

China opens combined rail, road link to step up Nepal supplies

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Beijing: In a strategic move to cut landlocked Nepal's dependence on India, China has opened a combined road and rail service to Kathmandu through rugged mountain ranges of Tibet to boost supplies to the country and reduce transit time by more than a month.

A 43-coach international freight train departed from Lanzhou, the capital of China's northwest Gansu province, for Tibet yesterday carrying 83 cargo containers filled with daily necessities and home appliances.

The train will carry the cargo to Xigaze, the nearest Tibetan town to Nepal, from where the goods will be transported to the Nepal by road. The whole journey will take 10 days, state-run People's Daily reported.

Â Â Â The journey includes 2,431 kilometres of rail transport, 564 kilometres of road transport to Geelong Port in Nepal. From there it will take another 160 kilometres of road transport to reach Nepal's capital Kathmandu.

Altogether, the combined transport takes 35 days fewer than traditional ocean transport, the report said.

The launch of the combined rail-road service will further promote the rapid growth of related industries in China's Gansu, Qinghai and Tibet province to connect with South Asian regions, it said.

The combined rail and road service has been started as a follow up to Nepal Prime Minister K P Sharma Oli's visit here in March, during which the two countries signed the landmark transit treaty to access supplies from China through the arduous route of Tibet.

Officials said China has also agreed to extend the rail link in Xigaze to Nepal border, which will enable Kathmandu to access the rail and road infrastructure in Tibet.

Nepalese officials say the opening up of new routes with China will cut their dependence on India, which till now was the sole supplier of goods.

A Chinese government official said during Oli's visit that Chinese firms will be encouraged to explore possibility to extend the railway from Xigaze to Gyirong in Tibet close to the Nepal border.

After the Qinghai-Tibet Railway was extended from Lhasa to Xigaze in Tibet in 2014, it was expected that the railway will be extended Gyirong county but the 420 kilometre route not far from Mt Everest was expected to cost heavily.

Oli government was particular to open up new routes with China, including access to its port Guangzhou, to reduce dependence on India in the aftermath of the blockade along the Indian border imposed by Madhesis in Nepal to express their resentment against the new Constitution.

The blockade by Madhesis, who are of Indian origin, however, ended unexpectedly just before Oli's maiden visit to India in February without any political agreement.

Nepal had accused India of imposing an "economic blockade", which India strongly denied.

China, which is backing the new Constitution, has been stepping up its engagement with Nepal, which in turn has

stepped up efforts to cut flow of Tibetans crossing over to Dharmasala to meet the Dalai Lama.

- PTI