

which should be nurtured. Indian skilled professionals have contributed to the growth and development of the U.S. economy and have helped the U.S. retain its competitive edge and innovation advantage. They are a big stakeholder in India-U.S. relations and their backward linkages to India have helped U.S. businesses. Most recently, issues of H-1B visa were raised during the visit of the U.S. Secretary of State, Michael R. Pompeo, to India on 26 June, 2019. We have conveyed our expectation to the U.S. Administration for a non-discriminatory and predictable H-1B visa regime.

### **Relationship with SAARC countries**

3698. SHRI SASMIT PATRA: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) the status of relations between India and the SAARC countries at present; and

(b) the measures proposed to be taken for improving relations between India and the SAARC countries during the next five years?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI V. MURALEEDHARAN): (a) and (b) India enjoys excellent bilateral relations with Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka. As per our 'Neighbourhood First' policy, Government is committed to developing friendly and mutually beneficial relations with all its neighbours. India is an active development partner and is engaged in several projects in these countries. Our engagement with these countries will continue to be based on a consultative, non-reciprocal and outcome-oriented approach, while focussing on delivering benefits like greater connectivity, improved infrastructure, stronger development cooperation in various sectors area, security and broader people-to-people contacts. With regards to Pakistan, the Government has conveyed that it desires normal neighbourly relations with Pakistan in an atmosphere free from terror, hostility and violence. The onus is on Pakistan for creating such an environment.

### **Funding of Kashmiri separatists**

3699. SHRI G. V. L. NARASIMHA RAO: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether the Ministry has sought any explanation from Pakistan Government about the funding received by Kashmiri separatists from Pakistan or on its behalf;