We are optimistic about the outcome. The talks are now at an important stage. The next round of talks will be held in China." "We've made a good start. We've made progress. We would find a solution soon," Dai added.

The Indian Express, 14 March, 2006

Russia to sell nuclear fuel to India

WASHINGTON, March 13: Russia has informed the United States that Moscow intends to supply nuclear fuel for India's Tarapur reactor, a State Department official said. Critics worry the action will erode further international rules governing nuclear proliferation. Opponents say that Russia's decision was spurred by a US determination last year to share civilian nuclear technology with India and it signals a coming flood of countries looking to trade nuclear goods outside international treaties. "This is the first salvo," Daryl Kimball, executive director of the Arms Control Association, said on Monday. "China could be next in trying to propose a similar loophole for Pakistan." US President George W Bush decided last year to change decades of anti-proliferation policy and negotiate a deal to supply nuclear technology and fuel to India. The deal was completed just this month, during Bush's India visit. The State Department official, who spoke on Monday on the condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to comment publicly, disagreed that Russia's decision could be linked with the Indo-US agreement. India, the official said, is short of fuel needed to power a civilian reactor that provides crucial energy. "A serious need exists independent of the Indo-US arrangement," said the official, who has direct knowledge of Russia's dealings with the State Department.

The Indian Express, 14 March, 2006

Over time, 90 p.c. of India's nuclear reactors will be under safeguards: U.S.

NEW DELHI, March 13: U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Richard Boucher has said that as India builds larger nuclear power reactors over the years close to 90 per cent of its reactors would come under safeguards. In a roundtable with Indian and Pakistani journalists on March 9 in Washington, Mr. Boucher said, "If you look at their [Indian] separation plan, there's a very clear commitment to place all future civilian thermal reactors and all future civilian fast-breeder reactors under safeguards in perpetuity." That's a very important commitment because as we understand India's programme, they intend to build quite a few very large reactors for power needs over the coming years. They plan to build fast-breeders on the civilian side. "And so I think the way we calculate it is you go from a situation where right now I think 19 per cent of the reactors are under safeguards ... as soon as the separation plan is implemented, and you know, they have to work it out with the IAEA [International Atomic Energy Agency] and things, but that will lead to 65 per cent being under safeguards. And over time that's going to rise to 90 per cent, almost 90 per cent," a transcript of Mr. Boucher's remarks said.

The Hindu, 16 March, 2006

India counters U.S. objections to Russia's decision to supply fuel

NEW DELHI, March 15: Dangling the carrot of "major" civilian nuclear imports before the United States in the event of a change in the laws there, India on Wednesday countered Washington's objections to Russia's decision to supply light enriched uranium (LEU) for the Tarapur plant. "The U.S. is aware of the urgent need for fuel for Tarapur," the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) spokesperson said when asked for his response to Washington's reservations about the Russian decision. "There is no violation of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) guidelines and Russia has approached the group under the safety exception clause," he said. Senior officials told The Hindu that the Russian offer "really has no connection to our nuclear deal with the United States." In all interactions over the past year, Russia assured India that it would continue to provide LEU for Tarapur as and when required, an official said. This point was reiterated when Prime Minister Manmohan Singh went to Moscow last December and the final technical details of the transfer were sorted out in January. However, Russia waited till India and the U.S. reached agreement on March 2 before notifying the NSG of its decision.

The Hindu, 16 March, 2006

Canada to review nuclear deal with India

ISLAMABAD, March 15: Visiting Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper has said his Government will review the "controversial" civilian nuclear cooperation agreement reached with India by the previous regime. At a news conference after talks with Pakistan Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz here on Tuesday, Mr. Harper said countries involved in building reactors must sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty. The reference was to a September 2005 pact, by which Canada agreed to resume supply of nuclear-related "dual-use items" for Indian civilian facilities after three decades of sanctions. Mr. Harper said there was no discussion with his Pakistani counterpart on the civilian

nuclear deal between India and the United States. Mr. Aziz said he discussed with Mr. Harper a wide range of issues, including Pakistan's cooperation with the international community in the war on terror, trade, economic relations between the two countries and regional issues including progress in the Indo-Pak talks. He said the talks focussed on the possibility of a free trade agreement between the two countries. He briefed the Canadian Premier on developments in the region, including Pakistan's relations with Afghanistan, India, Iran and China. He explained Pakistan's position on Kashmir. Mr. Harper said Canadian troops in Afghanistan would continue their peacekeeping role. Their mission was to uphold the cause of international security and peace. He said Pakistan and Canada would enhance trade and economic cooperation. He appreciated Pakistan's role in fighting terrorism and said Canada supported continuation of dialogue between Pakistan and India.

The Hindu, 16 March, 2006

Gas pipeline: talks conclude

DUBAI, March 15: India, Iran and Pakistan have concluded their first round of official-level talks in Teheran on the proposed 2,100-km Iran-India gas pipeline. Official sources told The Hindu that talks revolved around the project structure, feasibility and pricing. "As this was the first round, details were not discussed. Consequently, it would be premature to talk about the preparation of a Memorandum of Understanding," the sources said. During talks on "project structure," the three sides discussed whether it would be appropriate to form a joint "overarching" authority that would steer the entire project. The other option would be country-specific, where each of them would construct the pipeline only within their territorial limits and then connect them together. The sources clarified that a detailed joint technical feasibility study on the project was yet to commence. The specific route, which this pipeline would take, would be covered by this study. In a written response to a question in the Rajya Sabha, Minister of State for Petroleum and Natural Gas Dinsha Patel had said three possible routes — northern, central and southern — all passing through the Pakistani province of Baluchistan, were under consideration during the preparation of a detailed project report. Discussions on "pricing" revolved around tapping appropriate sources for financing the project. While Iran might not be inclined to seek international funding, India and Pakistan showed greater interest. According to current estimates, the pipeline could cost around \$7 billion.

The Indian Express, 16 March, 2006

'India not apologetic of Indo-US ties'

NEW DELHI, March 15: In a blunt rejection of criticism by Left allies and the Opposition, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh today made it clear that India is not surrendering its autonomy of independent foreign policy in engaging with the US. At the same time, Singh said he was not apologetic on forging new relations with the US. He felt this would create 'new space' and 'greater elbow room' for economic development. Describing the US as a 'super power', he said "it is in our interest to engage" with that country "to see wherever space exists, we can take advantage of it". "Any notion that the new deal we have with the US amounts to surrender to our independent thinking is totally misplaced," he said replying to the discussion on the working of the ministry of external affairs in the Rajya Sabha. The Prime Minister dispelled apprehensions of India associating itself with any move at regime change in the region. "Certainly, we are not part and parcel of any attempt to change regime," he stressed. On India-China relations, he hoped 'some solution' to the 'difficult' boundary problem would emerge from the ongoing talks between special representatives of the two countries. Chinese President Hu Jintao would be visiting the country later this year. Promising to pursue a pro-active role with its neighbours for a prosperous, inter-connected South Asia, Singh said Bangladesh Premier Khaleda Zia would be visiting India later this month during which the two countries would have candid discussions on bilateral issues.

The Times of India, 17 March, 2006

India ready to shoulder global role: US report

WASHINGTON, March 16: India is now poised to shoulder global obligations in cooperation with the United States "in a way befitting a major power," the Bush administration said on Thursday in a sweeping overview of American strategic interests worldwide. The administration's National Security Strategy document for 2006 built on its 2002 report which first identified India as a "growing world power with which we have common strategic interest." In effect, the latest report said New Delhi has arrived and spoke more glowingly about India than any other country. While the 2002 report spoke about residual differences over development of India's nuclear and missile programme, the new report released Thursday referred only to the "bold agreement" of July 2005, calling it a "roadmap to realize the meaningful cooperation that had eluded our two nations for decades." "We have made great strides in transforming America's relationship with India, a major power that shares our commitment to freedom, democracy, and rule of law," the report declared in a chapter devoted to "Developing Agendas for Cooperative Action with the Other Main Centers of Global Power." The NSS report also institutionalized Washington's new differentiated approach towards India over Pakistan, saying "America's relationship with Pakistan will not be a mirror image of our relationship with India." While the report spoke of shared democratic values that underpinned its ties with India, it said the U.S. was "eager to see Pakistan move along a stable, secure, and democratic path." The report was also sharply critical of China while acknowledging the advances made by the Asian giant.

The Times of India, 17 March, 2006

Nepal Maoists to conditionally give up arms

NEW DELHI, March 16: Nepal's Maoist guerrillas are ready to lay down arms if King Gyanendra agrees to form a constituent assembly. But if the monarch does not agree, they will continue their campaign to overthrow the "stubborn king", a spokesman for the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist told the BBC Hindi service. The Maoists have also asked the Indian government to clarify its stand on the kind of democracy it wanted in Nepal. "We are clearly saying that we want to be a part of the new mainstream, which would have to be through the process of formation of the constituent assembly, and then the people of Nepal would decide what kind of democracy they want." If this happens, we are ready to give up arms and join the peaceful democratic set up," spokesman Krishna Bahadur Mahara said in an interview from an undisclosed location. Asked whether the Maoists saw King Gyanendra as the biggest roadblock to this, Mahara said: "If the king agrees then the constituent assembly can be set up peacefully. But if he doesn't agree, and all political parties agree, people are ready and the international community supports it then we will have to speed up the agitation process." We have been fighting for the past 10 years and will continue our struggle with the political parties to make the stubborn king understand or to bring an end to his rule if he doesn't agree." Mahara said the Maoists had nothing in personal against the king but were opposed to the monarchy. "We have no personal agenda against the king, we are against the monarchy as an institution. Monarchy is an old system, it is feudal and has no place in today's world and Nepal does not need it.

Hindustan Times, 17 March, 2006

Tarapur deal today, Uncle Sam wary

NEW DELHI, March 16: Russian Premier Mikhail Fradkov will seal the deal to supply uranium fuel for the Tarapur Atomic Power Station (TAPS) during his meetings with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on Friday. Russia, a member of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), is supplying the uranium for fuel-starved Tarapur under the safety exception clause. The decision to supply 60 tonnes of uranium to the safeguarded TAPS 1 and 2 will be finalised despite US reservations that it was "important" for India to first fulfill its "obligations" under the Indo-US statement on civil nuclear cooperation. Diplomatic analysts say the reservations stem more from the process of sealing the deal than the actual supply of fuel. NSG members should not be seen to be acting independently or out of consensus, they said. "It's not a question so much of who, the French or Russians or Americans, supply the fuel," a source said, but that "the process should not appear to be hurried and it should be completed as a process in totality. India needs to take the initiative to work with the IAEA on the additional protocol and safeguards." The US is trying to solve the issue on a long-term basis, and is "committed to providing a regular supply of fuel through the NSG," state department spokesman Adam Ereli said.

Hindustan Times, 17 March, 2006

India-Iran-Pak pipeline: Talks end with no deal

TEHRAN, March 16: Talks between India, Iran and Pakistan on building a new gas pipeline ended on Thursday without any agreement and a new round of negotiations is scheduled for late April. "Iran made a proposal on the price (of gas) that we must examine," India's Petroleum Secretary MS Srinivasan told reporters in televised remarks. Iran's state news agency confirmed Tehran had proposed a price for gas, but India and Pakistan said they needed time for consultations. The next round of talks are scheduled for Islamabad on April 30, state television reported. The sides had hoped to settle on the framework for the project that would see Iranian gas travel by pipeline through Pakistan to India. They are yet to sign a memorandum to set the long-stalled project in motion. Iran has its own hurdles to clear as well. "We have told them that a government commitment necessitates a vote in the Iranian parliament and we will need another six or seven extra months for that," Deputy Oil Minister Mohammad-Hadi Nejad-Hosseini said on television. The 2,600-kilometre (1,600-mile) pipeline from Iran's southern Pars field, estimated to cost more than seven billion dollars (€5.9 billion), was first proposed in 1994. India plans to initially draw 60 million cubic metres (2.11 billion cubic feet) of gas from the pipeline and increase the quantity to 90 million cubic metres (3.17 billion cubic feet) within two to three years. Pakistan has estimated its initial demand at 30 million cubic metres which would double by 2013.

The Hindu, 17 March, 2006

India a non-proliferator, says U.S President

Silver Spring (United States), March 16: United States President George W. Bush asserted that India had been a non-proliferator, and said Congress should pass a law that would allow sale of nuclear technology to New Delhi. "India is a non-proliferator. It has been a non-proliferator for the past 30 years. They have got a record, and in my judgement, [the record] should cause Congress to pass old law. Treat them as a new partner, as India wants to be a part of international agreements that will deal with proliferation," Mr. Bush said on Wednesday. He said he did not think the July 18, 2005 civilian nuclear energy pact between India and the U.S. would harm Washington's relations with Pakistan.

The Times of India, 18 March, 2006

India, Russia to expand nuclear energy cooperation

NEW DELHI, March 17: India and Russia on Friday decided to expand cooperation in strategic areas of civil

nuclear energy and space as Moscow agreed to supply 60 tonnes of uranium to fuel-starved Tarapur reactors in the teeth of American opposition. The two countries also declared their resolve to expand bilateral trade to \$10 billion in the next five years and set up a joint study group to explore the possibility of signing a Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement between them. "I would like to convey our warm appreciation to the Russian government for responding positively to meet the requirements for nuclear fuel supplies to Tarapur I and Tarapur II," Prime Minister Manmohan Singh told reporters at a joint press interaction with visiting Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov. Moscow will supply around 60 tonnes of uranium fuel for safeguarded reactors at Tarapur Atomic Power Station (TAPS) I and II (located near Mumbai) to enable it to run in "safe and reliable conditions." Moscow last supplied fuel to the Tarapur reactors in 2001, a move that also provoked American protests. Russia and France have intermittently supplied fuel to the Tarapur reactors, built by US firm General Electric in the 1960s. Washington stopped fuel supplies to the plants after New Delhi conducted its first nuclear test in 1974. "We envision a substantial increase in the sphere of nuclear energy in India's overall energy mix. We see the Kudankulam project as a flagship of our cooperation in this area," Manmohan Singh said at Hyderabad House after talks with Fradkov.

The Indian Express, 18 March, 2006

India has the right pill for Myanmar

YANGOON, March 17: The Indian pharma industry should take a bow. In a country where the China-Singapore-Thailand troika controls a major chunk of trade, Indian pharmaceuticals have driven out the existing competition to make it to the No. 1 slot with their products capturing nearly 60 per cent of the market share. A cursory look at the market in Yangon tells an arresting story. At least 10 pharma majors of India have their country offices here. Gursharan Singh, country director for Ranbaxy, the first Indian company to make a foray into the Myanmar market in 1994, says these companies are doing well due to their reputation for high quality drugs at pocket-friendly prices. It was a concoction of these factors that slowly inched out China and other big players. Karun Gaur, the country head of Dr Reddy's for the past five years, says country managers of companies like the Pfizer and Glaxosmithkline had to leave because it became unsustainable to maintain an office here due to the squeeze in their profits. US sanctions also kept many aspirants away from the country. Ironically, the rise of the Indian pharma coincides with that of the military regime. Gaur says till 1987 China used to control most of the market, Indians began their advent in the mid-'90s. But some restrictions apply.

The Hindu, 18 March, 2006

Russia can help in pipeline project

NEW DELHI, March 17: New Delhi is hopeful that "ways and means" can be found to involve Moscow in the construction of the proposed Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline project, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said after talks with Russian Premier Mikhail Fradkov here on Friday. Mr. Fradkov pointed to Russia's "ample experience" in building pipelines. "If there are suggestions, we will certainly consider them," he said about its involvement in the project. Taking questions, Dr. Singh thanked Moscow for agreeing to supply uranium fuel for the safeguarded reactors of the Tarapur atomic power station, stressing that India looked forward to working with Russia bilaterally and multilaterally. Senior officials said enhanced civilian nuclear cooperation figured in the talks between Dr. Singh and Mr. Fradkov even as Russia was awaiting the U.S. Congress approval of the New Delhi-Washington nuclear deal and the lifting of curbs by the Nuclear Suppliers' Group. According to the officials, no separate agreement was necessary for Moscow to supply fuel to Tarapur, which comes under a safety clause Russia invoked. It has already informed the NSG of its decision to supply the fuel. Pointing out that energy security would be the theme of the G-8 summit being hosted by Russia in St. Petersburg in July, Dr. Singh said there was a substantial increase in nuclear cooperation between the two countries and described the Koodankulam plant in Tamil Nadu as a "flagship project." On the gas pipeline from Iran, he said India was desperately short of hydrocarbons and was interested in entering into both bilateral and multilateral arrangements to address the issue. Both Dr. Singh and Mr. Fradkov stressed the importance of building business-to-business links for India and Russia to enjoy a healthy trade relationship. Dr. Singh said they had set a trade target of \$10 billion for the next five years. A joint study group was set up to chart a future comprehensive economic cooperation agreement, he said. Private sector partnership was the way forward in trade and investment matters.

The Hindu, 18 March, 2006

Border fencing in a year

NEW DELHI, March 17: Observing that infiltration in Jammu and Kashmir has come down significantly largely due to the fence erected on the border, Union Home Minister Shivraj Patil on Friday expressed confidence that the remaining work of border fencing on both eastern and western sectors will be completed within a year's time. Addressing a meeting of the Parliamentary Consultative Committee of the Home Ministry, Mr. Patil said it was essential to expeditiously complete the fencing work in other areas as well. The Consultative Committee took stock of the progress of border fencing with Pakistan and Bangladesh and also deliberated upon several issues related to border managements. The Home Minister emphasised the need to strengthen the Border Security Force, Sashastra Seema Bal, Indo-Tibetan Border Police and Assam Rifles by providing them with more men, modern equipment and intelligence support. Favouring construction of more security posts and a road along the

porous Indo-Nepal border to ensure effective patrolling, Mr. Patil stressed the need for proper coordination and cooperation between the Centre and the States in the border-management task. He said the Centre was also taking steps to strengthen coastal security by giving funds to the States for construction of police stations near the coastline and also for acquiring speed boats and modern equipment.

The Hindu, 18 March, 2006

Pakistan sounds a note of warning

ISLAMABAD, March 17: Pakistan on Friday night said the grant of waiver to the India-U.S. agreement on civilian nuclear cooperation as a special case, would have "serious implications for the security environment" in South Asia. The Pakistan Foreign Office in a statement said the objective of strategic stability in South Asia and the global non-proliferation regime would have been better served if the United States considered a "package approach" for Pakistan and India. It said that an even-handed approach should have been adopted to prevent a nuclear arms race and promote restraint, while ensuring that the legitimate needs of both India and Pakistan for civilian nuclear power generation were met. The statement said the history of nuclear development in South Asia showed that Pakistan pursued the nuclear option only after India tested a nuclear device in 1974. The statement maintained that Pakistan's civilian nuclear power reactors are totally covered by the IAEA safeguards including the spent fuel produced by these reactors and its future nuclear power generation reactors will also be under safeguards. "We expect all the NSG member countries to be sensitive to Pakistan's energy needs and extend cooperation in the civilian nuclear sector."

The Times of India, 20 March, 2006

India, US begin process of finalising N-deal

NEW DELHI, March 19: Having taken a breather after hyperactive negotiations of the past few months, India and US will now start work on the next phase of the nuclear agreement. As the draft legislation by the Bush administration makes its tortuous way through the US Congress, the two countries have begun the outline of a final bilateral civil nuclear agreement, imaginatively called the "123 Agreement". India received the first draft of the agreement last week. Foreign secretary Shyam Saran will now travel to Washington at the end of this month to work out the details of the document with US undersecretary of state Nicholas Burns. This will be a much easier agreement to work through than the separation plan, which was presented to the US side during US president George W Bush's visit. Since most of the thorny issues between the two countries have already been resolved the "123" will simply be reflected in the agreement. But it is important for two reasons. First, it will set out the terms, quantities and nature of nuclear commerce that US and India will engage in. The details of this document have been demanded by many Congressmen, some of whom are described as fence-sitters, before they decide whether to vote for the deal. Both sides will, therefore, have to step on the gas to get the text of the agreement ready, which will be ready for signing as soon as the deal goes through Congress. As a matter of fact, the draft legislation that has been introduced in the Congress includes within it a clause which says the "123 Agreement" would automatically go into effect unless the Congress moves to block it. But as Nick Burns told journalists recently, "The bigger conceptual agreement is a separation plan." Second, it could be seen by some in US as the last chance to slip in some conditions for India into the agreement.

The Hindu, 20 March, 2006

Nepal Maoists, parties sign pact

KATHMANDU, March 19: Joining forces against King Gyanendra, seven political parties and the Maoists in Nepal on Sunday announced an agreement to launch a fresh agitation next month against his autocratic rule and find a political solution to the decade-old armed conflict by holding polls to the Constituent Assembly. The seven-party Alliance for Restoration of Democracy also urged the rebels to end the blockade of roads connecting Kathmandu and the rest of Nepal. The Maoists and the Alliance agreed to form an interim government by holding a national political conference of the agitating democratic forces and to establish full-fledged democracy by holding elections to the Constituent Assembly, the parties said in a joint statement. Nepali Congress central member Shekhar Koirala said the Maoists agreed to withdraw the three-week-long economic blockade. But a rebel statement on this is yet to come. The intensified agitation programme starting on April 6 includes a four-day general strike and civil disobedience movement, besides a massive public rally in Kathmandu on April 8. The leaders of the Alliance called on the people to participate in their peaceful movement to restore democracy and return sovereign power and state authority to the people through elections. The parties also called on the international community to support their initiatives to end absolute monarchy and find a political solution to the insurgency, the joint statement said. They reiterated their commitment to reinstate Parliament and form a powerful all-party government, which will hold a dialogue with the rebels. The parties have also agreed to continue a dialogue with the Maoists to seek common ground. On behalf of the seven-party Alliance, Nepali Congress spokesman Krishna Sitaula and party treasurer Mahanta Thakur, Nepal Communist Party UML's senior politburo members Jhalanath Khanal and Bamdev Gautam, Janamorcha Nepal President Amik Serchan and CPN-Unity Centre leader Prakash inked the agreement while CPN-Maoist chief Prachanda signed for the rebels.

The Hindu, 20 March, 2006

New Delhi, Dhaka looking at `CBMs' route

NEW DELHI, March 19: Confidence-building measures (CBMs) that staple of the India-Pakistan peace process could provide a way out of the bilateral logjam on India's eastern front with this week's state visit of Bangladesh Prime Minister Khaleda Zia. It could be a perfect occasion for the two sides to engage in some creative diplomacy. With Bangladesh holding SAARC chairmanship, Begum Khaleda's visit has a formal focus on regional issues but both sides are anxious to get the bilateral agenda on to a firmer political footing. After a long period during which normal institutional mechanisms for bilateral discussion on different subjects had fallen into disuse, India and Bangladesh have managed over the past year to revive high-level engagement in trade, security and water management. Though the agenda of discussion is fairly open-ended, each side is expected to bring to the table issues that are of particular concern to itself. For Bangladesh, this means trade and water. Dhaka wants Delhi to cut or eliminate tariff and non-tariff barriers so that Bangladesh has a fair chance of reducing its yawning \$2 billion annual trade deficit with India. Apart from cheaper or easier access to Indian markets, Dhaka is looking for unilateral concessions on some specific product lines and an "early harvest package" under the proposed free trade agreement. On water management, Begum Khaleda will want to hear Dr Singh reiterate the earlier assurances made by Priyaranjan Dasgupta when he was Water Resources Minister that India's river-linking plans would not cover water in which Bangladesh has lower riparian rights. In addition, Dhaka is anxious about the effect the proposed Tipaimukh barrage would have on dry season flows of the Surma and Kushiara rivers. Indian officials concede that there have been crossed signals in the past and the slow progress on joint water management has not helped either side. "There are 53 rivers (other than the Ganges) waiting to be shared," said an official. India has been seeking to improve connectivity with Bangladesh and between the north-eastern States and West Bengal. Reports from Dhaka suggest the government is apparently ready for "forward movement on connectivity" between the two countries. Among the rail and road links on the agenda are revival of the Sealdah-Tongi and Agartala-Akhaura-Chittagong rail lines as well as a bus service between Shillong and Sylhet with onward connections to Guwahati and Dhaka. These will be intended for passengers or perhaps point-to-point trade but they do open up the possibility of a more generalised and efficient movement of goods.

The Hindu, 20 March, 2006

India takes stock of ties with West Asia

NEW DELHI, March 19: Minister of State for External Affairs E. Ahamed has announced that New Delhi is about to embark on a new initiative to build stronger ties with its extended neighbourhood to the west. "In line with our successful `look east' policy, it is time to take a fresh look at the West Asian region under a `look west' policy," Mr. Ahamed told Indian ambassadors and heads of mission from the West Asian region who had assembled in Doha. Ambassadors from Iran, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman and Kuwait were present at the meeting. The Minister acquainted the envoys with the changes in India-U.S. relations and its implications for the region. The meeting also noted the region's interest on forging closer ties with Asia. Mr. Ahamed told The Hindu over telephone that a follow-up action to King Abdullah's visit had been set in motion, which went beyond the issue of "energy security." "We are equally concerned about the stability of the Gulf not only from an economic point of view but also because the safety of millions of Indians who reside in this region is involved." Apart from oil and gas, information technology, biotechnology and pharmaceuticals would become the key areas of cooperation in future. The first ministerial meeting of the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and India is beginning in Muscat on March 25.

The Times of India, 21 March, 2006

Indo-US nuclear deal: Support in Senate

WASHINGTON, March 20: The US-India nuclear deal is set to sail through the US Senate following the backing it has got from Washington's top lawmaker on nuclear issues. Senator Richard Lugar, who heads the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that will review the deal, has said that despite doubts about the agreement in various quarters, he feels "a majority of members of the Senate... are probably going to come down on the side of the legislation" once their concerns are addressed. A preliminary estimate made by lobbying groups suggests that the deal has majority support in the 18-member Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC), with very few lawmakers inclined to oppose it. Besides Lugar, nine other Republican Senators on the Committee are said to favor the deal. However, the deal faces considerable resistance in the 49-member House International Relations Committee (HIRC) headed by Illinois' Republican Henry Hyde, who is himself leery of the agreement. Besides Hyde, there are a number of lawmakers among 26 Republicans on the committee, including Indiana's Dan Burton, California's Dana Rohrabacher, and Florida's Ileana-Ros Lehtinen, who are expected to offer resistance if not changes to the deal, included batting for Pakistan. Here the administration will be banking more on the 23 Democrat lawmakers, some of whom like ranking member Tom Lantos and former India caucus co-chair Joseph Crowley, have spoken for the deal. The agreement has to go be voted through the Senate and House committees before it before the full Senate and the House of Representatives. For now though, the Bush administration and the deal's supporters are taking heart from Lugar's remarks that he will go with the deal if he is "satisfied that the new strategic relationship is in the best interest of the United States, and that there are considerable if not complete safeguards with regard to nuclear fuel."

The Indian Express, 21 March, 2006

US takes n-deal to fuel suppliers

NEW DELHI, March 20: Having tabled the legislation before its Congress to enable a civil nuclear cooperation agreement with India, US will now take the next important step this week and brief the Nuclear Suppliers Group at Vienna on the deal struck with India. New Delhi has also been doing its bit ahead of the meeting. Last Tuesday, Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran briefed all NSG ambassadors represented in India (nearly 35) on the separation plan and how India is planning to meet all its obligations. At the Vienna meeting starting Wednesday, US Assistant Secretary of State for international security and non-proliferation Stephen Rademaker and Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia Richard Boucher will brief the NSG's Consultative Group and explain how the deal strengthens the non-proliferation regime. Significantly, Commissioner of the US Nuclear Regulatory Commission Peter Lyons will be here around the time the NSG meets. Lyons, who starts his trip on Wednesday, will also visit Tarapur and meet with DAE officials. He will look at the safety, regulatory and management aspects while firming up a view, which could be important as the Congress debates the legislation, on standards and practices being adopted by India. It's learnt that a senior Indian diplomat will also be going from Delhi to be present in Vienna. The Consultative Group comprises key officials from all 45 members and decides by consensus. It is the important functional layer below the NSG Plenary. The plenary, which also includes political representatives, will be the all-important meeting where the final call will be made and this is expected to take place end of May or early.

The Hindu, 21 March, 2006

Keen on deeper ties: Khaleda

NEW DELHI, March 20: Calling for "candid and constructive" discussions with the Indian leadership, Bangladesh Prime Minister Khaleda Zia arrived here on Monday on a three-day State visit. She is scheduled to hold talks with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on Tuesday evening. "I hope that as a result of our discussions it would be possible for us to create conditions for perceptible improvement in the content of our cooperative relations," Begum Zia said on her arrival. Describing the two countries as close neighbours, she said: "Our bonds of friendship are deeply rooted in ... history. Our friendship has over the years drawn strength from our very intimate economic, political and cultural ties. We are, indeed, keen to deepen these ties." According to Begum Zia, the potential for India-Bangladesh relations was immense and it would be her "desire" to discuss with Dr. Singh and other Indian leaders how best to realise this potential. The visiting Prime Minister said that while India and Bangladesh had made impressive economic and social progress, their many problems remained daunting. "The problem of poverty and deprivation still stalks our countries. We can overcome these problems only through cooperation in an environment of peace and stability." "I would certainly like to utilise my present visit to discuss all issues of relevance to our multi-faceted relations. But, equally, importantly, it would be my intention to carry forward our sustained engagement in a positive direction ... " she added. An agreement on bilateral investment protection is likely to be signed on Tuesday after talks between Begum Zia and Dr. Singh. The Bangladesh leader will also call on President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam apart from meeting a host of senior Ministers. Soon after her arrival, Minister of State for External Affairs E. Ahamed and Lok Sabha Speaker Somnath Chatterjee called on the Prime Minister. Welcoming her to India, Mr. Ahamed referred in general terms to trade, investment and security issues between the two sides. India, Mr. Ahamed said, wanted to see a strong, stable and prosperous Bangladesh: a point made by Dr. Singh to Begum Zia during their meeting in Dhaka on the sidelines of the SAARC summit in November 2005. In a related development, the External Affairs Ministry spokesman said her visit "may be seen" in the context of the policy of sustained and continuous high-level engagement that India has instituted with Bangladesh. "Bangladesh is a close and friendly neighbour and the visit is testimony to the importance that both countries attach to bilateral relations," the spokesman stressed, adding that the entire gamut of relations would be discussed during the Manmohan-Khaleda meeting.

The Hindu, 21 March, 2006

Charges baseless, says Pakistan

ISLAMABAD, March 20: Pakistan on Monday described National Security Adviser M.K. Narayanan's comment that it was breeding a new form of jihadi terror aimed at fanning communal tensions within India as "baseless." Responding to questions on Mr. Narayanan's interview to a private television channel, Foreign Office spokesperson Tasneem Aslam told the weekly news conference here that Pakistan was a "victim of terrorism" and was engaged in fighting the scourge. Ms. Aslam said that "with one exception," there was recognition to Pakistan's role in the fight against terrorism. On Mr. Narayanan's hint that India is open for talks on converting the Line of Control into permanent border as a possible solution to the Kashmir problem, Ms. Aslam said the LoC was itself the problem and could not be the solution. Ms. Aslam said Pakistan made earnest efforts towards finding a solution to Kashmir and pointed to Pakistan President, Pervez Musharraf's statement on the need for an "out of the box" solution acceptable to all stakeholders.

The Times of India, 22 March, 2006

India, Pakistan discuss steps to fight crime

NEW DELHI, March 21: After a gap of 17 years, the investigating agencies of India and Pakistan on Tuesday began two-day talks here on crime, human trafficking, drug abuse and stepping up cooperation among police

forces of SAARC countries. Officials said the focus of the meeting was on improved cooperation between the two sides in tackling human trafficking and counterfeiting of currency, besides the appointment of nodal officers in both countries for quick and timely exchange of information on criminal matters. Vijay Shanker, director of the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), is heading the Indian side at the talks while the Pakistan team is headed by Tariq Pervez, director general of the Federal Investigating Agency (FIA). Besides Shanker, the Indian side includes senior CBI officials and representatives of the home and external affairs ministries, the Directorate of Revenue Intelligence and the Narcotics Control Bureau. According to senior CBI officials, the Indian side will also take up the list of 22 most wanted criminals and terrorists who are believed to be hiding in Pakistan. Several cases with Interpol references that were pending with Pakistan would also be discussed, they said.

The Indian Express, 22 March, 2006

N-deal: India law too being changed

NEW DELHI, March 21: Seeking an India-specific waiver to get the civilian nuclear deal rolling, the Bush Administration has sent to the Hill a bill seeking amendments to the American Atomic Energy Act of 1954. But what's not so well known is that work has already begun in Mumbai to give a new shape to the Indian Atomic Energy Act of 1962 for precisely the same reason. Two specific amendments are most essential for benefits of the nuclear deal to fructify. First, the Atomic Energy Act has to be amended to allow private players to set up atomic power plants—under existing rules, they are banned from undertaking this activity. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the regulatory framework which governs atomic energy in India has to be strengthened to build public confidence that safety of nuclear plants will be taken care of while letting in private players. The Indian Atomic Energy Act only permits the government and public sector companies in which the government has over 51 per cent stake to construct and operate atomic power plants. It explains why two public sector undertakings, directly under the Department of Atomic Energy (DAE), play a role in this sector. All civilian nuclear activity is regulated and controlled by the Mumbai-based Atomic Energy Regulatory Board (AERB) which draws its powers from a government notification of 1983 which empowers AERB to “lay down safety standard and frame rules and regulations in regard to the regulatory and safety requirements”. Kakodkar said that in the proposed amendment “the AERB will be made a statutory body that draws its strengths from the Act itself” and hopes that “AERB will find a clear and specific mention in the new law”. In the changed paradigm of tomorrow where several private players may be operating nuclear power plants, “the effort is to make AERB a higher level body”, said Kakodkar. An essential requirement which will help allay fears, if any, of lax safety standards around Indian nuclear installations.

The Hindu, 22 March, 2006

Delhi, Dhaka to fight terrorism

NEW DELHI, March 21: India and Bangladesh, being “victims” of terrorism, should join hands to fight the menace, Prime Ministers Manmohan Singh and Khaleda Zia agreed after two hours of talks here on Tuesday. The External Affairs Ministry spokesman told presspersons that the Home Secretaries of the two countries would meet often and exchange information. The Joint Rivers Commission too would meet frequently to address water disputes. While Begum Khaleda sought duty-free access to goods coming into India to set right the trade imbalance, the Indian side felt that investment proposals, such as the \$2.5-billion project of the Tatas, were one way of dealing with the problem. Dhaka and New Delhi also agreed to put into operation the Sealdah-Devpura railway link. Two pacts — a revised trade accord and another to prevent illicit narcotics trafficking — were signed in the presence of the Prime Ministers. Senior officials said that issues of concern were discussed during the restricted, one-on-one and delegation-level talks. An advance seems to have been made on terrorism, with both sides agreeing to deal with the problem. In his banquet speech on Tuesday night, Dr. Singh said the dialogue had been “most useful” in understanding each other's point of view and in making progress on different issues. Begum Khaleda appealed to Dr. Singh to take steps to encourage more exports from Bangladesh, including duty-free access to goods. “This would help us base our economic relations on an even more solid foundation. Your positive response would help Bangladesh in narrowing the widening trade gap between our two countries.” She called for a “common approach” to the sharing of river waters. She also sought constructive engagement in result-oriented solution to water-related issues, as they would contribute to consolidating and strengthening ties.

The Hindu, 22 March, 2006

India helps set up bio-resource institute in Sri Lanka

SRINAGAR, March 21: Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse has inaugurated a bio-resource institute in central Sri Lanka, started with Indian expertise. The institute includes a model farm in which rural youth, mainly drawn from the plantation sector are trained. The farm will “train rural youth in modern, eco-friendly and low-cost solutions that help supplement their incomes,” the Indian High Commission said. Mr. Rajapakse inaugurated the institute at Kotagala, near Nuwara Eliya, in the presence of the Indian High Commissioner to Sri Lanka, Nirupama Rao, senior officials and the leader of the Ceylon Workers' Congress, Arumugan Thondaman. The model farm, being established under the guidance of Indian agricultural and rural development expert Rajbir Singh, has sections on floriculture, vegetable growing, bee-keeping and herbal-aromatic plants cultivation. An agricultural implements workshop and a people's tissue culture laboratory are also part of the institute. Mr. Singh expressed

confidence that the model farm based on the model of creating Self-Help Groups would further empower the rural youth and provide a vital laboratory-farm link.

The Hindu, 22 March, 2006

India, Pakistan making progress: Boucher

SRINAGAR, March 21: The United States has said that India and Pakistan were making good progress on the Kashmir issue. New Delhi and Islamabad had made some visible progress on the contentious issue and were taking forward the composite dialogue process in a careful manner, Richard Boucher, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia, said in an interview to ANI. "They have had new confidence building measures — started bus lines, railroads, people [going] back and forth in a way that they never had before — and each of them has stepped forward with, I think, some political parties and the interest of different groups in Kashmir, so there is a fair amount of thinking going on — new ideas coming forth and new steps being taken and that is good," he said. He said the U.S. viewed its role in the Kashmir dispute as that of a friend for both countries. The issue was bilateral and had to be solved by India and Pakistan only. "Both sides see the U.S. as a friend; there are different views about whether we should be involved or not. We define our involvement with both sides as friends, as interested outsiders but leave the work to them, I think that is the right way to go," he said. On the India-U.S. nuclear deal, he said the Bush administration was hopeful of it being passed by Congress. "I think the chances are good. We have been talking to a lot of people in Congress and many have said they would support the idea. They want to support the new U.S.-India relationship that this is part of and have questions about various aspects — non-proliferation aspects or specific aspects of the deal — but I think in general it is a good step forward for non-proliferation," he said.

The Hindu, 23 March, 2006

Dhaka, Delhi to work closely on security, trade

NEW DELHI, March 22: India and Bangladesh have agreed to work closely to find "mutually satisfactory solutions" to issues relating to security, trade and river water sharing. A joint release said on Wednesday that Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's visit had contributed to further consolidation of the "already close and friendly relations" between the two countries. Referring to the Tuesday talks between Begum Khaleda and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, it said, "The discussions between the two were underpinned by the common desire to strengthen and consolidate the friendly ties that already exist between the two countries based as they are on shared history and culture and wide-ranging people-to-people relations." Begum Khaleda's visit had provided both nations an opportunity to sustain their high-level political dialogue. "The visit is a testimony to the highest priority attached by both countries to the promotion of their bilateral relations in all aspects." It was agreed that meetings of the Joint Economic Commission, Joint Boundary Working Groups, Joint Rivers Commission and the Home Secretaries would be more frequent to ensure a movement in a positive direction and their outcome monitored by the political leadership on a "continuous basis".

The Hindu, 23 March, 2006

India, Pak. to share criminal investigation expertise

NEW DELHI, March 22: India and Pakistan on Wednesday agreed to make all efforts for expeditious disposal of pending Interpol references in each others' country. It was agreed to have periodical meetings at short intervals between the Interpol nodal points. At the end of two-day technical level talks between the Central Bureau of Investigations (CBI) and its Pakistan counterpart, the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA), it was agreed that the two agencies would share experience in various fields of criminal investigation. The CBI-FIA talks were held after a gap of 17 years. The decision to expedite pending Interpol references by both the agencies assumes significance as India has sought Pakistan's help to hand over about 100 criminals and terrorists wanted by the CBI and other police forces. These include prime accused in the March 1993 Mumbai bomb blasts Dawood Ibrahim and those involved in the hijack of the Indian Airlines aircraft from Kathmandu to Kandahar in December 1999. Islamabad too is learnt to have claimed that about 70 criminals wanted by it were believed to be in India. A joint study group will be set up to decide upon the modalities of future cooperation to prevent human trafficking, counterfeit currency and illegal immigration. Both sides agreed to designate an officer as the nodal point to pursue cooperation between the CBI and the FIA in these areas, a joint statement issued at the end of the talks said.

The Hindu, 23 March, 2006

Russia, China for tie-up with India

MOSCOW, March 22: Russia and China have called for setting up an institutional framework for trilateral cooperation with India to deal with new threats and challenges. The call, made in a joint declaration adopted by President Vladimir Putin and Chairman Hu Jintao during their summit meeting in Beijing on March 21-22, came two weeks after India dramatically raised the level of strategic interaction with the United States. "The sides favour an early establishment of a mechanism of trilateral cooperation in the Russia-China-India format in the belief that this will contribute to a fuller realisation of their potentials for economic development and will strengthen international efforts to stand up to new threats and challenges," said the Russian-Chinese declaration posted on the site of the Russian Foreign Ministry on Wednesday. A trilateral meeting of businessmen from India, Russia

and China has been scheduled in Delhi for end of March, and the Foreign Ministers of the three countries are to hold their second stand-alone meeting in India later this year. Russia and China also vowed to work for closer cooperation in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which India joined last year as observer. "Russia and China regard the development of SCO as a key strategic element of their foreign policy and intend to continue to closely coordinate their positions in the framework of this organisation," the joint declaration said.

The Indian Express, 24 March, 2006

India, Pak closing Siachen pullout deal

AHMEDABAD, March 23: India and Pakistan are inching closer to an understanding on withdrawal of troops from Siachen with Islamabad inclined "in-principle" to acknowledge current Indian troop positions on the glacier. New Delhi, on its part, will need to be more flexible on the distance to which its troops will pull back. This significant indication, from the active back channel engagement on the issue, could now pave the way for a possible visit by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to Pakistan within the next few months. When Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf visited India last April, both leaders had directed their officials to expeditiously find a mutually acceptable solution to Siachen and Sir Creek. Singh has always pointed out that there must be something substantive on the agenda for him to visit Pakistan and an understanding on Siachen could be that major breakthrough. Alongside, the two countries also hope to achieve a settlement of the Sir Creek issue where they have agreed on a joint survey of the entire creek. Defence Secretaries of the two countries are slated to hold talks on both these issues on May 23-26 in New Delhi. It's learnt that the acknowledgement of troop positions in Siachen will be done in the withdrawal plan attached to the agreement document. India had been insisting on recording and registering positions for authentication purposes. But sources point out that the withdrawal plan will list the positions from which the Indian troops will pull back and also where they will be stationed after that, amounting to automatic acknowledgement. This was the most controversial element of the settlement process envisaged twice earlier in 1989 and 1993. Once the acknowledgement of positions is agreed, the withdrawal plan will be formalised and Siachen will stand demilitarised. On withdrawal of troops, however, the Army feels Pakistan is at an advantage as the terrain on its side allows easier and faster access to the glacier than it would be from the Indian side. So, it argues that Indian troops should be deployed closer from the glacier than Pakistani troops to ensure that time taken to by either side is same.

The Hindu, 24 March, 2006

BSF-BDR personnel exchange fire

KOLKATA, March 23: Jawans of the Border Security Force (BSF) and the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) exchanged intermittent fire across the border near the BSF's Goldach outpost in West Bengal's North Dinajpur district early on Wednesday. There was no report of casualty on the Indian side. Speaking to The Hindu over telephone from Siliguri on Thursday, Sriram Tewari, Inspector General (North Frontier), BSF, said BDR personnel started firing after BSF authorities objected to Bangladeshi workers constructing an embankment along stretches of the Kartwa river that runs for 25 km along the border. "We fired back. More than 200 rounds of fire were exchanged between the two sides between 12.30 am and 4 am," Mr. Tewari said. "The BDR forces were backing the workers engaged in the job," he added. A meeting between the sector commanders was held and it was decided that all work on embankments be put off. The matter would be referred to the Indo-Bangladesh Joint River Commission, he said. "We raised objections on noticing that the Bangladeshi workers were encroaching within 150 yards of the Zero Line," he said. Villagers in Chopra Block have fled their homes in the wake of the firing, sources said.

The Hindu, 24 March, 2006

Cabinet approves India-Iceland pact on culture, education

NEW DELHI, March 23: The Union Cabinet on Thursday gave ex-post facto approval to the agreement between India and Iceland for cooperation in the fields of culture and education. The agreement, which was signed between the two countries on October 19, 2005, includes exchange of representatives of universities, institutions and organisations in the fields of culture and education, Union Information and Broadcasting Minister, Priyaranjan Dashmunshi, told reporters after the Cabinet meeting on Thursday. Under the agreement, scholarships would be awarded from both sides for joint studies and researches, he said. It would also facilitate bilateral workshops, seminars, training programmes and exhibitions. The agreement shall remain in force for a period of five years and shall be renewed automatically, thereafter for successive periods of one year, he said.

The Hindu, 24 March, 2006

Visit productive: Khaleda

DHAKA, March 23: Bangladesh Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia described her just-concluded visit to India and talks with her Indian counterpart Manmohan Singh as "successful and productive." "Both the sides are keen to improve relations," she told reporters on board a plane bound for Dhaka from New Delhi at the end of her three-day trip. Khaleda returned home on Wednesday midnight. She said India wanted to see Bangladesh as a strong and prosperous nation. "We also want strong economic relations with India," the Prime Minister said, adding that the Indian leadership expressed their willingness to further improve bilateral relations and cooperation. Briefing scribes at the Foreign Office on Thursday, Foreign Secretary Hemayetuddin said he was satisfied with the

outcome of the visit. He said the Indian side agreed to expedite negotiation to resolve all pending matters. Hemayetuddin, who accompanied Ms. Khaleda, described the decision to run a passenger train from Kolkata to Joydevpur of Bangladesh through the Jamuna Bridge "a milestone development." However, Political Secretary to Opposition leader, Saber Hossain Chowdhury said the Prime Minister's visit to India was disappointing and "devoid of any substance." He said since Khaleda made her visit towards the end of her tenure, it was expected to produce a substantive outcome. Quoting media reports, he said there was neither a breakthrough in resolving long-standing problems nor any forward movement in improving bilateral relations. "We're keenly waiting to know what she actually achieved by this visit." Referring to the PM's remarks that bombs and explosives used by JMB militants came from India and that the matter would be taken up through a proper channel, Mr. Chowdhury said people wanted to know if she had raised the issue with Indian leaders.

The Times of India, 25 March, 2006

India, South Africa sign maritime pact

CAPE TOWN, March 24: India and South Africa have signed an agreement to create a mutually beneficial relationship in the field of merchant shipping and related maritime transport matters. Indian Transport Minister T.R. Baalu and his South African counterpart Jeff Radebe on Thursday signed the deal that is expected to encourage and facilitate the development of maritime relations between the shipping organisations of the two sides. The pact will also facilitate the exchange of information for accelerating the flow of commercial goods at sea and at port and encourage the strengthening of the cooperation between merchant fleets. A maritime liaison committee has been established to enhance the implementation of the agreement. Baalu is on a four-day visit to South Africa and will return home on Sunday.

The Indian Express, 25 March, 2006

Pak pamphlets link militants to Hindus

PAKISTAN, March 24: Pakistan's military airdropped pamphlets this week over towns in restive tribal regions near the Afghan border urging tribesmen to shun "foreign terrorists", saying they were part of a Hindu and Jewish plot. The pamphlets were dropped over Wana, the main town in South Waziristan, and Miranshah in North Waziristan as part of a campaign to win support among tribesmen who have shown sympathy for both Taliban and remnants of al Qaeda living among them. A Reuters reporter in Tank, a town close to the boundary with the semi-autonomous tribal agency of South Waziristan, obtained one of the pamphlets, bearing the sign-off "Well Wishers, Pakistan's Armed Forces". Titled "Warning", the pamphlets said the foreign militants were fighting against Pakistan in connivance with "Jews and Hindus", a term that would play on traditional prejudices among the region's Muslim conservatives. "They (foreign militants) not only pose a danger to our sovereignty, but are also creating troubles for our people," read the pamphlet, which appeared in both Urdu and Pashto language versions. "You should stay clear of these terrorists. Don't let them come close to your areas and houses and protect your land against them." "This war is against foreign terrorists and their harbourers who are fighting shoulder-to-shoulder with Jews and Hindus against the state of Pakistan," it added.

The Indian Express, 25 March, 2006

Prime Minister offers Pak peace treaty & its roadmap

NEW DELHI/AMRITSAR, March 24: Taking a break from the political storm in New Delhi, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh kept his date with Amritsar today, flagged off the landmark bus to Nankana Sahib and used that occasion to launch a bold initiative to revive the stalled Indo-Pak peace process. Invoking his personal past, his journey from Pakistan to India, he announced two big ideas that would serve as an engine for a two-way "journey of peace" in the future: the establishment of common institutions across the Line of Control in Kashmir and an Indo-Pak treaty of peace, security and friendship. Singh's suggestion that both sides of Kashmir could "work out cooperative, consultative mechanisms" for mutual benefit with the "active encouragement of the governments of India and Pakistan" marks a major contribution to the discourse. In the last few months, the President of Pakistan has put across a wide variety of ideas on Kashmir that included demilitarisation, self-governance and joint management. Singh responded today with the first substantive Indian offer that focuses on good governance, open borders and cooperative mechanisms in Jammu and Kashmir. The Prime Minister's Kashmir package has the merit of skirting the sensitive question of territorial exchange, which neither side can ever contemplate, to a win-win game that focuses on improving the lot of the Kashmiris. Simultaneous progress on Kashmir and the normalisation of bilateral relations could culminate, according to Singh, in "a Treaty of Peace, Security and Friendship to give meaning and substance to our quest for shared goals." India and Pakistan had negotiated a draft treaty of peace and friendship in the early 1980s. Indira Gandhi and Zia ul Haque apparently came close to signing it. While that draft was symbolic, Singh's proposal for a treaty of peace, security and friendship would acquire a whole new meaning in the context of a political breakthrough on Kashmir. In offering a three-fold path on Kashmir, Singh was addressing the growing political impatience in Pakistan at the slow pace of the negotiations. At the same time the Prime Minister took care to define some red-lines that India will not cross.

The Indian Express, 27 March, 2006

Indo-French joint air exercise from today

NEW DELHI, March 26: In August 1999, Indian MiG-21 fighters shot down a Pakistani Atlantique-I submarine hunter aircraft in the North Arabian Sea after it penetrated the international border. While the hostile encounter lasted just 18 minutes—hardly time to collect data on the aircraft—seven years on, the IAF and the Navy will now be getting on better terms with what remains the core of Pakistan's maritime surveillance strength. Starting Monday, a contingent of IAF Jaguar maritime strike jets and Canberra surveillance aircraft will soar into an electronic-warfare drenched environment against French Atlantique-II aircraft operating from Goa in the eighth Indo-French Varuna joint exercise. With 10 days to get a feel of the Atlantique, the force will gain crucial flying hours with the aircraft for the first time ever. The Pakistan Navy is in the process of beefing up its American P-3 Orion fleet, but still largely depends on the Atlantique for maritime reconnaissance. The Atlantique, operated by France, Pakistan, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands, can carry 2.5 tons of weapons, including guided bombs, torpedoes and depth charges. Apart from the IAF battle contingent, a Naval spokesperson said the Indian side would field aircraft carrier INS Viraat, submarine INS Shankul and three Indian-built warships—the destroyer INS Mumbai, and two missile frigates INS Gomati and Betwa. The French task force includes the Charles de Gaulle aircraft carrier, destroyers Cassard and Montcalm, nuclear submarine Saphir and an embedded Royal Navy frigate HMS Lancaster.

The Hindu, 27 March, 2006

Muscat Declaration looks beyond oil

MUSCAT, March 26: Looking beyond oil, India and the six nation Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have decided to work together in new areas including information technology, manufacturing and tourism. After two days of deliberations during the second GCC-India business conference, both sides decided to forge an economic partnership that would focus on joint ventures driven by private initiative. In the Muscat Declaration, that was unveiled at the end of the conference, it was decided that information technology, biotechnology, tourism, industry, energy and petrochemicals would become the core areas of collaboration. "The Gulf countries have decided to diversify their economies to cater to their growing population demands while India has taken a strategic decision to deepen its economic ties with the Gulf countries. The result is a new found political will to collaborate," Arun Patankar, Principal Adviser to the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) told The Hindu. The GCC comprises Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Some delegates at the meeting pointed out that the political leadership in key GCC countries, such as Saudi Arabia and Oman, had signalled its intent to engage more deeply with countries, including India. "King Abdullah Abdulaziz (of Saudi Arabia) visited India. He opened the door through which I now wish to enter," Loay M. Z. Redwan, a Riyadh based business consultant on Small and Medium Enterprises (SME) said.

The Hindu, 27 March, 2006

Uncertainty over Pakistan extending SAFTA to India

ISLAMABAD, March 26: The third round of talks between India and Pakistan on economic and commercial cooperation begins here on Monday. There is uncertainty over whether Pakistan is ready to extend the South Asia Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA) to India. Commerce Secretary S.M. Menon and his Pakistan counterpart Syed Asif Shah will lead their sides in the three-day talks. The first day will be devoted to issues under the jurisdiction of the Joint Study Group (JSG) on trade. Three days ago the SAARC Secretariat in Kathmandu notified that all seven members of the grouping have deposited the instrument of assent on SAFTA, adopted at the Islamabad Summit in January 2004. It is to be operationalised from July 1, 2006. However, doubts linger on the intent of Pakistan in extending SAFTA to India. The second meeting of the JSG on trade assumes importance as at the last meeting in New Delhi both sides agreed that the JSG would be preceded by the meeting of the Sub-Groups on Non-Tariff Barriers (NTBs) and Customs Cooperation and Trade Facilitation to formulate recommendations for consideration by the JSG. Other issues which are expected to come up include the review of the air services agreement and the shipping protocol of 1975, opening of branches of the scheduled banks in each other's territory and concluding a memorandum of understanding between the Securities and Exchange Board of India and the Securities and Exchange Commission of Pakistan.

The Hindu, 27 March, 2006

Pakistan welcomes Manmohan's offer

ISLAMABAD, March 26: Pakistan Foreign Minister Khurshid Mahmood Kasuri has welcomed Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's offer of a friendship treaty but maintained that all issues, including Kashmir, should be resolved. In an informal talk with correspondents in Lahore on Saturday, Mr. Kasuri said the 'positive tone' was appreciable. "We should seriously think that why such efforts could not materialise." He said that composite dialogue being underway for the last two years had made much progress and covered many dimensions. "Nevertheless, we should not forget that we had fought three major wars on Kashmir and had been fighting on the Siachen for 25 years. We should realise that we have to resolve all the outstanding issues including the Kashmir issue." However, he said, in order to strengthen the peace lobbies working in both the countries, "what we can do is to go for resolving relatively more simple issues like Siachen or Sir Creek while remaining focused on discussing Kashmir." The Minister said that he also welcomed the statement of Dr. Singh that India was not afraid of talking about the Kashmir issue. There is a perception in Pakistan that the offer made

by Mr. Singh is little more than 'old wine in new bottle' but would not move forward unless there was progress on Kashmir. The English daily, Dawn, in an editorial said, "The Indian Prime Minister's offer of a treaty of peace, security and friendship with Pakistan is a step forward in the on-going composite dialogue taking place between India and Pakistan. But some reservations are bound to be expressed about Mr. Manmohan Singh's statement that also seeks to delink the Kashmir issue from the normalisation process."

The Hindu, 28 March, 2006

Road map for enhanced trade

ISLAMABAD, March 27: The India-Pakistan Joint Study Group to promote trade and commerce on Monday worked out a road map to finalise a "Mutual Recognition Agreement (MRA)." A joint statement issued at the end of the deliberations here said both sides agreed to form two working groups on standards and conformance and sanitary and phyto-sanitary within the sub-group on non-tariff barriers (NTBs). The MRA could pave the way for enhanced trade. Pakistan has been complaining of its negative trade balance with India despite the latter granting the most favoured nation (MFN) status to the former. Pakistan has argued that it is not able to enhance its exports to India due to a number of NTBs erected by India. The sub-group on NTBs was set up to redress Pakistan's grievances. The joint statement said the sub-group on NTBs would endeavour to complete the exercises identified by the two sub-groups before the meeting of the next Joint Study Group and work towards a new agreement. It said under the Sub-Group on Customs Cooperation and Trade Facilitation Measures there was consensus on measures to explore the possibility of a bilateral arrangement on Customs Cooperation; to exchange information on the Certificates of Origin; import and export declarations; customs laws & procedures; valuation; trade statistics; to encourage exchange of information electronically between the Customs of the two countries and to identify areas of mutual technical assistance and capacity building.

The Hindu, 28 March, 2006

PM flags off Amritsar-Nankana Sahib bus

ISLAMABAD, March 27: Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on Friday flagged off the bus service between Amritsar and Nankana Sahib, the birth place of founder of Sikh religion Guru Nanak Dev, declaring that the road link had opened a "new chapter" between India and Pakistan. Waiving a green flag, the Prime Minister launched the much-awaited inaugural service of the bus, carrying 40 passengers, shortly before noon amidst cheering by hundreds of people who had gathered here despite rain. "I am extremely happy to be here in Amritsar on this very important occasion of the launch of a regular bus service between Amritsar and Nankana Sahib. This is indeed a memorable day for Punjab." "This is a historic day for the entire Sikh Community, both in Punjab and elsewhere. This is a historic day for the Panth. In many ways, it is a historic day for both India and Pakistan," said the Prime Minister, who was flanked by his wife Gursharan Kaur and Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh. The 130-km road link, connecting the holy sites of the Sikh religion, has been a long-standing demand of people of both sides of Punjab, and the two countries had in January this year decided to begin the service.

The Hindu, 29 March, 2006

Pakistan to trade with India under SAFTA

ISLAMABAD, March 28: Ending weeks of suspense, Pakistan on Tuesday announced that it would extend the South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA), to be operationalised from July 1, 2006, to India. The clarification came from Pakistan Commerce Secretary Syed Asif Shah at a joint news conference he addressed along with Commerce Secretary S.N. Menon on the opening day of bilateral talks on commercial cooperation. Whether Pakistan would trade with India under the SAFTA regime has been a subject of intense speculation ever since Pakistan Commerce Minister Humayun Akhtar Khan in an interview to a local English daily said that trade between the two would continue to be guided by bilateral pacts. In response to a question on the reported remarks of the Minister, Syed Shah said that he was not aware of them. "SAFTA is a multilateral agreement valid for the whole of South Asia and Pakistan is a signatory to it. How can we exempt any country in the region from its purview?" he asked. The stand taken by Syed Shah assumes importance as India-Pakistan trade is governed by what is known as the 'positive list.' While India has conferred the Most Favoured Nation (MFN) status on Pakistan for the purposes of trade, the latter has refused to reciprocate on the plea that pending resolution of political issues such as Kashmir, full-fledged commercial cooperation was not feasible.

The Hindu, 29 March, 2006

3 killed in BDR firing

KOLKATA, March 28: Three persons, two of them said to be Indian nationals, were killed when Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) personnel opened fire at workers engaged in road repair work near the border village of Khalasipara in the Kuchlibari area of West Bengal's Cooch Behar district on Tuesday afternoon. The firing, which started around 1.20 p.m. lasted nearly 20 minutes in which about 30 rounds of ammunition were used, Border Security Force (BSF) Inspector General (North Bengal) Sriram Tewari told The Hindu over telephone from Siliguri in the evening. A flag meeting was held between officials of the BSF and the BDR later in the day and normality was restored, he said. Local BSF authorities have lodged a protest against the firing with the local Sector-Commander of the BDR. According to Mr. Tewari, the villagers were repairing the road near the main pillar no. 806 located outside

150 yards of the zero line on the Indian side of the border when the BDR authorities objected. "Work was stopped immediately despite which the BDR resorted to firing," he said. Encroachment by either side within that distance off the zero line violates the bi-lateral border agreement, he said.

The Hindu, 30 March, 2006

India, Pakistan for better trade ties

CHENNAI, March 29: India and Pakistan agreed on a number of proposals at the end of the third round of talks on economic and commercial cooperation within the framework of the Composite Dialogue here on Wednesday. A joint statement welcomed the ratification of the South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA) by all SAARC member-countries. The clarification by Pakistan Commerce Secretary Syed Asif Shah that the country would extend SAFTA to India means trade and economic relations between the countries are poised to grow in a new direction. With the operationalisation of SAFTA from July 1, over 4,000 commodities will be open for trade compared to less than 1,000 under the India 'positive list' maintained by Pakistan. According to the statement, a new shipping agreement would be signed in the near future. Talks on air services agreement would be concluded expeditiously. The existing deal was signed before the era of private airlines. Both sides are in agreement to give an important role to private airlines. In line with Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz's announcement, during his visit to India in November 2004, on opening branches of scheduled banks in each country, the central banks would process applications expeditiously. To identify problems in transportation of goods by rail, representatives of the Ministries of Railways of both sides held a meeting on the sidelines of the talks. Pakistan and India would constitute a working group to discuss the issues of joint registration of Basmati rice SGI. India would provide detailed proposals for trade in IT-enabled medical services. It was noted that the laying of optical fibre on the Indian side would be completed in the near future. Soon, India and Pakistan are expected to have a fibre link through Wagah.

The Hindu, 30 March, 2006

Face socio-economic challenges collectively, Rajapakse tells SAARC

COLOMBO, March 29: The Sri Lankan President, Mahinda Rajapakse, on Wednesday called upon the members of the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC) to "develop structures" to face the "social and economic challenges collectively and regionally." Mr. Rajapakse made the call at the inaugural of the Fourth Conference of SAARC Speakers and Parliamentarians in Colombo. The conference, he said, would provide an opportunity for collaboration between SAARC MPs and strengthen Parliamentary processes in the countries. Mr. Rajapakse stressed the need for SAARC structures as South Asia was home to a large per cent of the world's poor and all our countries are faced with serious and urgent challenges of poverty, unemployment, income disparities and social and economic deprivation." The Leader of the Opposition and former Prime Minister, Ranil Wickremesinghe, said that the "lack of political interest" among member states in the SAARC was among the reasons for the lack of progress made at the regional body compared to other regional organisations such as the ASEAN. He called for a sustained effort to address the issues facing the region. The Deputy Speaker of the Lok Sabha, Charanjit Singh Atwal, said it was "imperative" for MPs "to ensure that the Executive remains responsive and accountable." "Each and every individual and institution of the State should be made accountable to the people who is the hallmark of any representative system," he added.

The Hindu, 30 March, 2006

Poverty, a challenge to development in S Asia: Atwal

COLOMBO, March 29: Observing that widespread poverty in South Asia posed the most formidable challenge to development, Lok Sabha Deputy Speaker, Charanjit Singh Atwal, on Wednesday said the region's parliamentarians should take collective action to tackle the menace. "As elected representatives of the people, Parliamentarians must support and supplement the efforts being made by their respective Governments," Atwal told the 4th Conference of Association of SAARC Speakers and Parliamentarians. Widespread poverty in the region posed the most formidable development challenge for all member States, he said. He said the people of the SAARC region were the real strength of the region and that this large human resource must be taken full advantage of, by providing them with enabling conditions so that they can contribute to the prosperity of the region.

The Hindu, 31 March, 2006

China backs India's efforts on nuclear power

SYDNEY, March 30: China on Thursday supported India's cooperation with other countries for nuclear power generation but said that non-proliferation protocols should be followed. "India is a friendly neighbour of China, which approves India cooperating with other countries in nuclear power generation," Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao told The Australian newspaper in an interview. Australia, with 40 per cent of the world's uranium reserves, is a potential leading partner in supplying uranium to India as it will be to China when Mr. Wen, arriving in Australia on Saturday, signs two ground-breaking agreements next week. The Chinese Premier said that relevant parties should honour their obligations under the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which limits uranium sales to other signatories. India has not signed the NPT.

The Hindu, 31 March, 2006

U.S. defends civilian nuclear deal with India

NEWYORK, March 30: The United States on Thursday defended the civilian nuclear deal with India, saying that it materialised only after New Delhi's commitment to meet non-proliferation goals. As Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran was holding crucial talks with lawmakers and officials, State Department spokesman Sean McCormack countered the remarks made by German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier that the deal came at a wrong time, when international efforts were for curbing Iran's nuclear ambitions. Our view, in sum, is that at the end of the day, India has been a responsible member of the international community when it comes to issues of non-proliferation," Mr. McCormack said. Iran, on the other hand, "has abrogated its treaty obligations not to seek to develop a nuclear weapon, continually lied to the international community about that, [and] continually deceived the international community about that. And, certainly we do have concerns about Iran's involvement in [the] proliferation of weapons of mass destruction." He also mentioned how the Iranian regime had contacts with the network of Pakistani nuclear scientist A.Q. Khan. "So the track record of Iran with regard to non-proliferation behaviour stands in stark contrast to [that of] India." Condemning the parallels drawn by critics, Mr. McCormack said, "It is on merits of behaviour by the Indian Government that we have concluded the agreement, and are now working with the Congress to seek some changes in U.S. law that would allow that agreement to be fully implemented." President George Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice "as well as other members of this administration have talked about the importance of this agreement. And certainly we have talked about it in the past, how we would differ with anybody who tries to make any comparisons between the behaviour of Iran and the behaviour of India." Mr. Steinmeier said in an interview to German daily Handelsblatt that the deal between the U.S. and India was not helpful given that it came in the midst of talks on curbing Iran's nuclear ambitions.

The Hindu, 31 March, 2006

Army positive on withdrawal from Siachen

LEH/ NEW DELHI, March 30: With the Indo-Pak diplomatic back-channels working on a solution to the Siachen issue, there are signs, a decrease in number of surveillance sorties for instance, that things are already changing on the glacier, the world's highest battleground. That more changes are in the offing was clear from the statement of Army Chief General JJ Singh in New Delhi today. The Army will "remain positive" on the issue of withdrawing from the glacier, while ensuring that national interest was not affected, he said. "We are not dogmatic and we remain positive. We are sure that national interest will be kept," he said when asked whether the Army would be happy to withdraw from the forward points on the glacier, if the government decides so. He said the Army had put across its views on the demilitarisation of Siachen to the government, and the Army would do what the Centre says. Army sources in Leh gave clues of the Army's logic regarding the world's highest battleground. Siachen and adjoining areas will be sufficiently patrolled as long as it seems necessary but with changing perceptions and a possible political thaw on the issue, chances are that resources will be directed towards the LAC with China among other areas. Air patrolling missions around the glacier had started since January. The Army's 14 Corps that operates across Ladakh, through the 826-km line of actual control (LAC) with the vast China-controlled Aksai Chin valley, has been paying attention to this mission as the Army feels it would be far more compatible to its current and future strategic perceptions.