

BIMSTEC EMBARRASSMENT FOR INDIA

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India is facing an embarrassing situation at the first-ever military exercise of the regional grouping BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) with Nepal and Thailand backing out from sending full contingents. On Tuesday, Nepal also conveyed that its Army Chief would not be able to attend the Chiefs' conclave at the exercise.

"All participating nations except Nepal have confirmed their Army Chiefs would attend the Chiefs' conclave," a Defence official said on condition of anonymity. "The reason was their new Chief has just taken charge and has a large number of commitments."

Nepal's new chief

Nepal, which had initially confirmed a full contingent, pulled out in the last minute and instead sent three observers. General Purna Chandra took charge as the Chief of Nepal Army on Sunday.

The exercises were proposed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi during his speech at the BIMSTEC summit in Kathmandu last month that brought together leaders of India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Sri Lanka from South Asia and Myanmar, and Thailand.

Interestingly, Nepal is scheduled to hold its second military exercise with China next week.

Thailand, which was the last to confirm its participation in the exercise, conveyed that it could only send observers.

The MILEX 18 exercise, being held from September 10 to 16 at the Aundh Military Station in Pune, is aimed at helping BIMSTEC nations practise "planning and conduct of counter terrorist operations".

Each country was asked to send a contingent of 30 personnel including five officers and 25 soldiers in addition to three observers.

Thailand Ambassador to India Chutintorn Gongsakdi said, "Thailand is absolutely committed to BIMSTEC...This [level of participation] is due to fiscal year ending in September and MILEX being an unforeseen event."

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