



FORGING TIES:
Downer and Sinha

Talking Tough

After roping Australia into the war on terror, the foreign minister also scores with the expats

IN A COUNTRY WHERE NEWS from India makes a mere single column in the inside pages of mainstream media, it came as a complete surprise to Australia's almost 100,000 expatriate Indians to find Indian Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha quoted on the front page of the only national daily, *The Australian*. "Pakistan is the epicentre of world terrorism," declared Sinha. But for the readers, the surprise was Sinha himself on a visit Down Under without too much prior publicity. The Indian community was excited to have a senior minister making his views on "our neighbour" clear to the Australian public, fed since 9/11 only on reports of President Musharraf as an ally in the "war against terror".

The centrepiece of Sinha's talks with the Australian leadership was the challenge terrorism poses to the world. The blasts in Mumbai and Srinagar only underlined the threat as the minister signed a

Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on cooperation in combating (international) terrorism with his Australian counterpart, Alexander Downer, immediately after the Third Foreign Ministers Framework Security Dialogue in Adelaide.

Downer further reiterated the terror threat at a joint press conference, saying: "There is irrefutable evidence that Pakistan has been one of the sources of terrorism and there has been support in Pakistan for terrorist organisations over many years. We have been very concerned about boarding schools and private Islamic educational institutions being breeding ground for fundamentalists, extremists and in some cases terrorists."

Australia had snapped all ties with India in 1998 after the nuclear blast in Pokhran. But the gesture of providing the visiting minister with a special Royal Australian Air Force craft to travel to Adelaide, Melbourne and Can-

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YASHWANT SINHA
External Affairs Minister

berra, not to mention Australian Prime Minister John Howard flying back to Sydney with Sinha, reflects the steady warming of relations between the two countries. Launching the Australia centre of the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan in Sydney, Sinha called it "another Sydney bridge linking Australia and India". He also addressed a host of concerns of the Indian community during the visit. The 30,000 Indians living in Victoria demanded a full-fledged consulate in Melbourne, the second largest city of Australia, to which Sinha agreed, adding to the Indian High Commission in Canberra and the consulate in Sydney. The 9,000-strong Indian student body in Australia was upbeat that Sinha discussed a MoU in the field of immigration with Phillip Ruddock, minister for immigration and indigenous affairs. Said Sinha: "It is worth adopting attitudes that avoid treating every student with suspicion as a potential illegal immigrant. It's in our interest to afford students the respect and dignity that they deserve." He also allayed the expatriates' concerns that the Indian armed forces would be sent to Iraq by saying, "Our troops go for peace-keeping, not war. India believes regime change is the responsibility of the people of that country and governance and sovereignty should be returned to the Iraqis at the earliest."

Both foreign ministers agreed to set on track cooperation to encourage business opportunities between the two countries. A MoU on cooperation in telecommunications was also signed with Richard Alston, Australian minister for telecommunications. Neville Roach, the chairman of the Australia-India Business Council, said: "Businesses are looking forward to government policies that would help increase trade links." The two countries have investments worth A\$1 billion on each other's shores. From enhancing business to countering terrorism, the bilateral relationship is moving towards commitment, confidence and cooperation.

—Neena Bhandari