Transcript of Media Briefing by Secretary (East) during Prime Minister's visit to Thailand (November 03, 2019)

November 03, 2019

Official Spokesperson, Shri Raveesh Kumar: Friends, Namaskar, good afternoon and welcome to this special briefing from Bangkok on Prime Minister’s visit to Thailand. As you are aware Prime Minister arrived here yesterday to attend the ASEAN related Summits. Today he had three meetings, three engagements. India-ASEAN Summit and two bilateral meetings. I have with me Secretary (East) who is joined by our Ambassador to Thailand, Smt. Suchitra Durai as well as Jt. Secretary (Indo-Pacific) Vikram Doraiswami. Secretary (East) will give her initial remarks after that we will take some questions. Ma’am the floor is yours.

Secretary (East), Smt. Vijay Thakur Singh: Good afternoon. As you all know Prime Minister arrived in Bangkok yesterday afternoon. His first engagement was an interaction with Indian community. Almost 5000 members of the Indian community were present at the National Indoor Stadium in Bangkok and they had very enthusiastically welcomed Prime Minister to Bangkok. Those who attended the event apart from the members of the diaspora and NRI community there were also members of the India-Thai Parliamentary Friendship Group.

At the event Prime Minister had released a commemorative coin on the occasion of the 550th Birth Anniversary of Guru Nanakdev Ji and he had also released the Thai version of Thirukkural which is a great Tamil Classic.

This morning Prime Minister participated in a business event which also marked the Golden Jubilee of the Aditya Birla Group’s presence in businesses in Thailand this year. They started their operations in 1969 and have completed 50 years.

This is one of the first investments by an Indian company into Thailand and Aditya Birla has so far made investments in a number of sectors which include fabrics, chemicals, carbon etc. and during the event the Prime Minister assembled those business persons who were there. He of course recognized that through the Indian business houses and Indian investments they make a lot of contribution to the economy of the country in which they operate and also in terms of strengthening the economic ties between the two countries.

Prime Minister outlined the progress that had been made in India over the last five years in achieving socio-economic milestones which included financial inclusion, sanitation, access to electricity as well as LPG and improved use of renewable energy. He also called on the businesses to further invest in India because of the growing opportunities that are there in India and he called for further strengthening of economic relations between the two countries.
Later in the morning Prime Minister also co-chaired the 16th ASEAN India Summit along with the Prime Minister of Thailand. Thailand is the current chair of the ASEAN and also the country coordinator for India in the ASEAN.

In his remarks Prime Minister had underlined the centrality of ASEAN in India’s Act East Policy and the Indo-Pacific vision. He highlighted the convergences of our respective approaches to the Indo-Pacific. Both India and ASEAN shared lot of similarities in the way they approach Indo-Pacific. He also called for intensification of partnership in capacity building which included areas like agriculture, science, IT, engineering and the network of universities. Prime called for greater surface, maritime, digital and people to people contacts and connectivity. He referred to the $1 billion line of credit which could be used for further strengthening connectivity in both physical and digital between India and ASEAN countries.

Prime Minister announced that we would be looking at creating an endowment of about INR 50 million that would be used for promoting exchanges between faculty as well as students under the India-ASEAN university network. In addition about 50 scholarships were offered in agriculture universities. Apart from that the other announcement was to hold the Tata festival along with India – ASEAN Hackathon early on in 2020. There was also reference to the sub-regional cooperation that India has in this region and this includes the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation and also India’s recent joining as development partner of the ACMECS initiative which is the Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy. So we were amongst the first development partners of ACEMECS.

On their part the ASEAN leaders spoke of India as a long term friend, a dynamic partner and they acknowledged India’s contribution in the region for peace and stability. The leaders also welcomed India’s support to the centrality of ASEAN and India’s programs and projects which support ASEAN integration and ASEAN masterplan for connectivity.

They also acknowledged India’s leading role in capacity building including in agriculture. They expressed keen interest in enhancing partnership in maritime and cyber domain and in terms of the 1000 PhD scholarships that were launched, they expressed deep appreciation for India’s cooperation and offering of this scholarship as part of the knowledge building partnership between the two countries. As you are aware that ASEAN had announced the ASEAN outlook on Indo-Pacific and the ASEAN leaders noted the many commonalities they have with our Indo-Pacific region in particular SAGAR which is Security and Growth for All.

Apart from that on the agenda was also the developments in the region and in the international areas of common interest and concern. These included terrorism, counter-terrorism, violent extremism, cyber
security, South China Sea and it was noted by both sides the importance of promoting a rule based order in the region including through upholding adherence to international law specially the UNCLOS of 1982. The leaders affirmed the importance of maintaining and promoting peace, stability, safety and security in the South China Sea in particular freedom of navigation and overflight. Subsequently after the conclusion of the meeting of the India-ASEAN Summit Prime Minister had two bilateral meetings. One was with the Prime Minister of Thailand and the second was with the President of Indonesia.

Today, later in the afternoon he would be meeting the State Counsellor Aung San Su Kyi and therefore today there would be total three bilateral meetings and it would be noted that all the three are maritime neighbors of India. Of course Myanmar is our maritime neighbor and our closest land neighbor as well.

All this emphasizes the key role and importance that India attaches to the ASEAN counties as the part of its Act East Policy. On the bilateral meetings, ones which have already taken place press releases have been issued and they are already on the MEA website but in short, as far as the meeting with the Prime Minister of Thailand is concerned, the discussions focused on connectivity, bilateral connectivity apart from the broader concept of connectivity which was discussed with the ASEAN countries as well and they also discussed promotion of bilateral defence ties including promoting trade and investments.

It was noted that Thailand has started a direct flight from Bangkok to Guwahati and that is in fact very important because it marks the connectivity with North East region of India which is actually our closest to the South East Asia region. In fact if you look at it Thailand has its Act West Policy, India has its Act East Policy so it really makes us natural partners.

As far as the meeting with Indonesia was concerned it was great to work together on further strengthening ties. The two leaders had already met previously at Osaka and subsequent to that meeting they had also been in a meeting at the foreign ministers level. So it was to review the relationship and there was commitment to work together in promoting ties in all spheres namely defence, security, connectivity, trade & investment, people to people exchanges. So all in all there was also emphasis again on maritime connectivity and cooperation in that area.

Prime Minister congratulated the President of Indonesia for the leadership role taken by Indonesia in the Indo-Pacific discussions that had taken place in the ASEAN. So that was about the two bilateral meetings in the morning. Today after the bilateral meeting with State Counsellor Aung San Su Kyi Prime Minister would be attending a Gala Dinner which is being hosted by the Prime Minister of Thailand for all the leaders attending the Summit. I will stop here and maybe take a few questions.
**Official Spokesperson, Shri Raveesh Kumar:** Thank you very much Ma’am. We have time for a few questions.

**Question:** You said that the discussions were a kind of convergence between India and ASEAN on the vision of the Indo-Pacific. Does that mean there is a complete convergence or are there areas where we have issues, number one. And number two, this convergence, how does this translates into enhanced cooperation in areas of connectivity or in any other area in Indo-Pacific?

**Secretary (East), Smt. Vijay Thakur Singh:** See, when ASEAN came out with its outlook we were amongst the first countries to welcome it. Reason why we were amongst the first because it had elements in terms of maritime cooperation, maritime safety, sustainable use of marine resources, all these were issues on which our vision is also there and we have looked at those areas and they could be possible areas of working together with the ASEAN.

**Question:** What the main takeaways are from the India-ASEAN Summit meeting and you said in fact the issues of terrorism and violent extremisms, situation in South China Sea were discussed in the meeting. Did Prime Minister raised any of these issues during the meeting?

**Secretary (East), Smt. Vijay Thakur Singh:** Yes, they were discussed and they were raised by both sides. The Prime Minister spoke about terrorism and the threat that it poses to international peace and security and similarly the ASEAN leaders also spoke about the importance of working together to defeat terrorism. So both sides referred to the issue of terrorism. South China Sea also, there was discussion. Prime Minister spoke on South China Sea and so did the ASEAN leaders collectively and many of them individually referred to South China Sea. And as you said what were the other issues.

One of the main takeaways was to work together in Indo-Pacific, a question that was referred earlier and the reason of course, the convergence, I mentioned other issues because the principles on which we are approaching the Indo-Pacific region are similar to each other and it is the way of now working together in the maritime domain in its very broad terminology.

**Question:** I am from NHK. So this morning when the Prime Minister was referring in the ASEAN India Summit, when he was talking about increase in partnership and the need to strengthen connectivity, does this necessarily extend towards RCEP seeing India still has several outstanding issues within it?

**Question:** Did this issue of RCEP figure in the bilaterals with Indonesia and Thailand?

**Secretary (East), Smt. Vijay Thakur Singh:** Let’s take all the questions on RCEP tomorrow. Wait till tomorrow for RCEP but in terms of working with the ASEAN countries on trade, there was discussion on looking at the India-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement and to undertake review of that.

**Question:** You spoke about financial inclusion, sanitation, renewable energy were discussed. Can you elaborate about it in some detail?

**Secretary (East), Smt. Vijay Thakur Singh:** I referred to these areas in the sense that Prime Minister had spoken about the focus of government of India on these areas and as a part of the economic growth
and development taking place in India at the business meet in the morning. But within the ASEAN those issues did not specifically come up.

**Question:** Is it planned to be held Japanese Prime Minister’s and Prime Minister Modi’s meeting tomorrow and what will be the issues?

**Secretary (East), Smt. Vijay Thakur Singh:** I can only confirm that a meeting will take place but what issues will be discussed, we will brief you after the meeting has taken place.

**Question Contd.:** Is it tomorrow?

**Secretary (East), Smt. Vijay Thakur Singh:** Yes, tomorrow. And coming back to the question that was raised relating to the work that we have undertaken, tomorrow Prime Minister will be participating in a luncheon meeting which is hosted by the Prime Minister of Thailand. The focus of that is sustainable development. So many of those points will be discussed under the sustainability rubric.

**Question:** Some of the ASEAN countries were actually not comfortable with India joining the Quadrilateral Correlation. It was articulated by Singaporean Foreign Minister last to last year. So did this issue figure in the ASEAN Summit meeting with India and overall what were the indications from the ASEAN countries about India’s growing, kind of, role in the Indo-Pacific as sought by various powers including US, Australia and Japan?

**Secretary (East), Smt. Vijay Thakur Singh:** See as far as India’s role in the region is concerned as I mentioned in the very outset all the ASEAN countries appreciated India’s growing role and that India’s growing role is a factor of peace and stability in the region. So that is the broad approach of ASEAN and the way they look at India. As far as the other issues which you spoke about those were not a part of the agenda of the ASEAN.

**Question:** This $1 billion connectivity fund has been around for a long time. What is the progress in utilization of the fund?

**Secretary (East), Smt. Vijay Thakur Singh:** As far as that $1 billion fund is concerned there is one project. We have been approached by Lao government to look at funding of road in Laos under the $1 billion. Because this is a fund meant for connectivity projects so it is either physical connectivity, digital connectivity. So we are looking at the first request which has been submitted to us.

**Official Spokesperson, Shri Raveesh Kumar:** Thank you all for joining us in this special briefing from Bangkok on Prime Minister’s visit. Ma’am thank you, thank you Ambassador, and Vikram. Thank you very much.

(Concludes)