

QIA plans to open office in India: Envoy



EXCLUSIVE

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THE PENINSULA

The Qatar-India task force on investment is moving forward to convert the historic trade ties of both countries into a full-fledged comprehensive partnership enhancing their participation and investment in a full value chain.

In an exclusive interview with *The Peninsula*, Ambassador of India to Qatar, H E Dr. Deepak Mittal, said Qatar Investment Authority (QIA) plans to open an office in India. He said despite pandemic, trade volume between the two countries recorded robust growth which is expected to reach about \$11bn by the end of Indian financial year in March this year.

The Ambassador said that the first campus of Indian university and three new Indian schools are expected to open this year in Qatar.

To further enhance the bilateral relations, the Ambassador said that exchange of high level visits are continued under which H H the Amir accepted an invitation by Honourable Prime Minister of India to visit India once the situation of COVID-19 pandemic is improved.

He said that Bubble Arrangement which enables people to travel between Qatar and India following COVID-19 protocol has been extended until February end. Indian embassy is issuing visas for exigencies as tourist visa yet to open, he added.

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Indian Ambassador Dr. Deepak Mittal during the interview. PIC: SALIM MATRAMKOT/THE PENINSULA

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"The visit of Minister of External Affairs of India, H E Dr. S Jaishankar to Qatar on December 20, 2020 added momentum to very close partnership and multifaceted cooperation between two countries.

They touched upon all areas of bilateral cooperation including trade, investment, energy, cultural, people to people contact and education cooperation. They also looked for exploring new areas to enhance the cooperation further," said Dr. Mittal. ➔P2

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He said the External Affairs Minister also extended an invitation message from the Honourable Prime Minister of India to H H the Amir to visit India which H H the Amir has graciously accepted.

Speaking about the investment from India in Qatar, the Ambassador said that investment is top priority for leadership of both countries.

"When our Prime Minister and H H the Amir spoke in December, they agreed that India and Qatar will set up a joint task force on investments which will facilitate investments between India and Qatar. So clearly, the investment remains top priority," said Dr. Mittal.

He said that over 6,000 Indian companies already present in Qatar covering almost all sectors including construction and energy, information technology, food and beverage, service industry, hospitality sector, education sector among many more.

"We do have even companies which are fully Indian owned and there are a large number of companies of joint venture with Qatari partners."

"There are 100 Indian companies registered with the Qatar Financial Center. Over 10 Indian companies running under Qatar Free Zone. More Indians will look at newer opportunities, which Qatar offers including recently launched North Field expansion project which also eyes foreign investment," said Dr. Mittal.

He said Qatar Investment Authority is looking at setting up a big new office in India, hopefully once the pandemic situation is improved.

"We have high level nominees from both sides to undertake discussions on the specific investment in potential projects as also on the energy side, a joint task force on energy has been set up at very senior levels on both sides," said Dr. Mittal.

He said that India is looking for Qatar's participation not just as an important and a reliable energy supplier, but also in participation in its ambitious program, which involves more than \$60bn worth of investments in energy infrastructure development, including its LNG gas terminals, city based gas distribution centers and the national gas pipeline grids.

He said that Qatar is going to host FIFA World Cup 2022 and Asian Games 2030 which opens up another big opportunity for Indians in the area of sports, the sports technology and hospitality.

"Investment task force has been set up, both sides have nominated their representatives and there is already discussions going on between both the sides," said Dr. Mittal.

He said energy task force held its first meeting on December 23, 2020 and now the following up is going on. "Task force is headed by senior members from the government sectors like senior officials from the Qatar Investment Authority and Indian Ministry of Finance," said Dr. Mittal.

He said Qatar is a leading supplier of LNG, LPG and many of the petrochemicals to India. "India has an ambitious targets as part of its renewable energy within its target of increasing the share of natural gas in its overall energy basket to 15 percent by 2030," said Dr. Mittal. He said that India has a program to set up a lot of LNG regasification terminals, either floating or offshore or onshore.

"So we would be looking at Qatar's participation in both setting up those terminals as also because these terminals would then be supplying to the consumers back inside," said Dr. Mittal.

He said there is a long term discussion going on between India and Qatar on two important agreements - bilateral investment treaty and double taxation avoidance agreement.

"We have a robust trade between the two countries. From April to March, as per our financial year - 2019-20 - the bilateral trade was over \$11bn, despite the pandemic restrictions, trade was very robust reaching about \$8bn until December. We are hopeful that by the end of our financial year, which is still March, we will be able to achieve from \$10bn to \$11bn bilateral trade," said Dr. Mittal.

He said there is more potential to enhance bilateral trade, because of suitable environment of business for example Doha Bank is operating with its three full branches in India and Qatar National Bank with one branch in India.

Speaking about the investment and cooperation in



Ambassador of India Dr. Deepak Mittal gestures during the interview with The Peninsula. PIC: SALIM MATRAMKOT/THE PENINSULA

food sector, the Ambassador said: "We discussed food security issue with Qatari authorities. There is a lot of emphasis in Qatar to ensure food security in the country. Since 2017, Qatar has been making tremendous efforts for developing its strategic food reserves at Hamad Port and increasing self-sufficiency in fresh food production."

"Now in India we are global suppliers of essential commodities, including rice, cereals, wheat of good quality, which comes to Qatar also," said the Ambassador.

To a question about the reaction of India on Al-Ula Declaration, the Ambassador said that India welcomed the reconciliation and the rapprochement in GCC states.

"For India, GCC is very important because over nine million Indians stay here in the region. Our bilateral trade in GCC is one of the highest in the world with touching almost \$121bn. This is a place where we have important energy partners. Nearly 60 percent of India's energy comes from the GCC region therefore, peace, security, stability in the region is very important for India because they have direct impact on it," said Dr. Mittal. He said Al-Ula Declaration will further promote peace, security, stability in the region.

Lauding efforts of Qatar in Afghan peace talk, the Ambassador said that India has been supporting all efforts for the establishment and return of peace, security and stability in Afghanistan.

"We welcome the positive efforts of Qatar in facilitating rapprochement, initiating dialogue. Last year, they facilitated

the dialogue and agreement between the US with Taliban. Now they have started and facilitated the start of the Intra-Afghan talks which begun in September; these are very positive developments," said the Ambassador.

To a question about the major issues faced by Indian community in Qatar Dr. Mittal said: "Indian community is really liked here in Qatar. We are really grateful to H H the Amir, the government, the royal family and also the everyone here in Qatar for giving their continued support and patronage to the Indian community. At present, nearly 700,000 Indians are living in Qatar because of trust and affection which were bestowed by the leadership of Qatar on them."

Speaking about the intervention of Indian embassy to help provide suitable education opportunity to Indian students in Qatar, the Ambassador said the number of Indian schools had increased significantly during past years.

"In 70s or the 80s, we had only one or two Indian schools, the MES and Ideal Indian school, now we have nearly 18 Indian schools operating in Qatar enrolling nearly 50,000 students," said Dr. Mittal.

He said three new Indian schools are expected to open in Qatar in 2021 which will further enhance the capacity to accommodate more Indian students.

"After completing schooling, Indian students go to India or other places to pursue higher studies but now they can get opportunity to study in Qatar. An Indian University, Savitribai Phule Pune University is expected to open its campus in

Qatar by the end of this year offering humanities and commerce educational programmes," said Dr. Mittal.

He said to cope with COVID-19 pandemic, Indian Embassy launched online appointment system. "An emergency appointment system was also introduced to serve those who want to travel to home in emergency and for urgent matter," said Dr. Mittal.

He said the Embassy has sped up efforts to launch a mobile app enabling Indian community in Qatar to approach embassy easily whenever they have any issue or query.

"We are in the process of setting up a multilingual call centre enabling our fellow citizens to register their issue, seek clarity, grievance, within 24 to 48 hours we can get back to our Indian national and share whatever information they need," said Dr. Mittal. He said that both aforementioned new services will be rolled out soon.

Speaking about the efforts of the Embassy to facilitate its fellow citizens to travel between Qatar and India during pandemic, he said 70,000 Indian national residing in Qatar travelled back to their homes under Vande Bharat Mission.

"We started Air Bubble arrangement in August last year under which, the people can travel between both countries easily following COVID-19 protocol and quarantine as per both countries. Qatar Airways is flying from Doha to various cities in India. We have Indigo, Air India and now, Vistara started operating flights between India and Qatar," said Dr. Mittal. "Over 100,000 people benefitted from Vande Bharat Mission and Air Bubble Arrangement," he added.

He said civil aviation authorities of both countries agreed to extend bubble arrangement until end of February, depending on COVID-19 situation the decision will be revised. He said the Embassy is issuing visa in a limited manner. "India so far did not open tourist visa. We are not in a position to issue any tourist visa but we are issuing visa for exigencies like medical treatment, urgent visits to relatives, students to study or taking exams and very urgent business matter," said Dr. Mittal.