

INDIA-BANGLADESH SUMMIT: PM MODI, SHEIKH HASINA LIKELY TO MEET IN DECEMBER

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NEW DELHI : NEW DELHI: The prime ministers of India and Bangladesh will hold a virtual summit in December, a joint statement issued at the end of the fifth India-Bangladesh Joint Consultative Commission said on Tuesday after both countries reviewed existing bilateral ties and pledged to increase collaboration in a range of areas including trials for the covid-19 vaccine.

The Joint Consultative Commission (JCC) was co-chaired by Bangladeshi foreign minister A. K. Abdul Momen and his Indian counterpart, S Jaishankar.

The two ministers expressed satisfaction over the fact that despite the covid-19 pandemic causing major disruptions, India and Bangladesh had been able to keep up sustained engagement, the joint statement said.

Some of the things accomplished in spite of the covid-19 induced constraints were the “first trial movement of cargo from Kolkata to North East India through roads and waterways of Bangladesh, signing of the second addendum to the Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade (and the) export of goods from India using rail route, including container and parcel trains,” the statement said.

The transit of Indian goods through Bangladesh to its northeastern states is a measure of how far ties have evolved between the two countries in the past decade. The two countries have sorted out land and maritime boundary issues between them – that have helped build trust between the two countries.

According to the statement, the transit of Indian goods through Bangladesh to northeast India reflected “the excellent understanding shared between the two countries. In this regard, (the Bangladeshi) Foreign Minister reiterated Bangladesh’s commitment to support India in strengthening connectivity in the region for creating a win-win situation for both economies.”

The two ministers also discussed holding trials of covid-19 vaccine candidates to combat the disease that has swept the world killing one million people so far since it emerged in China late last year.

Given their shared history, the two countries outlined a slew of programmes to “jointly celebrate the Golden Jubilee of the Liberation War (of Bangladesh) and the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries in India, Bangladesh and in select third countries through their respective Missions,” the statement said. These include ceremonial military parades on 16 December in Dhaka and New Delhi and Kolkata, honoring Indian war veterans of the 1971 India-Pakistan war, the revival of the Mujibnagar-Kolkata road and the simultaneous launching of a website on 50 years of victory and friendship between India and Bangladesh are some of the programmes the two sides have chalked out.

Border management was an area that the two ministers agreed needed “further strengthening” for the effective implementation of the Coordinated Border Management Plan (CBMP).

“Both sides agreed that the loss of civilian lives at the border is a matter of concern and urged

the concerned border forces to enhance coordinated measures to bring such border incidents down to zero," it said. The "importance of educating the border population about the sanctity of the international border was stressed on," the statement said.

On trade, the two ministers noted that "greater measures could be taken for mutually beneficial enhancement of trade and investment...including the removal of all forms of barriers to trade," according to the statement. Bangladesh reiterated its appreciation for duty free access of Bangladeshi products into the Indian market under a South Asian pact, as a result of which Bangladeshi exports to India could cross the \$ 1 billion mark in 2018-19.

Momen repeated a Bangladeshi request for advance information on any amendments in export policy that India could make that could impact India's export of "essential commodities to Bangladesh, since such exports are an important factor influencing Bangladesh's domestic market. The Indian side took note of this," the statement said. This comes against the backdrop of India recently stopping exports of onions that Bangladesh sources from India.

Jaishankar and Momen tasked their officials to work closely to avoid disruption of supply chains, particularly in the post-covid period, stressing on the importance of unhindered two-way trade through the land ports and four trans-border railway connections as well as inland and coastal waterways.

Jaishankar and Momen also reviewed the status of projects under the three Lines of Credit (LoC) agreements concluded between India and Bangladesh. Dhaka is the largest recipient of aid from India in the form of LoC.

On the vexatious issue of sharing of river waters, the two ministers "reiterated their commitment to finalization of the Interim Agreement for sharing of the waters of the Teesta," the statement said. The two ministers also "underscored the need for early conclusion of Framework of Interim Agreement on sharing of waters of six other joint rivers, namely, Manu, Muhuri, Khowai, Gumti, Dharla and Dudhkumar," it said.

On the issue of Rohingya refugees who are sheltered by Bangladesh, Jaishankar and Momen "reiterated the importance of the safe, speedy and sustainable return to Myanmar of the forcibly displaced persons from the Rakhine State of Myanmar."

In this regard, Bangladesh Foreign Minister emphasized that unless the problem is resolved quickly, there are possibilities of pockets of radicalism disrupting economic growth, peace and stability in the region and requested India's leverage, to address the crisis," the statement added.

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