

Israel's envoy to India, **Reuven Azar**, chose Uttar Pradesh for his first official visit after taking charge in Aug this year. The purpose of the trip, he said, was to explore new opportunities and strengthen ties between UP and Israel. He spoke to **Shalabh** on a wide range of issues, including the ongoing tension in West Asia and efforts being made by his nation to restore peace. Excerpts:



'We Are Trying To Be Part Of UP's Success Story'

How was your meeting with CM Yogi Adityanath? Any big announcements in the offing?

■ We (Israelis) are modest people. We do not make big announcements until we achieve something substantial. The CM is a sincere person and has achieved a lot during his tenure, both in terms of security and prosperity (for the people). We are trying to be a part of this success story by cooperating in fields of mutual interest such as agriculture, defence, infrastructure. I took charge (as envoy to India) in Aug this year and this is my first visit outside Delhi. UP is the heart of India. We want to add more layers to our relationship with UP. Israel firms are also working to improve the water quality in the state and mitigate the water problem in Bundelkhand region by building reservoirs and augmenting harvesting measures.

UP gov't officials are doing a good job in developing their own economy. We have the task of working together to advance both the economy of UP and Israel. I come across people that are proud of their heritage and nation. We can also join hands together to deal with various challenges.

How much interest are Israel companies taking in the upcoming defence corridor project in UP and Tamil Nadu?

■ The nature of cooperation in the defence sector between Israel and India is changing. A few years ago, it used to be about procurement. Now, we are moving to the stage of Make in India products. So in this mode, we can keep the cooperation going. Israel companies have been partnering with local partners to set up new companies; hundreds of them.

Most of the manufacturing is being done in China at present, but there are countries that also want to grow as manufacturing powers. And, no doubt, India has the potential of doing that and



ISRAEL'S ENVOY TO INDIA REUVEN AZAR

has set out on that course. Besides labour and manpower, you (India) have good technology too. And gov't is framing policies to attract foreign companies. Focus is going to be on drones, anti-drones, explosives manufacturing, mechatronics, radars, mobile mortars and ammunition. Israel is one of the leading countries when it comes to cyber protection, both in the military and civilian fields. Manufacturing cost in Israel is extremely high. Our land is very expensive and so is the manpower and raw material. Hence, our companies are keen on exploring the Indian market.

What message do you have for college students and graduates, especially those from the rural belt, who want to work in other countries?

■ If they want to work in Israel they should apply through the companies that have been certified by the Indian gov't. They can apply digitally. We have demand in the construction and healthcare sectors. We are also hopeful of attracting Indian infrastructure companies. Israel is committed to investing USD 35 billion into projects over the next five years.

I would like to add that we are going to build a Metro rail system. We do not have it at present while India already has about 1,000km of operational Metro lines. Indian companies through the bidding process could enter the construction segment and also bring the workforce required for the job. At present, we have 10,000 workers from India and want that figure to go up to 50,000.

Given your vast experience and global exposure, do you have any suggestions

or advice for UP gov't?

■ My aim is to increase bilateral cooperation based on mutual interest. Purpose of my UP visit is first to learn, not to teach. Learn about what are the needs, how we can cooperate not only to benefit the Indian economy, but also to benefit Israel economy.

The TOI Interview

But migrant population & professionals working in Israel are apprehensive due to tension with Iran and Palestine. How would you reassure them?

■ We have a commitment to keep them in safe areas. We do not allow people to work in the areas that are unsafe. Like the rest of the population, those who come to the job enjoy the infrastructure of shelters. We are committed to keeping people safe and I do not think there is any worry in that regard.

What steps are being taken by Israel to reduce tension and restore peace in West Asia?

■ Look, we, like India, are victims of terrorism. We have to show the resolve. We were attacked by Hamas on Oct 7 (2023). It was a failure of our defence, both intelligence and operational. But since then we have recruited our people. We have destroyed the army of Hamas. We are now dealing with the army of Hezbollah, trying to push it far away from our border because it was preparing a massive attack on us. We are now dismantling its infrastructure in south Lebanon that won't allow it to attack us. This work has to be finished. We also want to send a very clear message

to the Iranian regime that is instigating this attack on us. They (Iran) are supplying financial assistance to Hezbollah, about a billion dollars per year. They are providing training and weapons; supplying technology and how to produce weapons. This is very dangerous. They've been doing this all around the region, in countries which have instability, such as Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen. They are trying to topple gov't in Jordan as well. They're trying to create problems in Gaza, in the West bank. So they also attacked us directly with 200 ballistic missiles 10 days ago.

Israel has to retaliate. This is our duty. If we don't retaliate, it means that Iran can attack us or any other country at its will. This is completely unacceptable.

We are coordinating with the United States. We are trying to create a situation where Iran will be stopped but we do not deteriorate to a regional war. We are going to get rid from this attempt of Iran to choke Israel from seven fronts. We are now doing it successfully and will continue until we reach a ceasefire that will make sure that Hamas doesn't rearm and regroup in the Gaza Strip and that Hezbollah will not attack us from the border in the north again.

So, efforts to reach a ceasefire are on?

■ The question is, whether we can maintain a sustainable ceasefire and we can restore stability in the region free of a threat coming from Iran and its proxies. Because if we succeed in that, it will be easier to do regional cooperation. We have good cooperation from our neighbours Egypt, Jordan, Gulf countries like UAE, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia. We want to cement this cooperation. We want to create a corridor of connectivity between Asia and Europe. And you can only do that when you have security and stability free from the threat of Iran. That's why we have to be tough. We have to have resolved to finish the job.

Coming to a different subject, how are you finding Indian food?

■ I am trying to get used to the Indian food and flavours. The food is very rich and a lot of spices are used. It is very different from our flavours. I have tried *paneer* and *dal*.

Photos: V Sunil