

Indians in jails of Pakistan

27. SHRI RITABRATA BANERJEE: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

- (a) the details regarding the number of Indians presently in the jails of Pakistan; and
- (b) the measures initiated to bring them back?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI M. J. AKBAR): (a) and (b) As per available information, there are 208 (61 civil prisoners and 147 fishermen) individuals who are Indian and believed to be Indian in Pakistani jails. Apart from this, there are 74 missing defence personnel that are also believed to be in Pakistan's custody but whose presence has not been acknowledged so far by Pakistan.

Government regularly takes up with the Government of Pakistan the matter of early release and repatriation of all Indian civil prisoners and fishermen, who have completed their sentences. The High Commission of India in Islamabad, on a continuing basis, provides humanitarian and legal assistance to Indian nationals imprisoned in Pakistan and also regularly undertakes distribution of items of daily necessity to them through Pakistani jail authorities. As a result of Government's efforts, a total of 438 Indian fishermen were released by Pakistan, in two batches of 220 on 26 December 2016 and 218 on 6 January, 2017.

In addition, an India-Pakistan Judicial Committee on Prisoners, consisting of retired judges from the higher judiciary of both countries, was constituted in 2008 to look into humanitarian aspects of the matter and recommend measures to ensure humane treatment and expeditious release of fishermen and prisoners, who have completed their prison term. The last visit of the Committee was to India in 2013. It is now Pakistan's turn to organise the next visit of the Committee and Government awaits further steps by Government of Pakistan in this regard.

Bilateral relations with China

†28. SHRI NARESH AGRAWAL: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

- (a) whether it is a fact that despite India's efforts to maintain amicable relations, China continues with its treacherous ways;

†Original notice of the question was received in Hindi.

(b) if so, the manner in which India would deal with the double standard of China; and

(c) if not, the details of progress made with regard to relations with China during the last two years?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (GENERAL (RETD.) V.K. SINGH): (a) to (c) India's engagement with China is multifaceted. In areas where we have commonality of views, engagement has expanded and upgraded in recent years. Both sides share a view that India-China bilateral relationship is poised to play a defining role in the 21st Century in Asia and in the world. They have agreed to work towards strengthening the Closer Developmental Partnership for mutual benefit. In view of the significance of the bilateral relationship, the two sides have agreed to continue their engagement at various levels to enhance mutual understanding and trust and to address outstanding issues in the spirit of showing mutual respect and sensitivity to each other's interests, concerns and aspirations.

High-level exchanges have intensified between India and China, with the top leadership meeting at regular intervals. The two countries have also cooperated in multilateral frameworks like G-20 and BRICS. China has supported India's entry into SCO, which would provide another multilateral platform for bilateral engagement. The two sides have enhanced cooperation in border areas by establishment of more border personnel meeting points and conducting joint military exercises. New dialogue mechanisms in the area of counter-terrorism, including for exchange of information have been initiated. A new bilateral dialogue mechanism to discuss regional and international security issues has also been agreed to.

New Passport Policy

29. SHRI RAJEEV SHUKLA: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether Government has recently announced the New Passport Policy; and

(b) if so, the details thereof?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (GENERAL (RETD.) V.K. SINGH): (a) and (b) Yes. In order to streamline, liberalize and ease the process of issue of passport, the Ministry of External Affairs has taken a number of steps in the realm of passport policy which is expected to benefit the citizens of India applying for a passport. The details of these steps are given below:—