

Capitalising on the gulf

Dec 13, 2017-On June 5, Qatar's Middle East neighbours Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain blocked access to Doha by air and land. Diplomatic and trade links were cut and sanctions were imposed over accusations that Doha was supporting terrorism and cosyng up to Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nemesis Iran. Qatar meanwhile has been adamant in denying these charges. Seven months have passed since the blockade was put in place, and it still doesn't look as though the crisis will end any time soon.

Given these circumstances, Qatar has started to focus on strategic projects to address problems caused by the blockade by working on its trade through ports to ease the supply of food and water. And now, the Qatari government has approached Nepal to inquire if it can meet the Gulf state's vegetable and spices requirements for the short, medium and long terms. India and Pakistan have been cashing in on this opportunity by supplying huge quantities of food to Qatar, but the demand for such products is very high.

Nepal should act quickly to capitalise on such a fortuitous opportunity. Our country's vegetable export potential is largely untapped as a result of differences between Nepali and global food quality standards, according to a study report of the South Asia Watch on Trade, Economics and Environment (Sawtee). But with Qatar's recent advance, both the public and private sectors have been given a chance to promote Nepal's products globally.

This development could not be better timed. Nepal's vegetable output swelled 9 percent to 4.16 million tonnes in FY 2016/17. Furthermore, the growth rate of high-value crops and exportable items like ginger and cardamom has increased by 9.25 percent and 5.66 percent respectively. It is essential for Nepal to expand its trade further in the global market to capitalise on this growth. The opportunity to boost international trade that has been presented to us by Qatar should not be passed up.

The government has already started discussions with traders and producers from the private sector to see whether or not they can meet some of the demand. Logistical issues such as the price of shipping vegetables and spices by air or by sea are also under consideration. What's more, agro-products such as large cardamom, coffee and tea have already been organic certified and are ready to be exported without hassle.

Nepal's relationship with Qatar has been one-sided thus far, with the gas-rich nation being an important source of remittance income as the most preferred job destination for Nepali migrant workers. A total of 125,892 Nepali migrants left for the Gulf state in the FY 2016/17. Now, we have been given a chance to establish a trade relation that could develop into a long-term agro business relationship.

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