

During the visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to India in September 2014, the matter of further strengthening bilateral cooperation on trans-border rivers was discussed and the Joint Statement issued during the visit stated that “The two sides will further strengthen cooperation through the Expert-Level Mechanism on the provision of flood-season hydrological data and emergency management, and exchange views on other issues of mutual interest.”

Government carefully monitors all developments on the Brahmaputra River. As a lower riparian State with considerable established user rights to the waters of the River, India has conveyed its views and concerns to the Chinese authorities, including at the highest levels of the Government of the People’s Republic of China. India has urged China to ensure that the interests of downstream States are not harmed by any activities in upstream areas.

Problems during Haj pilgrimage

2069. SHRIMATI NAZNIN FARUQUE: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

- (a) the number of Haj pilgrims who did their Haj in this year;
- (b) whether they faced any problems or inconvenience during the Haj, if so, the details thereof; and
- (c) the steps being taken by Government in this regard and the steps being taken by Government for the betterment of Haj pilgrims?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS GENERAL (RETD.) V. K. SINGH: (a) The number of Haj pilgrims who performed Haj this year is 1,35,966 (99,966 through Haj Committee of India and 36,000 through Private Tour Operators).

(b) Haj 2014 operation was accomplished smoothly and without any significant problems. However, minor problems like delay in arrival/departure of schedule of flights, inadequate facilities at the place of stay and issues regarding local transportation were observed.

(c) It has been the constant endeavor of the Government and the Haj Committee of India to keep making improvements in the arrangements for the Haj pilgrims and provide them with better facilities after taking into account the feedback received from all concerned.

The steps envisaged for problem-free travel of Haj pilgrims during Haj 2015 are as follows:

- (i) To improve amenities for pilgrims in buildings in Makkah and Madinah.

- (ii) To streamline air travel arrangement of Hajis by ensuring effective management for timely arrival and departure of flights.
- (iii) To improve catering facilities in Madinah.
- (iv) To strengthen medical services for Haj pilgrims.
- (v) To strengthen arrangements for transportation of Hajis to Haram and back who are accommodated in Azizia.
- (vi) Upgradation of the Mobile phone Application - "Indian Haj Accommodation Locator" with more information for pilgrims.

Meeting of SAARC Culture Ministers

2070. SHRI RANJIB BISWAL: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

- (a) whether India has hosted South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC) Culture Ministers meeting recently;
- (b) if so, the details of the discussions held therein;
- (c) the names of the countries whose Culture Minister attended the meeting; and
- (d) the details of decisions arrived at the meeting and the benefits likely to accrue to India and other countries as a result thereof?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (GENERAL (RETD.) V. K. SINGH): (a) Yes. The 3rd Meeting of the SAARC Ministers of Culture was held in New Delhi on September 25, 2014.

(b) Issues of cooperation in such areas as Libraries, Archives, Museums, Performing Arts and Cultural Festivals were discussed during the meeting.

(c) Culture Ministers of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and India attended the meeting.

(d) The meeting adopted "The Delhi Resolution" and the "SAARC Agenda for Culture". It also decided to:

- (i) Designate Bamiyan (Afghanistan) as the SAARC Cultural Capital for 2015-16
- (ii) Declare 2016-17, as the SAARC Year of Cultural Heritage
- (iii) Launch a dedicated SAARC Website on Culture
- (iv) Establish a SAARC Cultural Heritage Committee (SHC)

The decisions will help preserve and promote the rich cultural heritage of SAARC region.