

India gifts radar to Maldives, seeks security tie-up

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NEW DELHI: Defence minister George Fernandes, who oversaw the signing of a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on gifting a radar to the Maldives, has said that defence co-operation between the two countries was vital for the strategic security scenario in the Indian Ocean region.

The MoU has been signed with the understanding that the training to operate this radar will be provided by India, a defence ministry statement issued here on Saturday said. The purpose of the MoU was "to promote mutually beneficial programmes of bilateral co-operation and to further strengthen the existing friendly relations".

During his just concluded three-day visit, Mr Fernandes discussed the possibilities of further bilateral co-operation with Maldivian minister of state for defence and national security Maj-Gen Abdul Sattar Anbaree. He recalled with gratitude India's prompt assistance during the November 1988 attempted coup in his country. Mr Fernandes also called on Maldives President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, foreign minister Fathulla Jameel and speaker of the Majlis, Abdullah Hammed.

The MoU seeks to promote mutually beneficial programmes of

bilateral co-operation and to further strengthen the present level of relations. India is concerned at the rise in Chinese and Pakistani sale of defence hardware and influence among India's smaller neighbours, notably Nepal, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Sri Lanka.

Pakistan has, for the first time, recently sold night vision devices to Nepal and some armaments to Myanmar. Islamabad also entered into a contract with Sri Lanka for selling its multi-barrel rocket launchers and assorted ammunition, in addition to extending servicing facilities to Sri Lankan air force transport aircraft.

In contrast, during the mid-'90s, India stopped bilateral Coast Guard exercises with the Maldives after the Indian high commissioner in Male complained that he had not been accorded proper protocol during a function related to a bilateral Coast Guard exercise. Much to India's embarrassment and concern, the incident led the Maldivians to approach the U.S. Coast Guard and Navy for holding such training exercises.

During his visit, Mr Fernandes also toured the Gan island where he paid homage at a memorial to the Indian Army soldiers who died during World War II.

Veerappan is suspected to be involved in forest raid

The Times of India News Service

CHENNAI: The most wanted fugitive and forest brigand Veerappan is suspected to have surfaced again, making a mockery of the STF operation in the forest to nab him.

He is suspected to be involved in a raid by a gang of masked men on the forest range office in Namakkal near Salem, that occurred in the early hours of Saturday. The gang is said to have fled with two guns, some ammunition, a walkie-talkie and money, police sources said.

Two forest guards were injured in the attack and they have been hospitalised. One of them, Karunanidhi, was accidentally hit on his arm by a bullet when his colleague, Rajamanickam, opened fire on the gang. The attackers are said to have escaped with one single-barrel and one double-barrel gun besides some ammunition and Rs 22,000 that was kept in the office and was to be disbursed to the staff as Pongal bonus.

The fact that Veerappan could have been behind this incident is suspected by the villagers in the area, as Namakkal is close to Satyamangalam forest range where Tamil Nadu and Karnataka joint STF operations are on, with the help of the Border Security Force to nab him. The belief in Veerappan's involvement gained strength because the gang had taken away weapons and ammunition and not just money.

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Maoists support multi-party system in Nepal

Keshav Pradhan
Kathmandu, July 29

IN A surprise move, Nepal's Maoist insurgents have extended support to the concept of a pluralistic political system.

Maoist chairman Pushpakamal Dahal, alias Prachand, in a statement released to the media last evening, said, "The radical change we are seeking is not aimed at establishing a one-party dictatorial rule."

He added: "Instead, we prefer a system where political parties can have healthy competition on their way to fight against unpatriotic, corrupt and fascist forces." He stressed the need for unity of pro-people organisations to bring about radical changes in the country.

This is the first time the underground Communist rebels, who have been fighting to turn the kingdom into a Republic since 1996, have expressed their faith in a pluralistic system. This comes at a time when both the Government and the Maoists are trying to create a conducive atmosphere for talks. Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba, who took over last week with a promise to resolve the Maoist problem, yesterday decided to free 15 rebels from prison. There is a possibility of the Government giving amnesty to more insurgents in the coming days.

Earlier, Deuba invited the rebels for dialogue and stopped all police operations. Reciprocating the Government's gesture, the rebels stopped their raids on police and State establishments. They also expressed their willingness to revive talks with the Government that broke down last year. There are reports that the Maoists have sought the release of 301 activists from prison.

They also want the Government to make public the whereabouts of 71 of their colleagues missing for a long time. Before this, they had asked for withdrawal of all laws enacted to contain their movement. Prachand cautioned the Government about "the need for launching confidence-building measures without succumbing to the forces that be against a negotiated settlement". The Home Ministry also yesterday reiterated the Government's commitment to reach a meaningful settlement through negotiations.

Deuba held a meeting with Madhav Nepal, general secretary of the major Opposition Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist Leninist), to discuss the prevailing situation in the country. At the time of the drafting of the present democratic Constitution in 1990, the UML and several other radical Communist parties had accepted the concept of a pluralistic system.

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