
INDIA-UK FTA TALKS GAIN STEAM

Commerce secy, team in London to push deal

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Officials from India and the United Kingdom (UK) are working overtime to address the contentious issues related to the proposed free trade agreement (FTA) between the two nations, in a final push to conclude the deal by the year-end.

Commerce Secretary Sunil Barthwal was headed to London on Thursday after completing his four-day visit to Brazil. Other key officials from India's negotiating team will be joining Barthwal in the UK capital, hoping to make headway in the FTA negotiations, which started in January last year, a person aware of the matter told *Business Standard*.

Thirteen rounds of negotiations have been completed so far. The pre-

vious round commenced on September 18. In addition, discussions on some of the issues are also ongoing virtually between both countries.

"UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak is anticipated to travel to India again towards the end of this month (weeks after the G20 Leadership Summit) to meet his counterpart, Narendra Modi.

If the negotiations conclude by then, the agreement could be signed during Sunak's visit," the person said.

"There's an indication that both sides aim to finalise the details of the agreement by the end of the month. However, the differences on topics such as mobility and greater market access for whisky, among other issues, remain unresolved," the person added.



Ameya Joshi, an aviation analyst and founder of the aviation blog Network Thoughts, told Business Standard that IndiGo's airfares would increase by "less than ₹1,000 as a whole on most sectors" as a result of Thursday's announcement. He said this fuel surcharge would not take care of all the ATF price rise and, therefore, the airline may also increase the base airfare. Joshi also said other airlines could follow IndiGo's suit. As a result, the air travel could become expensive during the peak travel season.

IndiGo, in a statement on Thursday evening, said it was introducing a fuel charge on domestic as well as international flights from Thursday midnight. "The decision follows the significant increase in ATF prices, which have surged in the last three months with consecutive price hikes every month... Under this pricing structure, passengers booking IndiGo flights will incur a fuel charge, per sector, based on the sector distance."

Rajiv Mehra, honorary secretary, Federation of Associations of Indian Tourism & Hospitality, told Business Standard any increase in airfares was detrimental to the interests of flyers and it was a "double whammy" ahead of the festival season.

Comm secy...

Now that the FTA talks with Canada have been paused, the only significant FTA that India hopes to conclude this year is with the UK.

A trade agreement with the European Union (EU) also appears distant since government officials believe the negotiations will be more intricate and may take at least another year to conclude.

In any case, India will need to finalise the FTA with the UK by the end of this year – before the Lok Sabha elections in 2024.

For the UK, a trade agreement with India is essential in its efforts to establish a post-Brexit trade relationship with the world. To date, India is the largest market with which the UK has committed to negotiating a trade agreement.

The trade agreement has

faced several obstacles, whether it was the political upheaval in the UK last year or the pro-Khalistan protests in London. Elections in key Indian states further decelerated the discussions between both countries.

Some of the disputed issues include India's request for a liberalised migration policy and the UK's demands for reduced tariffs on whisky and automobiles, as well as opening up India's sectors like legal, architecture, and financial services.

Last month, a senior government official said both sides had made "good progress" in the negotiations on the proposed bilateral investment treaty as well as pivotal topics such as the 'rules of origin'. "Both nations are aiming for a robust agreement that benefits both parties, and we aren't restricting ourselves to any specific timeline... There are issues we aim to address promptly," the official had said.

Sikkim...

GLOF occurs when a glacier-fed lake experiences a sudden release of water, often due to a naturally built moraine wall's inability to contain the water. Flooding can occur due to various reasons, including earthquakes and landslides.

GLOF events are increasing due to rapid glacier melting caused by global warming.

India has previously experienced GLOF events in the Himalayan region, from the Kedarnath tragedy in 2013 to the Chamoli disaster in 2021. However, this is the first time a GLOF event of this scale has impacted the Northeastern region of the country. Neglecting scientific warnings exacerbates this situation.

Over the years, scientists have warned about the increasing size of glacial lakes in Sikkim. In 2012, a Sikkim government-commissioned study by Centre for Development of Advanced Computing noted a doubling in the area of the Lhonak and South Lhonak glacial lakes between 1965 and 1989. These lakes were listed as potential GLOF sources.

In 2021, a study published in the Geomorphology journal

