

## 'Sustainable growth should be a goal'

Prime Minister Narendra Modi being greeted by his British counterpart Theresa May at the official welcome ceremony for the Commonwealth meet in London. APStefan Rousseau

Prime Minister Narendra Modi urged the Commonwealth to put sustainable development and climate change, particularly of small island states, at the heart of its agenda, as India announced an increased funding for various Commonwealth initiatives and sought to take a leadership role in a renewed group.

He also used the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in London for a series of bilateral meetings, including with Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, and Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull. No meeting took place with the Prime Minister of Pakistan, who also attended the summit.

During the executive sessions that focussed on democracy and the rule of law, the international trading system, climate change and sustainable development goals, Mr. Modi spoke on the need in particular to give a greater role to the concerns of small island states.

India has said that it would double its contribution to the Commonwealth's small states offices in New York and Geneva to help them deal with multilateral areas of concern, a spokesperson at the Ministry of External Affairs said.

### **Bilateral meetings**

Mr. Modi held several bilateral meetings, including with Prime Minister of Mauritius Kumar Jugnauth; Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni; Gambian President Adama Barrow; President of the Seychelles Danny Faure; Prime Minister of Antigua and Barbuda Gaston Brown; President of Kiribati Taneti Maamau; Fijian Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama; Prime Minister of St. Lucia Allen Chastanet; Keith Rowley, Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago; and Solomon Islands Prime Minister Rick Houenipwela.

"No meeting took place with the Pakistani Prime Minister and there is no plan to have any meeting with him," said an MEA spokesperson.

"Held wide-ranging talks with PM Sheikh Hasina on ways to further cement India-Bangladesh relations," tweeted the Prime Minister at the end of an intense day of bilateral meetings and group executive sessions. A spokesperson said that the focus was on developmental cooperation during the sit-down discussion between the two leaders.

Ahead of the summit, it was hoped that renewed interest from India will give new impetus and relevance to the organisation. After many years of active engagement with it, there was an eight-year period where no Indian Prime Minister had participated in a CHOGM, so the decision by Mr. Modi to attend the event was seen as a significant moment for the group.

"I had not been able to visit the last summit and this time, it was an honour that Prince Charles came personally to India last year to invite me for it. The Queen herself wrote a personal letter to me, a matter of great pride for India," Mr. Modi said at Westminster Central Hall on Wednesday.

From the Indian perspective, the Commonwealth offers opportunities to reach out to small states, that make up around 60% of Commonwealth members. In some of these states, India has no diplomatic presence, and forging relations with these countries could help India secure crucial

votes during UN or multilateral contests it is involved in, says Rahul Roy Chaudhury, head of the South Asia programme at the International Institute for Strategic Studies.

### **A counter to China**

India also views the Commonwealth as a counterpoint to China, and its expanding influence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean, he added.

Opening the summit on Thursday, 91-year-old Queen Elizabeth expressed her “sincere wish” that the Commonwealth would choose Prince Charles as her successor to lead the 53-nation community.

Ahead of the summit, there had been debate over who should lead the group if and when the Queen chooses to step down from the role, which she had taken over from her father.

Security, counterterrorism, education, climate change and environmental issues were set to feature prominently in discussions, as well as opportunities to grow intra-Commonwealth trade to \$700 billion by 2020, challenging rising protectionist sentiment globally.

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