

Nepal PM urges India to lift economic blockade

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Kathmandu: Invoking the Panchsheel principles, Prime Minister K P Sharma Oli today called on India to immediately lift the "undeclared blockade" imposed on Nepal to help boost bilateral ties amid the recent political crisis over the country's new Constitution.

Addressing the nation for the first time after assuming office last month, Oli said Nepal's new Constitution was excellent in terms of process and content.

"We want to establish cordial relationship with our neighbours on the basis of principle of mutual equality and interest in line with the principles of charter of the United Nations and Panchsheel," Oli said adding "we believe that we can resolve any misunderstanding through talks."

The Panchsheel doctrine is a set of principles to govern relations between states. Their first formal codification in treaty form was an agreement between China and India in 1954.

Oli also asked neighbouring countries "to honour Nepal's territorial integrity, national sovereignty and independence." "The ongoing blockade is worse than the war-time situation," he said asking India to swiftly lift the blockade. "Hospitals have run out of medicines and blood bags for emergency and people are unable to cook food due to the shortage of cooking gas as a result of the transport blockade, he said.

India has firmly denied imposing the blockade, saying truck drivers are concerned for their safety after violent protests against Nepal's new Constitution in which over 40 people were killed.

Calling on the agitating Madhes-based parties to end their protests, Oli assured that the Constitution would be amended and provincial borders redrawn on the basis of consensus among all to address the demands of the agitating parties.

The Constitution does not discriminate between people on the basis of caste, region or any other way, he said adding that the national charter was not discriminatory.

He said the unofficial blockade imposed by India was "unimaginable in the 21st century" adding that the blockade created a humanitarian crisis in Nepal obstructing supplies of life-saving medicines and fuel.

Oli said the government has now realised it was Nepal's weakness to depend only on India for supplies of essentials.

Now the government would work to diversify trade and promote renewable alternative energies, he said. "Last month, Nepal signed a memorandum of understanding with China to import fuel, ending India's four-decade supply monopoly.

"We remember the goodwill and cooperation shown by our neighbours during the time of the (April 25) earthquake and we expect same kind of cooperation and support to avoid humanitarian crisis and for peace, reconstruction and economic prosperity.

"Nepal has signed important agreements with India including Power Trade Agreement, Power Development Agreements for developing Upper Karnali and Arun Third as well as Pancheshwor Project, which shows how Nepal wants to move forward by forging economic partnership with India," he said.

Oli also made it clear that the "government's move to import fuel from China" to ease supply situation in the country in the wake of the blockade on the southern border was "not directed against any other country" in a reference to India.

"We are just trying to diversify and balance our trade relations. We are trying to develop our historical relations with friendly country India by ensuring unobstructed transit rights and our access to the sea as a landlocked country," he said.

- PTI