

THE MINISTER OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI PRANAB MUKHERJEE): (a) to (d) EAM visited Bangladesh on February 9, 2009. During his visit he met several leaders of the newly elected government including Prime Minister, Foreign Minister, Home Minister, Commerce Minister and Industries Minister of Bangladesh. In his meetings, he discussed issues related to the entire gamut of India's bilateral relation with Bangladesh including connectivity, trade and commerce. During the visit both sides also signed two agreements, namely, Bilateral Investment Promotion and Protection Agreement (BIPPA) and India-Bangladesh Trade Agreement.

Present policy on Middle East

448. SHRI SABIR ALI: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

- (a) the details of our present policy with regard to Middle East;
- (b) the countries in the Gulf and West Asia with which we have special relations, normal relations and working relations respectively;
- (c) the special steps being taken to strengthen our diplomatic staff and assisting staff in that region;
- (d) the suggestions/requests/demands received in the matter; and
- (e) the action being taken thereon?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI E. AHAMMED): (a) Given the political, strategic and economic importance of the North African, West Asian and Gulf countries and the historical linkages that mark our relations with them, our policy aims to strengthen all aspects of our relations with individual countries of the region as well as with bodies such as the League of Arab States and the Gulf Cooperation Council. With regard to Palestine India has consistently supported Palestine cause and for a peaceful resolution of the West Asian conflict resulting in a sovereign, independent, viable and united State of Palestine living within secure and recognized borders, side by side at peace with Israel.

(b) India maintains cordial diplomatic relations with all the countries in the region.

(c) to (e) Requests of Indian Missions and Posts in the Gulf region for augmentation of staff mainly stem from their requirement to service the consular needs of large expatriate Indian populations in these countries.

Cabinet has approved a proposal for augmenting diplomatic and support staff in the Ministry of External Affairs in the long run. This proposal envisages the creation of an additional 175 posts of Officers and 90 posts of support staff (*i.e.* 265 in total) in Indian Missions and Posts abroad, to be spread over the next 10 years. The additional numbers of personnel would be allocated among the various India Missions and Posts on the basis of the specific requirements faced by them, including those for consular activities.

For specific activities, such as the coordination and facilitation provided by the Indian consulate in Jeddah for the travel and stay of Indian Haj pilgrims, the Post is granted special permission every year to locally hire additional hands during the Hajseason.

Proposal to abolish import duty on Ferro-Nickel

449. SHRI A. ELAVARASAN: Will the Minister of FINANCE be pleased to state:

(a) whether Government proposes to abolish the import duty on ferro-nickel to increase the import of ferro-nickel so that the domestic stainless steel production would be increased;

(b) if so, the details thereof; and

(c) if not, the reasons therefor?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF FINANCE (SHRI S.S. PALANIMANICKAM): (a) No, sir.

(b) Does not arise in view of (a).

(c) All ferro-alloys including ferro-nickel already enjoy a concessional rate of basic customs duty of 5% as against the peak rate for industrial goods of 10%. Steel production is a function of several factors such as demand, prices, domestic capacity etc. and is not determined by imports of ferro-nickel alone.

Sectors affected by global recession

†450. SHRI SHREEGOPAL VYAS: Will the Minister of FINANCE be pleased to state:

(a) the areas of which pace of development has been affected by global recession and upto what extent;

(b) the areas in which proposed investments may be required to change comprehensively in order to keep the pace of complete development in this Five Year Plan; and

(c) assistance which would be required for the purpose from outside?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF FINANCE (SHRI PAWAN KUMAR BANSAL): (a) to (c) The global slowdown has impacted the growth of the domestic economy. As per the Advance Estimates of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) released by the Central Statistical Organisation (CSO), the growth in real GDP for 2008-09 is placed at 7.1 per cent, as compared with 9.0 per cent in 2007-08. The estimated growth in 2008-09 is composed of growth of 2.6 per cent in Agriculture and allied sectors, 4.8 per cent in Industry and 9.6 per cent in Services as compared to a growth of 4.9 per cent, 8.1 per cent and 10.9 per cent in 2007-08.

The Eleventh Five Year Plan envisaged an annual average real growth of 9 per cent comprising an average per annum growth of 4 per cent in Agriculture, 10 to 11 per cent in

†Original notice of the question was received in Hindi.