

'SRI LANKA WILL DEVELOP MATTALA AIRPORT'

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Sri Lanka

Gotabaya RajapaksaR_V_Moorthy

Sri Lanka's civil aviation authority will develop the southern airport in Mattala, near the strategically located Hambantota port, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa said on Thursday, ruling out earlier proposals of a joint venture with India. However, he invited Indian companies, especially in the IT sector, to invest in Sri Lanka.

New Delhi — with known strategic interests in the airport adjoining the Chinese-run Hambantota port — has in the past discussed a possible joint development plan with Colombo, to upgrade the loss-making facility in Mattala built by former President Mahinda Rajapaksa. However, the project did not take off despite multiple rounds of negotiations.

"There is no discussion with India on this project," President Rajapaksa said, indicating that the project was now off the table. On the other hand, a small country like Sri Lanka welcomed foreign investment focusing on training Sri Lanka's human resources, he said. "There is a lot of worry about Chinese involvement in this region... the best thing is for other countries like India, Singapore, Japan, Australia, and ASEAN countries to invest here... that is how you can counter, just complaining won't do," he said, addressing foreign journalists.

Responding to a range of questions in his first interaction with foreign media since assuming office, President Rajapaksa said his government is focussing on rationalising the taxation system in order to improve the economy and restructuring the security apparatus to ensure enhanced national security.

Mr. Rajapaksa said he would dissolve Parliament early March, signalling the likely conduct of general elections in late April.

'I am the victim'

On the diplomatic controversy with the Swiss government, following the alleged abduction of a local staffer of the Swiss Embassy in Colombo, President Rajapaksa said: "In this case, I am the victim," adding that available evidence showed the abduction claim "is not true".

"It was a planned thing to discredit me and my government... I want to clear my name and the government's... the legal side has taken over," he said, days after the staffer was arrested for "making a false accusation" that she had been detained and threatened.

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