

## India makes push for U.K. immigration reform

A file photo of students attending an education exhibition organised by the British Council in Chennai.

Commerce and Industry Minister Suresh Prabhu and Minister of State for Home Affairs Kiren Rijiju, both on visits to the U.K., have pressed the need for Britain to review immigration policies relating to India, including on student visas and the extension of a visa system introduced for Chinese visitors to the U.K.

The visit comes amid the official confirmation that Prime Minister Narendra Modi will attend the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in London in April.

The meetings came as India and Britain agreed to the terms of a memorandum of understanding on the swift return of Indian illegal immigrants from the U.K. — an issue that has been repeatedly raised by the British government and cited as an obstacle to immigration reform on the British side.

The progress on this issue — the MoU will likely be signed during Mr. Modi's visit — will be seen as a gesture of goodwill on the Indian side and will strengthen their calls for change on the U.K.

Among the key asks raised by the Ministers is for the introduction of a two-year visa system for business travellers. Britain introduced the system for Chinese visitors in 2016. Mr. Prabhu said he raised issues both around the ease of getting visas and the costs which could prove prohibitive for the services sector. Costs have been rising amid a toughening of the U.K. policy regime in this area.

Mr. Rijiju raised issues relating to the two-year visa, as well as students and the treatment of women on spousal visas. The last is a growing issue of concern, amid fears that women who had accompanied partners on spousal visas would be deserted in India, had their visas been cancelled.

Both Ministers expressed their satisfaction with the progress of talks on these issues. "Their response was very positive," Mr. Rijiju said on Friday. He added that another issue raised was the need for visa-free travel for Indian diplomats in the U.K. Britain remained the only major European country not to bring in this policy, he said.

### Trade opportunities

During the course of his visit, Mr. Prabhu held a number of discussions, including taking part in the 12th India-U.K. Joint Economic and Trade Committee (JETCO) meeting, in which the recommendations of the Joint Working Group on trade were discussed. With Britain unable to commence formal discussions on a trade deal with India till it leaves the EU, the two countries have begun informal talks on the scope of potential trade opportunities through this working group.

Mr. Prabhu welcomed the progress that had been made in this area, highlighting Britain's more than doubling of the export finance support to U.K. companies trading with India, and also extending it to Indian buyers of goods and services. He also highlighted progress made on cooperation on advanced manufacturing, SMEs, and energy.

He said India would be working with Britain on cooperation around new technical innovation when it came to the use of wind, tidal and solar energy, as well as the potential for British firms in this

area to set up manufacturing facilities in industrial corridors in India.

The forthcoming CHOGM meeting also played a big part in discussions, as they sought to infuse the Commonwealth with dynamism. “We must first create wealth otherwise what is common?” he said, arguing there had to be a much greater push for intra-Commonwealth trade, which was about new wealth and opportunities.

“India is the right candidate we must take leadership in doing that along with our host, the U.K.,” he said. He also highlighted the importance of defending the multilateral trading system. “We now want to take stock and revive the spirit of the WTO,” he said warning against the rise of protectionism globally. “we strongly believe we need to promote trade to bring in economic development.”

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