

## **Lankan PM Ranil Wickremesinghe to visit India on first foreign tour**

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**Colombo:** Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's first overseas visit since assuming office will be to India next week during which he will hold extensive talks with the Indian leadership including on the sensitive fishermen issue and a comprehensive economic pact.

During the three-day visit from September 10<sup>th</sup> to 16, he will hold talks with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, besides meeting External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj and calling on President Pranab Mukherjee.

The visit assumes significance as President Maithripala Sirisena also chose India to be his first overseas destination after being elected to office in January.

Wickremesinghe was elected Prime Minister after his party United National Party won the parliamentary elections last month, finishing just short of a majority.

This is the fourth time he has become the Premier. The 66-year-old was picked by President Sirisena, who handed a shock defeat to Mahinda Rajapaksa in polls, to lead a minority government in January till the parliamentary elections last month.

This will be Wikremesinghe's maiden foreign trip since January, when he had assumed premiership for the third time.

Wikremesinghe will hold talks with Swaraj in the company of Sri Lanka's Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera.

Sri Lankan officials said among the subjects that are expected to figure in the bilateral talks are the fishermen issue and the comprehensive economic partnership agreement.

Wikremesinghe has vowed to strengthen ties with India but has taken a tough stand on the fishermen issue as in March he stoked a controversy suggesting that Indian fishermen may be shot if they intruded into Lankan waters.

The Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement is expected to be part of the talks agenda. Prime Minister Modi, during his visit to Sri Lanka in March, had said both countries should move boldly to conclude the pact and attract investments.

The proposed Sri Lanka resolution at the UN Human Rights Council later this month is also expected to figure in the talks.

The US is set to move a pro-Sri Lanka resolution backing the island nation's internal domestic mechanism to tackle human rights allegations.

Wickremesinghe's New Delhi visit comes at a time as pro-Tamil groups have expressed reservations about the US stance on a domestic inquiry.

The Tamil groups are unhappy about a local mechanism and have called for an international inquiry.

Wickremesinghe has said earlier that lawmakers needed to bring a political conclusion to the ethnic issue.

"We will implement the 13th amendment within a unitary state," Wickremesinghe had said. The 13th amendment envisages the devolution of powers to the provinces.

- PTI