

(d) if so, the details thereof?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI E. AHAMMED): (a) to (d) Yes, Sir. Government have been taking into account the need to benefit the Eastern and North-Eastern States in pursuing foreign policy goals with neighbouring countries in the East bilaterally as well as multilaterally through the regional grouping, Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) consisting of India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand.

The BIMSTEC Framework Agreement on Free Trade Area signed in October, 2003 envisages FTA in goods, investment and services. For trade in services and investments, the negotiations shall commence in 2005 and are expected to be completed by 2007.

Bilaterally India already has a free trade regime with both Nepal and Bhutan. A framework FTA was signed with Thailand in October, 2003 and an "Early Harvest Package" of 82 items will commence on September 1, 2004. India and Bangladesh are also exploring the possibility of signing an FTA on which two rounds of discussions have already been held. An agreement has been reached with China in June, 2003 to set up a Joint Study Group composed of officials and economists to examine the potential complementarities between the two countries in expanded trade and economic cooperation, as well as the feasibility of an FTA between India and China.

Collection of fingerprints of US visa seekers

1677. SHRI RAMA MUNI REDDY SIRIGIREDDY:

SHRIMATI N.P. DURGA:

Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether it is a fact that the Embassy of US has recently made an announcement that from April, 2004, two electronic fingerprints would be collected from visa applicants;

(b) if so, the details thereof;

(c) whether it is applicable to visas issued before July, 2004; and

(d) the details of the countries in which its biometrics in visas has been introduced by the people?

[19 August, 2004]

RAJYA SABHA

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI E. AHAMMED): (a) and (b) According to information received from the US Embassy in New Delhi, under the new rules for grant of visa announced by the US Government, all persons intending to visit USA are required to visit US Consular Offices for biometric registration that involves electronic fingerprints and digital photograph at the time of issue of visa. The measures have come into force with effect from July, 2004. However, the applicants below 14 years and above 79 years and diplomatic and official passport holders visiting USA on an official visit do not require such biometric registration. The application of these rules is universal and not India specific.

(c) No.

(d) It is understood that US consular missions in more than 150 countries have introduced biometrics in visas.

Indian labourers in gulf countries

†1678. SHRI KALRAJ MISHRA: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether Government are aware that number of Indian labourers and employees are living in slave-like conditions in the Gulf countries;

(b) whether some of mason labours, truck drivers are working under the contractors;

(c) if so, the number of such labours in the Gulf countries; and

(d) whether Government have provided any facility to them for their return to native place at their own will?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI E. AHAMMED): (a) No specific case involving slave-like living conditions of Indian labourers and employees working in Gulf countries has come to the notice of the Government. However, there are cases of non-implementation of employment contract of Indian workers including those relating to non-payment of delayed payment of the dues of the Indian workers.

† Original notice of the question was received in Hindi.