

# Solih promises to reset ties

Maldivian President, PM hold talks, underline need for peace in Indian Ocean

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MALE

Promising a host of people-focussed policies and a foreign policy formulated on the basis of human rights, democracy and climate diplomacy, the Maldives's new President, Ibrahim Solih, sought to turn a new page in the country's politics at a glittering inaugural ceremony.

The event was attended by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, former Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga, Sri Lankan MP Namal Rajapaksa and other dignitaries from across the region.

Striking a populist note, Mr. Solih said that by the end of the first 100 days of his administration, electricity prices would be reduced, tuition fees fully covered for undergraduate students, and school students provided free breakfast.

He said that his government would allow pension funds to be used by Haj pilgrims.

The new government assumes power on the back of a coalition of parties led by Mr. Solih's Maldivian Democratic Party, and comes after five years of rule under Abdulla Yameen that saw Male moving strategically and economically closer to Beijing than to New Delhi.

Ordinary Maldivians, who braved the total security lockdown across Male and the media blackout at the inaugural venue, appeared to



**In strength:** Narendra Modi congratulating Maldives President-elect Ibrahim Mohamed Solih in Male on Saturday. From left are Sri Lanka's former President Chandrika Kumaratunga and Maldivian ex-Presidents Mohamed Nasheed and Maumoon Abdul Gayoom. ■REUTERS

take pride in the peaceful transition of power.

Immediately after the swearing-in ceremony, which was held in a packed Rasmee Dhandu Stadium, Mr. Solih held a meeting with Mr. Modi, which sources said was a special gesture toward India, as indeed was the fact that India was the only country that the new President mentioned in his speech.

## Peace in region

At their meeting, the two leaders agreed on the importance of maintaining peace and security in the Indian Ocean and being "mindful of each other's concerns and

aspirations for the stability of the region".

The need to boost economic cooperation was writ large in their conversation. Their joint statement recognised that easing the visa regime mutually in both countries would be the quickest way to expand opportunities for Indian companies to invest in the Maldives, and for Maldivians to travel to India for a variety of purposes.

India was also invited to step up again as an economic partner which could help the Maldives meet its most pressing economic needs, including for increased housing and infrastructure

development and for water and sewerage systems on the outlying islands.

On the more troubling question of tackling climate change, President Solih corroborated his reference to "climate diplomacy" with details on his plan to introduce a green tax and halt fishing permits to foreigners.

When Mr. Modi extended an invitation to Mr. Solih to make a state visit to India at his earliest convenience, the President accepted the invitation and Mr. Modi also agreed to President Solih's invitation to him to make an official visit to the Maldives in the near future.