

Remarks of H.E. Mr. Vinod K Jacob, Ambassador of India to the Kingdom of Bahrain at the Rotary Club of Manama on 21 January 2024

I am happy to attend today's gathering here at Rotary Club of Manama. At the outset, let me wish this distinguished audience a happy new year 2024. You occupy a special place in the GCC region given the fact that the Rotary Club of Manama was the first such Rotary club in the region when it was established as far back as 1965. I thank the President, Ms. Renuka Nambiar Ravindran for this invitation to speak on India-Bahrain bilateral relations.

India and Bahrain have long-standing brotherly ties and our bilateral cooperation is founded on close historical bonds, shared principles, mutual interests as well as common aspirations for international peace, stability and prosperity. The basis for the development of our relations across the board is the consensus reached by the leadership of the two sides.

His Excellency Shri Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India paid a State visit to the Kingdom of Bahrain in August 2019. This was the first ever visit by an Indian Prime Minister and constitutes a historical and important milestone in the engagement. It also reflects a continuity of approach under the guidance of His Majesty King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, King of the Kingdom of Bahrain and His Royal Highness Prince Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa, Crown Prince and Prime Minister.

During the visit, the two sides expressed satisfaction with the current state of bilateral relations and agreed to further broaden and deepen the engagement in diverse fields of mutual interest, and underlined the importance of enhancing high-level political exchanges, defence and higher education cooperation, trade and economic relations and people-to-people linkages. Both sides welcomed the efforts of the High Joint Commission between Bahrain and India. The two sides also noted the increasing trend of bilateral trade and existing potential for two-way investments, reaffirmed their desire to provide favourable environments for trade and investments.

You are all aware of the challenges of the COVID pandemic which impacted people and nations across the world. India and Bahrain supported each other during that time. Bahrain provided 40 MTs of liquid medical oxygen and all required facilitations for the needed COVID-19 related supplies to India in the month of May 2021 during the second COVID wave. The Gulf Air extended its support to airlift urgent medical supplies and relief items to India, free of charge, on a space-available basis on all its flights to India. The local Indian community associations sent about 900 oxygen cylinders and 35 oxygen concentrators to India in May 2021.

The Government of India gifted 100,000 doses of 'Made-in-India' Covishield vaccines to Bahrain on 28 January 2021. Earlier Government of India provided 1.5 million Hydroxychloroquine tablets on commercial basis and facilitated travel of nurses and medical professionals to Bahrain, besides keeping supply lines open for Bahrain and other GCC countries for essential trade, food products and medicine etc.

In the aftermath of lifting of COVID related restrictions on travel and connectivity, in 2022, bilateral non-oil trade registered, according to Bahraini Government statistics, a growth of about 20% to reach USD 1.4 billion. I expect this year to see a sort of correction and the trade could reach USD 1.2 billion to USD 1.3 billion. According to the statistics of the Indian Ministry of Commerce, bilateral trade for the April to October 2023 period reached USD 670.97 million.

Bahrain's imports from India include rice, boneless meat, shrimp, sugar, fresh fruit and vegetables, machinery and engineering goods, medicines, jewellery and polymers. Meanwhile, its exports to India include urea, methanol, mineral fuel, mineral oils and products, iron ore, aluminium, copper and bridge sections.

Cumulative Indian investment in Bahrain was USD 1.4 billion between April 2000 and June 2023. Financial services accounts for the highest investment value. Other important areas of investment are real estate, hospitality, health, IT and education. Bahraini investments are slowly increasing and as of 2023 stood at USD 185 million.

In the last six months, my Embassy has taken new initiatives to further support the strengthening of economic, trade and investment cooperation. We have been supporting business delegations from the states of Karnataka, Goa and Kerala as they explore collaborations in Bahrain. Indian presence was active in the Jewellery Arabia Show and in other important exhibitions. We have created a One District One Product wall in the Embassy to focus our attention by highlighting tourist attractions and the exquisite products of various states and union territories of India. For instance, this month, our focus state is Uttar Pradesh.

Similarly, in the important area of people to people ties, both countries have deepened cooperation. During the period January to December 2023, my Embassy issued 5329 visas. According to Bahraini data, during the period January to September 2023, almost 800,000 Indians visited Bahrain, representing a nearly 60 percent increase over the corresponding period in 2022. The Indian community in Bahrain now constitutes nearly 340,000 and they have been actively contributing to the economic prosperity of Bahrain. Many of the successful ones are in this room, and I am happy to note their continued support to the strengthening of the relationship. I would also like to thank the leadership, Government and society in Bahrain for being such excellent hosts.

In my monthly Open Houses when I meet Indian nationals without appointments, I regularly emphasise the need for them to adhere to the laws and regulations of Bahrain. I use the opportunity to stress the LMRA guidelines and the need for following the norms and regulations of the Ministry of Labour and the Immigration authorities. For the ease of service, we have introduced EoIBhCONNECT which is a mobile application for booking an online appointment with the Embassy of India, Bahrain.

Of the 340,000 Indians residing in Bahrain, around 28,000 are students. I am convinced that both countries have a responsibility to encourage these youth to rediscover the historical ties that began with the links between the Bahraini pearls and the Indian spices centuries ago. Therefore, my Embassy has started a new initiative called "Visit the Embassy" programme in which groups of 15 to 20 students visit the Embassy to get an understanding of the work we do and concludes with a free flowing discussion with me.

Similarly, we are keen to promote better appreciation of contemporary India among Bahraini friends and towards this end, a delegation of 8 Bahraini journalists visited India last week. It's my hope that even in the field of sports as well the two countries can collaborate. Another area for cooperation is space science. You would recall that in November 2023, Dr. A Sivathanu Pillai, Former Chief Controller (R&D), DRDO and Former Hon' Distinguished Professor, ISRO visited Bahrain and also delivered a talk on Space and the Future of Humanity at my Embassy.

Looking into the future in the spheres of economic and people to people cooperation, I would suggest that both sides can explore new ways and new sectors to

make progress. In my view, I feel we have potential for cooperation and collaboration in IT, ITES, big data, fintech, renewable energy and tourism.

I would be remiss if I did not speak a few words about the defence engagement. Recently, in the first week of January 2024, the Indian Navy responded swiftly to a maritime incident in Arabian Sea involving a hijacking attempt on board a Liberia flagged bulk carrier. Then, last week, INS Visakhapatnam, undertaking anti-piracy patrol in Gulf of Aden responded quickly to a distress call in the Arabian Sea after a Marshall Island flagged merchant vessel Genco Picardy came under drone attack. You would recall that Indian Naval Ship Vishakhapatnam had undertaken a friendly visit to Bahrain in August last year. India has interests in the Red Sea and we have the Indian Navy patrolling the area trying to secure the sea lanes and doing their best so that our economic interests are not impacted.

In conclusion, I would like to state that the India growth story presents a tremendous opportunity for Bahrain. According to the first advance estimates of national income released by the National Statistics Office in India on 5 January 2024, the real GDP growth for 2023-24 is placed at 7.3 percent. You can contrast this with the projections for global growth that are currently converging well below 3 percent for 2024 and appreciate the avenues that would be available for Bahrain. I and my Embassy will continue to support the process.

Thank you.