

OPERATION VANILLA BRINGS ISLAND CLOSER

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Africa, African Union (AU) and India

Timely help: Indian envoy Abhay Kumar, second from left, with Prime Minister Christian Lois Ntsay in Madagascar. PTI

India's flood relief mission to Madagascar will be followed up this week with the island's Defence Minister Rakotonirina Leon Jean Richard visiting Lucknow and Delhi from Tuesday — the first such high-level trip since Delhi incorporated the island off the coast of Africa into the "Indian Ocean Region (IOR)".

Mr. Richard is expected to discuss implementing a memorandum of understanding on defence cooperation signed during President Ramnath Kovind's visit to Antananarivo in March 2018. The Minister will travel first to Lucknow to attend the Defexpo, and later attend the India-Africa Defence Ministers' conference in Delhi, and hold a bilateral meeting with Defence Minister Rajnath Singh on Thursday.

Strategic capability

Mr. Richard will discuss the devastation in Madagascar due to flooding after a cyclone and heavy rain in the island's north-west left at least 31 dead and affected nearly 1,00,000 people.

Last week, the Indian Navy conducted "Operation Vanilla", with *INS Airavat* delivering relief material such as food, clothing, medicines and water. Officials said the humanitarian gesture by New Delhi also showcased India's strategic capabilities in the furthestmost islands of the IOR.

"*INS Airavat* delivers relief supplies to cyclone-hit Madagascar. SAGAR Policy at work — India as an early responder," External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar tweeted about the operation on Sunday, referring to India's policy of "Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR)" for IOR islands.

The SAGAR concept was announced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in March 2015, during his visit to Mauritius and other Indian Ocean islands. At the time, Madagascar, Comoros and the French island of Reunion were a part of the East and South Africa Division at the External Affairs Ministry.

Reworked approach

However, recently the Ministry decided to include the three islands as part of the IOR (Indian Ocean Region) desk along with Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Mauritius and the Seychelles. In a December 16 circular on the decision, it said the incorporation of the "Vanilla islands" as they are called, reflected "the growing strategic importance of the Indian Ocean Islands within the framework of Indo-Pacific".

Last October, Minister of State for External Affairs V. Muraleedharan travelled to the Reunion islands and met the leaders of all the "Vanilla islands" as well.

The inclusion of the region in the IOR signals the government's increasing level of comfort with the "Indo-Pacific" concept that describes the entire neighbourhood from the coast of Africa to the U.S. west coast.

In one of many changes effected last week to the Ministry's organisational structure, Foreign Secretary Harsh Shringla decided to club the entire Indian Ocean Region and the Southern and Indo-Pacific Divisions under one Additional Secretary (Indo-Pacific).

According to officials, the specific outcomes from Mr. Richard's visit are still being finalised, but that the effort would be to offer Madagascar strategic cooperation similar to what is currently shared with other IOR countries.

The Indian Navy undertakes Joint EEZ patrols with Maldives, Seychelles and Mauritius, which have all joined India's coastal radar chain network.

(With inputs from

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