

SRI LANKAN PROJECTS DELAYED: PM

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Taking stock:Narendra Modi and Ranil Wickremesinghe in New Delhi on Saturday.R.V. MoorthyR.V. Moorthy

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and visiting Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe on Saturday discussed the progress of a number of pending development projects, with the former expressing “concern” over delays, said a press release issued by the Sri Lankan PM’s office.

“Mr. Narendra Modi has expressed his concern over the implementation of Indo-Sri Lanka joint development projects in accordance with the MoU signed between India and Sri Lanka in 2017 ... Mr. Modi said he was not satisfied with the response he had received from the Sri Lankan government to his overtures,” said the release in Sinhala. India’s completed projects in Sri Lanka have been largely in the housing sector, and according to the release, Mr. Modi, during the meeting, agreed to finance another 10,000 homes for tea estate workers.

Indian statement

The statement came in sharp contrast to the more blandly worded release from the External Affairs Ministry about the meeting. “Prime Ministers discussed the entire gamut of bilateral relations and ways to further deepen the historically close and friendly relations between the two countries ... They also reviewed the progress in implementation of various decisions taken during high-level exchanges in the recent past,” it said.

Ministry officials present at the meeting said the delayed projects had indeed been the “main subject of discussion”, but characterised Mr. Modi’s reaction as “taking stock” of progress on the projects rather than “disappointment”.

During Mr. Wickremesinghe’s previous official visit to Delhi in April 2017, the two nations signed a “memorandum of understanding between India and Sri Lanka for cooperation in economic projects”. Under the MoU, Letters of Intent (LoI) were to be issued to India for most of the projects between May and September in 2017, but little or no movement has been made even a year later.

Some of the delay is over concerns that India would be allowed to acquire Sri Lankan land. Officials say the projects have also run into rough weather because of the deep disagreements between President Maithripala Sirisena and Mr. Wickremesinghe, who belong to rival parties, and the release from the Lankan PM’s office indicated the sharp divide.

The pending projects include an LNG terminal in Kerawalapitiya near Colombo, a 50-100 MW solar power plant in Sampur, an oil tank farm in Trincomalee and a container terminal in the Colombo port. There has been little word on a proposal for India to develop the Palaly airport near Jaffna and the Mattala airport near Hambantota. The preferential trade treaty, Economic and Technical Cooperation Agreement, still awaits clearances as it faces opposition from Sri Lankan business chambers. Mr. Wickremesinghe has been pushing for India to be handed the container terminal, while President Sirisena wants to retain it for Sri Lanka. At the Cabinet meeting on Tuesday, they are said to have openly aired their differences.

(With inputs from

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