

## **UAE confers award on Modi amid Kashmir crackdown**

DUBAI: Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi received the United Arab Emirates' highest civilian honour during a visit on Saturday to the oil-rich Gulf nation, reinforcing ties between the countries even as he pursues stripping occupied Kashmir of its special status.

The induction of Modi into the Order of Zayed shows the importance the UAE places on India, the world's third-largest consumer of crude oil.

India is home to a rapidly growing consumer market and labour pool that the federation of sheikhdoms relies on for its own economy.

Activists, however, decried the UAE bestowing the award on Modi as he pursues a clampdown on the disputed Himalayan region of Kashmir.

Modi is also to travel to Bahrain to become the first Indian premier to visit the island nation.

'With several Gulf states in an ever-tightening embrace with Modi, human rights have been discarded in favour of economic opportunities, wrote Samah Hadid, a Beirut-based human rights advocate.

Abu Dhabi's powerful crown prince, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, personally put the golden medal around Modi's neck during an event that was closed to press in Abu Dhabi, the Emirati capital. With a portrait of Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the UAE's first president for whom the order is named, behind them, the two men shook and held hands for a moment and spoke quietly.

'You deserve it,' Sheikh Mohammed told Modi at one point while posing for photos.

Modi had been announced as a recipient of the prize in April in a tweet from Sheikh Mohammed. 'We have historical and comprehensive strategic ties with India, reinforced by the pivotal role of my dear friend, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who gave these relations a big boost,' the tweet read.

Sheikh Mohammed's announcement came just before Modi won reelection. Their interaction on Twitter and elsewhere shows the personal relationship the two men have forged, said Abdulkhaleg Abdulla, an Emirati political science professor.

'We've never had it like this before,' he said. 'From there, everything circles down.

Even without the personal touch, India has for decades been a major point of trade for the Emirates, from trade routes to gold smuggling.

Some 3.1 million Indians now call the UAE home, ranging from labourers to multimillionaires, according to Indian government statistics. By comparison, estimates suggest there are only around one million Emiratis living in the country of over nine million.

The timing of the award, however, comes amid Modi's push in occupied Kashmir. On Aug 5, Modi's government revoked a decades-old special status granted to India-held region and deployed thousands of troops there. The Himalayan region has been under a sweeping military curfew since then that has seen residents cut off from all communication and the internet.

Although Modi's decision affects Muslims living in Jammu and Kashmir, the move has drawn a largely muted response from Gulf Arab nations. The UAE's ambassador to India in particular referred to Kashmir as an internal issue for India.

While calling the timing of the award 'awkward', Abdulla, the Emirati professor, said it made sense for the UAE to honour its promise to give Modi the Order of Zayed.

Others, like British parliamentarian Naz Shah from the Labour party, see it far differently. She published an open letter addressed to Sheikh Mohammed asking him to reconsider giving the award due to the brutality she described Modi as directing.

'I ask you to question this decision and reconsider giving such an award, not only because the majority of the Kashmiri people share the same faith as you, but because we have a duty as human beings to stand up against the disregard of human rights and evil,' Shah wrote.-AP Sanjrani cancels UAE visit In a related development, Senate Chairman Sadiq Sanjrani cancelled a scheduled official visit to the United Arab Emirates in the wake of Mr Modi's trip to the oil-rich Gulf nation which conferred its highest civilian honour on him.

A statement issued in Islamabad on Saturday evening said Mr Sanjrani decided to cancel the visit of a parliamentary delegation to the UAE against the backdrop of Mr Modi's visit to Abu Dhabi, our Staff Reporter in Karachi adds.

'The visit to the UAE at this juncture will hurt the sentiments of Pakistani nation as well as the Kashmiri elders, mothers and daughters,' it added.largely muted response from Gulf Arab nations. The UAE's ambassador to India in particular referred to Kashmir as an internal issue for India.

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