

# PM to address Indian-origin tea workers during Lanka trip

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**New Delhi:** In an outreach as well as a gesture of solidarity, PM Narendra Modi will connect with Indian-origin tea workers in Sri Lanka, mostly of Tamil ancestry, when he travels to the island nation later this month on May 12.

India has built a hospital for the use of tea workers in Dickoya, where Modi will address them while handing over the facility. The interaction balances his main engagement of being the chief guest for the UN Vesak Day celebrations in Sri Lanka as part of India's effort to reclaim its Buddhist heritage and build linkages within Asia.

Vesak Day, which celebrates the birth of Buddha and is the most sacred day in the Buddhist calendar, will provide an opportunity for Modi to reach out to Sri Lanka. Alarmed at China's growing presence, which has deepened since the Sirisena government took over, India is planning a larger footprint.

The engagement with tea workers, however, will underline solidarity with Tamils without directly touching on ethnic issues in the island. Modi visited Jaffna in March 2015, and continued to push Colombo to deliver on political devolution to Tamils. But since Modi is less dependent on Tamil parties' support, this has not been a forceful pitch.

India is at a disadvantage in different ways: China's exploi-



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tative financing mechanisms for projects draws less popular criticism than India's much more generous schemes.

It was only this week that Mahinda Rajapakse, the former president and architect of Sri Lanka's China tilt called for black flags during Modi's visit. His party has opposed a deal between India and Lanka which will see joint development of oil tank farms in Trincomalee.

The oil tank farms are a source of some discord in Sri Lanka. India says its good faith is demonstrated as despite LIOC (a subsidiary of Indian Oil Corporation) having exclusive rights, India wants to go in for a joint venture with Sri Lanka. India wants to extend the lease on the oil tank farms because it wants to set up a joint venture to develop the first 10 upper tank farms.

India says it has nursed the oil tanks in the lower farms since 2003 for better utilisation of fuel. As a source said, "Since taking over the facilities at Trincomalee Oil Tank Farm in 2003, LIOC has invested heavily in the refurbishment of tank-ages, pipelines & jetty.. LIOC

has spent approx LKR 7,000 million in the country ." In addition, LIOC pays the Sri Lankan government \$100,000 (around Rs 64 lakh) per year for the facility since 2003.

India and Sri Lanka will not sign major agreements during the visit, but the big framework MoU on economic projects signed during the recent visit by Lankan PM Ranil Wickremasinghe covers a vast range of developmental projects that India plans to get into in Sri Lanka. The text of the MoU was not made public, in deference to the sensitivities in Sri Lanka.

The Modi government plans to follow the template of the recent \$5 billion development outreach to Bangladesh, where 17 projects have been identified keeping the assistance targeted, visible and accountable.

In Sri Lanka, India is looking at the following: 500MW LNG power plant, LNG terminal, floating storage regasification unit (FSRU) in Keralalapitiya outside Colombo; 50MW solar power plant in Sampur; container terminal in Colombo port.

India has also promised to build roads between Mannar-Jaffna, Mannar-Trincomalee and Dambulla-Trincomalee.

Trincomalee is the most interesting project where India is planning to build a port in collaboration with Japan (Singapore has tentatively agreed to build the city); petroleum refinery and other industries. Given Lankan sensitivities, a joint working group is expected to be formed.