

India's relations with Sri Lanka have reached "an unprecedented level of depth and quality today", observed Indian Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon at his meeting with Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama on Friday, during his two-day visit to the island. The Foreign Secretary further observed that it is during difficult times that the true quality of a friendship becomes most evident, and that the Indo-Lanka relationship is one such friendship that has effectively withstood the test of time and adversity.

Minister Bogollama warmly welcomed Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon to Sri Lanka, and indicated that this visit is a reflection of India's steadfast friendship with Sri Lanka as well as the maturity of the Indo-Lanka relationship. The Minister extended the warm appreciation of the Sri Lankan government for the continued understanding of India on issues of mutual concern. Reiterating that the Sri Lankan government perceives the Indo-Lanka Accord as the key to seeking a political solution to the conflict, the Minister observed that the present juncture offers a window of opportunity to implement the Accord, given the decisive victories gained by the government in combating LTTE terror on all fronts. In this context, he observed that the government is currently in the process of exploring several avenues of implementing the 13th Amendment to the Constitution. The Minister highlighted the government's sincere commitment to evolving a broadbased and an inclusive peace process in order to achieve a durable peace, acceptable to all communities living in the island.

Foreign Secretary Menon expressed his appreciation of the sentiments expressed by Minister Bogollagama on the Indo-Lanka Accord and the 13th Amendment to the Constitution. Minister Bogollagama and Secretary Menon agreed that a moment of political opportunity has been made available to Sri Lanka today to bring about an inclusive peace process with credible political representation by the Tamil people within the country's democratic process. Minister Bogollagama in this context thanked the Indian government for the humanitarian assistance extended during this period to further augment the steps being taken by the Sri Lankan government to ensure the welfare of civilians living in northern Sri Lanka. He welcomed continued humanitarian assistance by India to the affected people.

Secretary Menon extended his appreciation of the proactive role played by Sri Lanka both multilaterally and in the regional context in combating terrorism, and extended the unstinted support of the Indian government in this exercise. Secretary Menon briefed Minister Bogollagama on the current status of the investigation on the Mumbai terror attacks and indicated that India would continue to work closely with Pakistan to bring the perpetrators of this heinous crime to justice. He emphasised that concerted and collective international action is needed in combating the scourge of trans-national terror. Minister Bogollagama, in response, indicated that as a country that has itself been the victim of terror which had proliferated with international links and support, Sri Lanka is well placed to understand the gravity of the threat of trans-national terrorism. He reiterated Sri Lanka's support in combating terror at every level in order to secure a sustainable peace within the region.

The Minister also reiterated Sri Lanka's interest in cooperating with India on maritime security in the Indian Ocean, both bilaterally and within the framework of regional groupings such as BIMSTEC.

On Indo-Lanka economic relations several issues of mutual interest were discussed. Minister Bogollagama expressed Sri Lanka government's satisfaction at the increase in bilateral trade within the framework of the Indo-Lanka Free Trade Agreement, and expressed the government's desire to work closely with India in upgrading the bilateral FTA to a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement in the foreseeable future. The discussions also referred to the need to address Sri Lanka's widening trade deficit with India in a meaningful manner.

The two sides discussed the Indo-Lanka Joint Commission which last met in 2005, and agreed to look at the possibility of convening the forthcoming session of the Joint Commission after May 2009. It was agreed to convene the sub-committees of the Joint Commission in the interim.

On the delimitation of the outer edge of the Indo-Lanka continental margin, the two sides agreed to further discuss attendant legal issues, and work closely in resolving outstanding issues, in a manner reflective of the close friendship existing between the two countries.

The two sides discussed progress within SAARC, including issues concerning the Standing Committee and the Council of Ministers sessions due to take place in Colombo shortly. The Minister observed that he looks forward to a successful outcome at the SAARC Council of Ministers Meeting that would bring on board many issues that concern the region. Secretary Menon in response pledged the fullest support of the Indian government to SAARC and observed that it looked forward to playing a constructive role in the forthcoming Council of Ministers Meeting.

Minister Bogollagama expressed his sincere appreciation of the role played by the Indian government in releasing Sri Lankan fishermen captured in the Indian waters, and for providing them with safe passage. He appreciated the cooperation and flexibility shown by the Indian government in this matter.

At the conclusion of the meeting, Foreign Secretary Menon informed Minister Bogollagama that India's External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee looked forward to an early visit to India by Minister Bogollagama. This invitation was welcomed by the Sri Lankan Foreign Minister.

Minister Bogollagama was assisted at the meeting by Foreign Secretary Palitha Kohona, Additional Secretary/Foreign Affairs Prasad Kariyawasam and other senior officials. Foreign Secretary Menon was assisted by India's High Commissioner in Sri Lanka Alok Prasad, Joint Secretary/External Affairs T.S. Tirumurti, India's Deputy High Commissioner in Sri Lanka Vikram Misri and other senior officials.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs
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