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New Delhi, 02 August, 2013: The World Bank's new vice president for the South Asia region, Philippe Le Houérou, was in India last week to meet with Indian policymakers and understand the country's development priorities. This was Le Houérou's first visit to India after assuming charge as vice president in July this year. At the end of his week-long trip that ended Friday, Le Houérou said he had productive discussions with Indian leaders, including finance minister P. Chidambaram, minister for rural development Jairam Ramesh, and deputy chairman of the Planning Commission Montek Singh Ahluwalia, Arvind Mayaram, secretary, Department of Economic Affairs, Ministry of Finance as well as other senior government officials and policymakers in New Delhi, Punjab and Uttar Pradesh. "India is the largest client of the World Bank Group and I am here to understand how the World Bank can better support the country as it seeks to reignite high growth and to share prosperity more evenly," said Le Houérou. "I saw some of the initiatives being undertaken in villages of Punjab and Uttar Pradesh to address the remaining development gaps. The scale of India's challenges is immense and the innovative development responses being forged here carry valuable lessons for countries around the world," he added. Mr Le Houérou, who crossed over into India through the Wagah border after a visit to Pakistan said that he was struck by the many opportunities for economic integration between the countries of South Asia. "I was surprised to learn that intra-regional trade in South Asia is as low as 5% of total trade and that the costs of trading across borders is one of the highest in the world," said Le Houérou, who was until recently the World Bank vice president for Europe and Central Asia. "Shared borders could lead to shared prosperity and we at the Bank are ready to help the countries of South Asia enhance their opportunities for greater trade and resource cooperation." The World Bank is supporting a cross-border transmission project between India and Nepal; a trade and transport facilitation project on the Nepal-India border; and is also helping India and Pakistan explore opportunities for power exchange. The vice president also visited several World Bank-financed projects in the states of Punjab and Uttar Pradesh. While in Amritsar district, he visited village communities who are running their own metered water supply schemes under the World Bank-financed Punjab Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Project. The project is helping bring clean drinking water to 840 Punjab villages, with 18 villages getting uninterrupted 24-hour supply. In Uttar Pradesh, Le Houérou visited a primary school, an anganwadi centre and a Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya - a residential school for girls - in the Saiyan block of Agra district. These residential schools are helping children from poor communities complete their elementary education. The vice president also went on a Heritage Walk through the old town of Agra, seeing historic old houses, mosques and temples, as well as nearby low-income settlements. A proposed World Bank-government of UP project seeks to make these communities partners in tourism activities around these heritage areas. Le Houérou met with farmers in Lakhanwala village in Bulandshahar district and Hursaina village in Aligarh district who used technology made available under the World Bank-financed Sodic Lands Reclamation Project to turn their unproductive lands into fertile fields. More than 260,000 hectares of unproductive sodic land in UP have been reclaimed under the project, helping more than 425,000 poor families improve their incomes substantially. During his meetings with government officials at various levels, the vice president discussed how the pace of implementation of World Bank-financed projects in India could be improved, to ensure quicker and better results for the people for whom these projects were designed. "What I saw firsthand in my field visit is how a sustained effort of a committed team can deliver fantastic results. This is true for the residential school for girls under the government's Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan program I visited, as it is for the amazing sodic lands reclamation project. Whether we work to fight against poverty by bringing girls from poor communities into schools or by transforming the productivity of the land of poor farmers, in the end it is all about the people who make it happen!" In the cities of Amritsar and Agra, the vice president interacted with city officials and development practitioners who acquainted him with the challenges that rapid urbanization is bringing to India. He walked through the old quarters of both cities and saw the pressures on housing and civic services that most Indian cities are facing today. "I had a brief glimpse of the massive rural to urban transformation taking place in India today. Accelerating urbanization is central to India's growth, development, and poverty reduction, but it is not easy to accommodate the needs of an additional 10 million urban dwellers each year," said Le Houérou. "I am glad that the World Bank will, over the coming years, increase its support for the efforts of the national and, state and city governments to improve the livability of cities across India." Le Houérou, a French national, was previously the vice president for the World Bank's Europe and Central Asia region. In his current role as VP for South Asia region, he will lead World Bank's work in a region with the largest concentration of poor people in the world that is critical to the institution's goals of ending global poverty and boosting shared prosperity. The South Asia region includes Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Pakistan, Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka. Le Houérou joined the World Bank as part of its Young Professionals Program and has worked in the East Asia, Latin America, Africa, and Europe and Central Asia regions. As of July 2013, total IBRD and IDA net commitments in India stood at \$22.3 billion (IBRD \$12.6 billion, IDA \$9.7 billion) across 78 projects. Media Contacts
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