

With hug, promises, Modi reaches out to Maldives President

Ibrahim Solih, who replaced pro-China Yameen, says will fortify ties with India

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WITH PRIME Minister Narendra Modi among his audience, President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih of the Maldives said Saturday that he would strengthen bilateral relations with India and other neighbouring countries, and would work to ensure stability in the Indian Ocean.

Modi, who was seated between former Maldives presidents Mohamed Nasheed and Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, met Solih and hugged him, after the new President was sworn in.

This was the first time that Modi had attended the swearing-in of any foreign leader.

Modi and Solih, who had a bilateral meeting just after the swearing-in, "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", a joint statement said.

This is aimed at addressing concerns stemming from China's assertive activities in the Indian Ocean region. Three Chinese naval ships had docked

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Prime Minister Modi greets new Maldives President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih in Male Saturday. PTI

Modi

in Male in August last year.

Solih briefed Modi on the dire economic situation facing his country, and the two leaders discussed ways in which India could continue the development partnership, particularly to help the new government meet its pledges to the people of the Maldives.

“In particular, President Solih highlighted the pressing need for increased housing and infrastructure development as well as for establishing water and sewerage systems in the outlying islands,” the joint statement said.

The two leaders also decided that the Maldives foreign minister would visit India on November 26, and would take forward discussions pertaining to the economic situation.

Modi assured Solih of India’s firm commitment in assisting the Maldives to achieve sustainable social and economic development. He also conveyed India’s readiness to extend help in every possible way, and suggested that both sides should meet at the earliest to work out details as per the requirements of the Maldives.

While former President Abdulla Yameen had claimed unprecedented infrastructure development in the island nation, it was largely perceived as being part of China’s “debt for leverage” model, which can be used by Beijing to get access to the country’s natural resources as well as for strategic reasons. Experts say Chinese loans for projects already account for around 70 per cent of the Maldives’ national debt.

Advocating for the Indian footprint to be expanded, Modi welcomed the “expanding opportunities for Indian companies to invest in the Maldives in different sectors for the mutual benefit of both countries”.

“Recognizing that nationals of both countries travel extensively between the two countries, the leaders also agreed on the need for facilitating easier visa procedures,” the joint statement said. Indian workers and professionals in the Maldives had been facing issues regarding visas and work permits as ties deteri-

orated.

Modi and Solih also expressed their “unwavering commitment and support for increased cooperation in combating terrorism both within the region and elsewhere”.

The Maldives has faced a rising tide of Islamist fundamentalism in the last few years. It is said to have supplied between 50 and 200 fighters to the ISIS, and Maldivian civil society has witnessed an increase in religious intolerance and violent extremism.

The official spokesperson of the Ministry of External Affairs Raveesh Kumar tweeted, “PM attended the inaugural ceremony & congratulated President @ibusolih. The visit reflects India’s commitment to assist the Government & people of #Maldives in their endeavour to build a peaceful, democratic & prosperous country.”

The spokesperson tweeted pictures of the inaugural ceremony, saying: “Being part of a special moment. Maldives President Solih in his address to the People’s Majlis: We will endeavour to fortify existing ties with India. Maldives will hereupon bolster its shared role to retain enduring peace & harmony of the Indian Ocean.”

New Delhi had heaved a sigh of relief after Solih’s victory in the presidential elections in September this year, as relations between India and Maldives had deteriorated in the last few years with Yameen in power. Yameen’s trampling of democratic processes and his veering towards China had caused considerable concern in New Delhi.

Yameen’s high-handed approach had prompted former Presidents Nasheed and Gayoom, arch rivals, to join hands and form a joint opposition, and they had fielded Solih as their presidential candidate. Sources said it was only befitting that Modi was seated between Gayoom and Nasheed, as these two leaders are perceived to be the powers behind President Solih.

Yameen, who has been accused of siphoning off funds, is likely to face charges. In his inaugural address, Solih said, “As I assume office, billions of Rufiyaa is missing from the state, we do not even know the exact amount missing,

We need foreign assistance in recovering these funds.”

Modi arrived Saturday to attend the swearing-in ceremony, in what is his first visit to the Maldives as Prime Minister. The last visit by an Indian Prime Minister to the Indian Ocean island nation was by Manmohan Singh in 2011. Modi was scheduled to visit the Maldives in March 2015, but political turmoil in the country had forced the cancellation of the visit.

On Saturday, Modi conveyed his greetings to the people and the government of Maldives on “consolidation of democracy, which is essential for peace, prosperity and stability”, the joint statement said after the meeting.

“The two leaders, while noting the resilience of the relations between India and the Maldives, expressed confidence in the renewal of the close bonds of cooperation and friendship with the election of Mr Solih as the President of the Maldives,” it said.

Ahead of the visit, Modi had said, “I will convey to the new Maldivian government of Mr Solih the desire of the Indian government to work closely for realisation of their developmental priorities, especially in areas of infrastructure, health care, connectivity & human resource development.”

He had said the recent elections in the Maldives represented the collective aspirations of the people for democracy, rule of law and a prosperous future.

“We in India strongly desire to see a stable, democratic, prosperous and peaceful Republic of Maldives,” he said.

Modi congratulated Solih and wished him “the very best for his tenure”. “India and the Maldives share a strong partnership rooted in history, strong bonds between our peoples, and their shared aspiration for peace and prosperity. My government’s vision of inclusive development ‘Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikaas’ extends to all our neighbours too,” he said.

Modi extended an invitation to Solih to make a state visit to India at his earliest convenience, which was accepted by the President. Solih, in turn, expressed the hope that Modi will make an official visit to the Maldives in the near future, which Modi accepted.