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"Success is simple. Do what's right, the right way, at the right time".

Arnold H. Glasow

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NATIONAL & SOCIAL ISSUES

Niti Aayog plans Artificial

Intelligence push with Rs 7500 cr

The National Institution for Transforming India (NITI Aayog) proposed a Rs. 7500 crore plan to give a strong push to Artificial Intelligence in India. This fund will help to create a new cloud platform and to build new research institutes. NITI Aayog requested cabinet Government to invest Rs. 7,500 crore initially over a three year period and set up a high level task force to oversee its roll-out and implementation.

This whole mission will be monitored by a task force. This task force will be headed by a member of NITI Aayog. However, representation from all ministries and states, experts will also be there in task force.

Major Highlights

- NITI Aayog's plan includes investments in 20 ICTAI, 5 CORE, and setting up of AIRAWAT for increasing AI technology in the country.
- High level task force will be set up to monitor implementation.
- Education, healthcare, agriculture, urbanisation and mobility will be the major sectors where artificial intelligence will work.
- According to the NITI Aayog proposal five research centers and 20 AI adoption centres are planned.
- As per the proposal, if implemented, it can add USD 957 billion to India's GDP by year 2035.
- Also, India's annual growth can go up by 1.3% by 2035.

About CORE and ICTAI

International centres for transformational Artificial Intelligence (ICTAI) and Centre of Research Excellence (CORE) are part of the two-tier AI development plan proposed by NITI Aayog in its 2018 discussion paper. It was titled 'National Strategy for Artificial Intelligence'. CORE centres were proposed to focus on pushing technology frontiers through creation of new knowledge. While, the International

Centres of Transformational AI (ICTAI) were given a mandate to develop and deploy application-based research.

May 28 observed as World Hunger Day

World Food Day is celebrated every year around the world on 16 October in honor of the date of the founding of the Food and Agriculture organization of the United Nations in 1945.

The day is celebrated widely by many other organizations concerned with food security, including the World Food Programme and the International Fund for Agricultural Development.

The main aim is to raise awareness of chronic hunger and celebrate the achievements of millions of people who are already taking actions to end their own hunger.

Hunger is not just about food. Hunger and poverty are inextricably linked to a nexus of issues including decent work opportunities, health, education, social justice, the rights of women and girls, the environment and climate change. The Hunger Project uses an innovative, holistic approach that tackles all these issues and empowers people living in hunger to become the agents of their own development and lift their communities above the poverty line for good this is the sustainable end of poverty.

'Jal Shakti' Ministry to deal with integrated water issues

Gajendra Singh Shekhawat takes charge as Jal Shakti Minister on May 31, 2019. Ministries of Water Resources and Drinking Water and Sanitation have been merged. A new 'Jal Shakti' Ministry, in which the erstwhile Ministries of Water Resources and Drinking Water and Sanitation will be merged, has been formed with Gajendra Singh Shekhawat at its helm. Mr. Shekhawat took charge of the Ministry on Friday, a day after he was sworn in as a Cabinet Minister. During the election campaign, Mr. Modi had promised to form an integrated Ministry dealing with water issues. The remit of the Ministry will encompass issues ranging from international and inter-State water

disputes, the Namami Gange project, the flagship initiative to clean the Ganga, its tributaries and sub-tributaries and the provision of clean drinking water.

In the first Modi government, the project to clean the Ganga was moved from the Ministry of Environment and Forests to the Ministry of Water Resources.

With a greater push and larger monetary allocation, the Namami Gange project was launched.

Mr. Shekhawat said that the priority would be to provide clean drinking water to everyone.

Collegium recommends names for appointment as chief justices of 4 HCs

The Collegium has recommended names of Justices A A Kureshi, V Ramasubramanian and R S Chauhan. The Supreme Court Collegium has recommended names of four high court judges for their appointment as chief justices of the high courts of Delhi, Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh and Telangana.

As per May 10 resolutions uploaded on the apex court website, a three-member Collegium, headed by Chief Justice of India Ranjan Gogoi, recommended to the Centre the name of Justice D N Patel for his appointment as the chief justice of Delhi High Court.

Similarly, the Collegium has recommended names of Justices A A Kureshi, V Ramasubramanian and R S Chauhan for their appointment as chief justices of high courts of Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh and Telangana respectively.

“Office of the Chief Justice of the Delhi High Court would be falling vacant very shortly, consequent upon retirement of Justice Rajendra Menon, chief justice of that high court. Therefore, appointment to that office is required to be made,” the Collegium, also comprising Justices S A Bobde and N V Ramana, said.

“Justice D N Patel is a senior puisne Judge from Gujarat High Court and at present is functioning, on transfer, in Jharkhand High Court. Having regard to all relevant factors, the Collegium is of the considered view that Justice D N Patel is suitable in all respects for being appointed as chief justice of the Delhi High Court,” the resolution said.

Recommending the name of Justice Rama Subramanian for appointment as chief justice of the

Himachal Pradesh High Court, the Collegium said it has taken into consideration the fact that at present there is only one chief justice from Madras High Court.

“Justice V Ramasubramanian is the senior-most judge from Madras High Court and at present is functioning, on transfer, in Telangana High Court. Having regard to all relevant factors, the Collegium is of the considered view that Justice V Ramasubramanian is suitable in all respects for being appointed as chief justice of the Himachal Pradesh High Court,” the resolution said.

Regarding Justice Kureshi, the Collegium said he is the senior-most judge from the Gujarat High Court and at present is functioning, on transfer, in the Bombay High Court.

“Office of the Chief Justice of the Madhya Pradesh High Court would be falling vacant, very shortly, consequent upon retirement of Justice S K Seth, chief justice of that high court. Therefore, appointment to that office is required to be made,” it said. The Collegium resolution said that Justice Chauhan is the senior-most judge from Rajasthan High Court and at present is functioning in Telangana High Court as acting chief justice.

“Office of the Chief Justice of the Telangana High Court, which has recently been constituted as separate high court for the state of Telangana, has been lying vacant for some time. Therefore, appointment to that office is required to be made.” Besides them, the Collegium has also recommended the names of two advocates, Vishal Dhagat and Vishal Mishra, for appointment as judges at the Madhya Pradesh High Court. It dealt with the file relating to proposal for appointment of five advocates as judges of the Madhya Pradesh High Court.

“For purpose of assessing merit and suitability of the above-named recommendees for elevation to the high court, we have carefully scrutinized the material on record including the observations made by the Department of Justice as well as certain complaints, placed before us. Apart from this, the Collegium had an interaction with all the recommendees on April 1, 2019,” the resolution said. It noted that proposal regarding elevation of the three other advocates as judges “deserves to be remitted” to the Madhya Pradesh High Court.

PM to meet President to stake claim to form new government

The NDA returned to power with a massive majority in the Lok Sabha elections with the BJP alone bagging 303.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi is likely to meet President Ram Nath Kovind on Saturday evening to stake a claim to form the new government, sources.

The Prime Minister is likely to call on the President at around 8 pm and before that, leaders of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) would meet Mr. Kovind at around 7 pm. The NDA returned to power with a massive majority in the Lok Sabha elections with the BJP alone bagging 303 of total 542 seats contested. Elections were held in 542 of the 543 seats. The election in Vellore Lok Sabha seat was cancelled by the EC citing abuse of money power.

Asked whether foreign dignitaries would be invited to the swearing-in ceremony, the sources said, "As of now there is no such information. We will share the details once a decision is taken."

Madhya Pradesh's Orchha makes it to tentative list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites

The Archaeological Survey of India had sent a proposal to the UNESCO on April 15, 2019 to include the sites in its list

The architectural heritage of Orchha town in Madhya Pradesh which depict peculiar style of the Bundela dynasty have been included in UNESCO's tentative list of world heritage sites following a proposal sent by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) to the U.N. body.

The ASI had sent a proposal to the UNESCO on April 15, 2019 to include the sites in its list, an ASI.

According to the rules, to be a part of UNESCO's World Heritage sites, the heritage or any historical site first has to be on the tentative list. After it makes to the tentative list, another proposal is sent to the UNESCO, the official said.

The ASI in its earlier proposal had requested to include Orchha in the list of cultural heritage.

Orchha is situated on the banks of the Betwa river. It is located around 80 km away from Tikamgarh district in Madhya Pradesh and 15 km from Jhansi of Uttar Pradesh. Orchha was built by king Rudra Pratap Singh of Bundela dynasty in the 16th century. The ancient town is famous for its Chaturbhuj Temple, Orchha fort complex, Raja Mahal among others.

The Bundela architecture has Mughal influence since the two dynasties were very close. The famous King of Bundela dynasty Veer Singh Dev was a close friend of Mughal emperor Jahangir and fought wars as Akbar's aid.

Orchha is also famous for its two elevated minaret called Saavan and Bhadon and its four palaces Jahangir Palace, Raj Mahal, Sheesh Mahal and Rai Praveen Mahal and for its concept of open bungalows, stone work windows, animal statues depicting the culture of Bundelkhand. It is the only place in India where Lord Ram is worshipped as a king with a dedicated temple in his name called Sri Ram Raja Mandir

Sushma Swaraj to attend SCO foreign ministers meet in Bishkek

The External Affairs Minister is expected to discuss several pressing issues, including threat of terrorism, at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation meet.

For the first time, since the Pulwama terror attack and the Balakot airstrikes, Indian and Pakistani Foreign Ministers will together attend a ministerial meeting under the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic, on May 21-22.

The meeting will be attended by External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj, along with the Foreign Ministers of SCO member states, including Pakistan.

In keeping with the evolving developments, Shah Mahmood Qureshi, Pakistan's Foreign Minister told the media on Monday that career diplomat Moinul Haq will be the new High Commissioner of Pakistan to India. Pakistan had not appointed a new envoy since

the tenure of the previous incumbent Sohail Mahmood ended in mid-April.

At the meeting in Bishkek, Ms. Swaraj is expected to take up cross-border terror attacks from Pakistan and India's response to it including the Balakot airstrikes. This is also the first meeting since India successfully ensured a global blacklisting of Jaish-e-Mohammed head Masood Azhar. India had blamed JeM for being behind the Pulwama attack.

The meeting is expected to discuss the latest attack by the Islamic State in Sri Lanka, which claimed at least 253 lives and injured hundreds.

The Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure of SCO has emerged in the last few years as an important platform where terrorism and security-related problems are discussed among member countries. India and Pakistan have participated in the multilateral military exercises.

The meeting acquires significance as it comes in the backdrop of an expanding U.S.-China trade war and the energy shock to several of the member countries after the U.S. administration ended waiver for energy trade with Iran.

The Ministry of External Affairs said in an official press release that the Foreign Minister-level meeting will review preparation for the forthcoming SCO summit in Bishkek on June 13-14.

Railways bet on this fast moving

'Python'

This giant 'Python' moves at a speed of 50-60 kmph to ensure that it reaches its destination on time.

Aptly named the 'Python Rake', this long-haul goods train, comprising rakes for transporting different kinds of cargo and stretching to a length of up to two kilometres, has operated successfully three times in less than a month from Sambalpur in Odisha to the Waltair division of the East Coast Railway. The goal: to ensure faster evacuation of cargo.

Zonal pilot project

A railway official described it as a pilot project being undertaken in the zone. Such trains will run regularly

once the proposed Dedicated Freight Corridors become a reality. Instead of one rake, three rakes are clubbed together. The rakes are supplied to the Visakhapatnam Port for despatch to various destinations. The rakes are also sent to Bailadilla mines of NMDC in Chhattisgarh to bring iron ore.

It is time saving, energy efficient and cost effective for users. A regular goods train stretches up to 650 to 800 metres. A 'Python Rake' consists of 147 wagons and looks like a snake because of its formation with two engines in the front and two at the rear. It hauls tanker wagons, flat wagons to carry containers and box wagons. "If such goods trains are run on regular basis, it will ensure evacuation of cargo without any delay giving a big relief to the ports as well as the users," said Visakhapatnam Port deputy chairman P.L. Haranadh.

Due to its length, a 'Python Rake' cannot be operated regularly to mainline stations as express trains have to be allowed to pass through on a priority. When required the 'Python Rake' can be split into two trains because of its configuration with four engines.

Mr. Haranadh said running of one freight train in place of three had been identified as a focus area by the Indian Railways.

The Sambalpur division had been chosen to operate the 'Python Rake' since it did not have much congestion, a railway official said, declining to be identified. Once the track doubling work on the Rayagada-Vizianagaram line is completed in about one year, it would enable the 'Python Rake' to haul a higher number of aluminium tankers.

NIN stands by its report on no onion, garlic in its meals

The National Institute of Nutrition (NIN) said on Tuesday that it stands by its findings certifying mid-day meals without onion and garlic provided by the Akshaya Patra Foundation (APF) in Karnataka schools as compliant with nutritional norms laid down by the State government.

The response from the institute follows an open letter from experts asking it to withdraw its report on APF on the ground that it was not based on a “systematic scientific study”, which would include a physical inspection at schools. The signatories of the letter comprised 10 organisations as well as 94 experts, including faculty from prestigious institutes like IIM Bangalore, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Centre for Sustainable Agriculture, Jan Swasthya Abhiyan, Right to Food Campaign-India, and People’s Union for Civil Liberties.

“We stand by our response to the Karnataka Government,” NIN’s Director, Dr Hemalatha R, wrote in response to a story in *The Hindu* on May 14, 2019.

In January, 2019, the Karnataka government had asked NIN to assess APF meals for nutritional compliance, food safety, taste and diversity of meals following objections by the Karnataka State Food Commission as well as activists that absence of onion and garlic from meals made the food unpalatable and resulted in children consuming less quantity of food. APF provides food under the government’s mid-day meals programme at 2,814 schools in the State. NIN’s response added that its report was based on computing macronutrients and micronutrients from menus suggested by the Karnataka government and those provided by APF.

“Using computational methods to compare different menus and assess nutritional quantity and quality and diversity is an accepted scientific tool,” the NIN Director wrote.

On the issue of onion and garlic missing from meals, the Director wrote, “looking at each vegetable or compound in isolation and implicating it to the overall nutritional quality of composite meal is not justifiable. NIN has no hesitation in saying that most vegetables/fruits improve bio-availability of micronutrients and hence can be used interchangeably.”

Bengaluru-based independent researcher, Siddharth Joshi, who was among the signatories of the open letter, rejects NIN’s explanation. “How could NIN prepare

a report without a field-level assessment of the ingredients used in preparation of food to ensure nutritional requirements were being met and not verify claims being made on a paper menu by APF.” The issue is not just about absorption of nutrients, but is also about the food not being as per local tastes. The most important question that authorities are glossing over is why not provide onion and garlic, which are available all round the year and are cheaper than other ingredients.”

India signs ‘Christchurch Call To Action’ to combat online extremism

To combat online extremism, India has decided to sign an international call initiated by the governments of France and New Zealand along with top social media companies after the Christchurch attacks.

The document called “Christchurch Call To Action” was signed and adopted with participation from 26 nations, including France, New Zealand, European Commission, Ireland, Norway, Senegal, Canada, Jordan, UK, Indonesia, Australia, Germany, Japan, Spain, Netherlands, Sweden and India. The agreement came in the backdrop of the attacks on mosques on March 15 and is aimed at stopping abuse of the Internet by extremists.

The meeting held in Paris was attended by representatives of online giants like Microsoft, Google, Twitter, Facebook and Amazon. India was represented by Ajay Prakash Sawhney, Secretary.

The document highlights, “All action on this issue must be consistent with principles of a free, open and secure internet, without compromising human rights and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of expression. It must also recognise the internet’s ability to act as a force for good, including by promoting innovation and economic development and fostering inclusive societies.” While the document stresses on the need to ensure that it does not impinge upon the rights of free speech of citizens of any country, the US has decided not to sign the document amid free speech concerns.

Iran, India discuss visa extension

India held the 11th Consular Committee Meeting with Iran which dealt with smoothening visa and legal matters essential for bilateral ties.

“Both sides discussed issues of mutual interest, including early conclusion of Agreement on Mutual Legal Assistance on civil and commercial matters, extending longer duration of e-Visa for each other nationals on reciprocity, visa facilitation for greater people-to-people contact,” a press release issued by the MEA.

Iran at present provides visa-on-arrival to Indian travellers which is given as a paper visa. Iranian visas are also given to Indians online and through missions.

Iran has been conducting talks with various countries for bilateral visa arrangements to help facilitate smooth travel as the country is facing international sanctions that can potentially affect the free movement of business travellers. India provides e-visa facilities to Iranian travellers. It is understood that Iran wishes longer duration e-visas from India.

In recent months, the Iranian paper visa was welcomed by business travellers as it ensured smooth movement through third countries that do not have good ties with Tehran. Streamlined visa processes are aimed at ensuring smooth travel for Indians to Iran where the U.S. sanctions are already disrupting the normal flow of trade. International tension has impacted India’s business with Iran as nearly 50 containers from Afghanistan meant for Indian market have been stuck at the port of Chabahar as of 15 May reportedly due to new restrictions imposed under the U.S government-backed sanctions.

DRI busts drone smuggling racket in

Ahmedabad

The Directorate of Revenue Intelligence (DRI) arrested one person in Ahmedabad while busting a network operating across India, China, Pakistan and Myanmar that had been engaged in smuggling high-end drones. Accusing the arrested person Chinmay

Anand of being the network’s kingpin, the DRI also seized high-end drones and recovered other equipment that is normally used in espionage and surveillance.

According to the DRI, the drones were supplied by Chinese companies, based on orders received from Pakistan-based firms, to a warehouse in Dehong, in China’s Yunnan province. From Dehong, which is located close to Myanmar’s eastern border, the drones were smuggled into Myanmar and from there to India.

“From Dehong in China, the Myanmarese smugglers were tasked with getting them to and across the China-Myanmar international border into Myanmar,” the DRI said in a statement. “Once in Myanmar, these drones were transported hundreds of kilometres to a place called Tamu in Myanmar. From Tamu they were transported across the international border into India through Moreh and on to Imphal”

While all transportation up to Imphal was by various modes of road transport, the final leg from Imphal to Ahmedabad was done using domestic airlines by misdeclaring the prohibited cargo as camera stands, household goods, electronic items, etc. to elude detection by Indian agencies. “From Ahmedabad, the drones were supplied to various locations across the country by using private couriers,” the DRI said. “The money against the smuggled drones were sent by the Ahmedabad based smuggler to the Chinese company through hawala channels operating out of Mumbai,” The agency contended that the racket had been going on since 2017 and that drones worth ¹ 10 crore had already been smuggled into and supplied in the country. “Illegal drones in private hands can pose a threat to national security as they can be used for espionage and sabotage purposes by the enemy states and anti-national and terrorist groups,”

Considering the security risk involved with regard to drones, equipment type approval (ETA) from the Wireless Planning and Co-ordination (WPC) wing of the Department of Telecommunications, import clearances from the DGCA (Directorate General of

Civil Aviation) and other approvals are required to import drones into the country.

India gives 2 attack helicopters to Afghanistan

India handed over two Mi-24 attack helicopters to Afghanistan. "These helicopters are a replacement for the four attack helicopters gifted by India to Afghanistan in 2015. The Mi-24 helicopters shall boost the capability of the Afghan Air Force (AAF) and enhance the effectiveness of the Afghan National Defence and Security Force in combating the scourge of terrorism. The helicopters were formally handed over by Indian Ambassador Vinay Kumar to the Minister of National Defence of Afghanistan, Asadullah Khalid, at the Kabul Air Force base. The helicopters were purchased from Belarus. Under a tripartite agreement, India has agreed to purchase the attack helicopters from Belarus and supply them to Afghanistan. Earlier, India had gifted four Mi-24 attack helicopters drawn from the inventory of the Indian Air Force and three Cheetal utility helicopters manufactured by Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL).

India cuts off UN panel after J & K report

Reacting angrily to a submission from the Geneva-based Human Rights Council (HRC) on the alleged violations in Jammu and Kashmir, India has informed the United Nations body that it will no longer entertain any communication with the HRC's Special Rapporteurs on its report. The report from the UN body came at the same time a report from two NGOs in the State on the alleged cases of torture was released in Srinagar, which was endorsed by a former UN Special Rapporteur.

India cuts off UN panel after Jammu & Kashmir report

Rejecting all the claims, the Indian Permanent Mission to the United Nations in Geneva replied to the OHCHR on April 23, saying that "India... does not intend to engage further with these mandate-holders or any other

mandate-holders on the issue," whom it accused of "individual prejudice".

India had also rejected the OHCHR's report on the 'Situation of Human Rights in Kashmir' — the first-ever such report on Jammu and Kashmir that came out in June 2018 — and accused the High Commissioner of Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein of "clear bias" in bringing it out.

UN officials say that India is already in contravention of several Conventions it has committed to, including a "Standing Invitation" signed in 2011 to all special rapporteurs to visit India. According to the UN records, more than 20 such visit requests, including to Jammu and Kashmir, are pending at present. UN sources also said that between 2016-2018, the OHCHR Special Rapporteurs had sent as many as 58 communications, and had received no response other than the April 23 letter on Jammu and Kashmir.

Report from NGOs

The UN submission on Jammu and Kashmir coincided with the release of an extensive 560-page report, prepared by the J&K based Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP) and the J&K Coalition of Civil Society (JKCCS). The report, entitled 'Torture: Indian State's Instrument of Control in J&K', documented 432 cases of suspected human rights violations and brutality by security forces of which only 27 had been investigated by the State Human Rights Commission.

The report claimed that nearly "70% of torture victims in Jammu and Kashmir were civilians (not militants) and 11% died during or as a result of torture". The cases included incidents of electrocution, 'water-boarding' and sexual torture, which the government has repeatedly denied.

Pakistan boat with 200 kg of heroin seized off Gujarat

Pakistani boat carrying narcotic substance worth Rs 600 crore was seized by the Indian Coast Guard on Tuesday after two days of relentless search of nearly

200 nautical miles along the International Maritime Boundary Line off the Gujarat coast, a top official said. Despite evasive manoeuvres carried out by the crew of Al-Madina and rough sea conditions, it was successfully intercepted within Indian waters. During the hot pursuit, the crew threw bags containing suspicious material into the sea. The Coast Guard team, upon boarding the vessel, took the crew into custody and retrieved the material.

OBC categories commission receives

2-month extension

Centre has extended the tenure of G. Rohini commission, a commission appointed in 2017 to examine the sub-categorisation of the Other Backward Classes (OBC categories), by two-month.

The commission was meant to

*examine the extent of inequitable distribution of benefits of reservation among the castes or communities included in the broad category of Other Backward Classes with reference to such classes included in the Central List.

*work out the mechanism, criteria, norms and parameters in a scientific approach for sub-categorisation within such OBCs and to take up the exercise of identifying the respective castes or communities or sub-castes or synonyms in the Central List of OBCs and classifying them into their respective sub-categories

Women's representation in Lok

Sabha rises to a record at 14.4%

At 78 elected women MPs, the 17th Lok Sabha will have the highest number of women representatives ever. They will account for 14.39% of the entire strength of the Lower House, which was at 12.5% with a total 65 women MPs in the previous Lok Sabha.

Party-wise Share:

With 40 women MPs, BJP has sent the largest number of elected women representatives to Lok Sabha because of the sheer size of its victory. It is followed

by Trinamool Congress (9), Congress (6), BJD (5) and YSRCP (4), as per data compiled by Association for Democratic Reforms, which analysed 539 out of the total 542 winning candidates.

Winnability Factor:

Women candidates also displayed a higher winnability factor or strike rate with 75.47% or 40 out of 53 women fielded by BJP bagging a Lok Sabha seat. Similarly, 71.42% of women candidates fielded by BJD won and 39.13% of women candidates given a ticket by TMC were elected. In case of YSRCP, DMK and NCP, all women candidates fielded by them were elected as MPs. The 78 elected women MPs emerged winners out of the total 716 women candidates who fought during the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, which is a success rate of 10.89%. This is much higher than the success rate shown by male candidates of 6.41% with 462 male candidates winning out of the total 7,207 men who fought for a Lok Sabha seat this election season.

People of Jammu, Ladakh want

removal of Articles 370, 35A

The Jammu and Kashmir unit of the BJP claimed that the people of Jammu and Ladakh regions want immediate removal of Article 370 and Article 35A of the Constitution by voting for the party. It also said the National Conference's claim that it will form the government on its own in the state after the assembly elections is "hollow". Article 370 grants special status to Jammu and Kashmir and limits Parliament's power to make laws concerning the state. Article 35A empowers the state assembly to define "permanent residents" for bestowing special rights and privileges on them.

ICMR head Balram Bhargava wins Dr.

Lee Jong-wook Prize for Public Health

Balram Bhargava bagged the award for his achievements as a clinician, innovator, researcher and trainer. "When I work with patients, I think about how to apply science to alleviate their suffering. This gives

meaning to everything else I do,” said Director General of the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) Professor Balram Bhargava after jointly winning the 2019 Dr Lee Jong-wook Memorial Prize for Public Health at the 72nd World Health Assembly in Geneva.

11 Indians get notices in a day as Switzerland steps up process

As Switzerland strives hard to re-establish its global financial centre position after clamping down on secrecy walls of its banks, there has been a significant surge in the number of cases where it has initiated process to share information on Indians with Swiss bank accounts and shot off letters to about a dozen such individuals last week itself.

Since March, at least 25 notices have been issued by the Swiss authorities to Indian clients of Switzerland-based banks in which they have been given one last chance to appeal against sharing of their details with India. An analysis of the notices issued by the Federal Tax Administration, Switzerland government’s nodal department for sharing of information on foreign clients of Swiss banks, shows that the Swiss government has stepped up its efforts in sharing such details with a number of countries in the recent months, but the surge in India-related cases is noticeable in the past few weeks.

In these notices, the individuals or their authorised representatives have been asked to file their appeals, if any, within 30 days with necessary documentary proof to support their case against providing ‘administrative assistance’ to India, which broadly means sharing of their banking and other financial details.

Switzerland was widely known as an alleged safe haven for black money before it bowed down before the global pressure and agreed to bring down the famed secrecy walls that had historically surrounded the Swiss banks, provided the requesting country gave proof for financial irregularities done by the concerned person or the company.

Along with several other countries, India has also been making use of this change in the stance of Switzerland by seeking details of suspected black money hoarders in Swiss banks and it has already got back information in a large number of cases in the last few years. As per the Swiss law, the FTA decision can be appealed within 30 days (in some cases 10 days), provided the appellant is able to give sufficient ground to challenge it.

While the Swiss government documents did not disclose specific details related to the information and assistance sought by the Indian authorities regarding these Indian companies and individuals, such an ‘administrative assistance’ follows submission of proof about financial and tax-related wrongdoings and typically involves sharing of information relating to bank account details and other financial data. While Switzerland has always denied being a safe haven for black money, it has begun sharing details for last few years with several countries including India after submission of evidence about financial and tax-related wrongdoings of the clients of Swiss banks.

Besides, a new framework of automatic information exchange has been now put in place and the details can be accessed under the new system from this year. According to Switzerland’s State Secretariat for International Finance, the global standard for the automatic exchange of information (AEOI) on financial accounts is expected to increase the transparency and prevent cross-border tax evasion.

The global standard makes provision for the mutual exchange of information on financial accounts between states and territories that have agreed among themselves to the AEOI. Besides Switzerland, over 100 states and territories, including all major financial centres, have declared their intention to adopt the standard.

Govt to identify tribals displaced from Chhattisgarh allegedly due to Salwa

Judum

The Chhattisgarh tribal families had fled to Andhra Pradesh and Telangana after being brutalised by Salwa Judum militia. The Centre will ask the Telangana and Andhra Pradesh governments to identify tribals who allegedly fled Chhattisgarh due to the Salwa Judum movement around 15 years ago and settled there.



Salwa Judum was a militia that had been deployed as part of anti-Maoist operations in Chhattisgarh. It was operational between 2005 and 2011, before it was banned by the Supreme Court 2011 after it acquired a notorious reputation for burning villages, killing people and sexually assaulting women after terming them Maoist sympathisers.

The action came on a complaint of an NGO, CGNet Swara Foundation, that wrote to the ministry claiming that over 5,000 families had fled Chhattisgarh to settle in Andhra Pradesh (which got bifurcated in 2012) due to the controversial militia force formed by late Congress leader Mahendra Karma in mid-2005 to counter the Maoists. The NGO claimed that these families had been living without basic facilities in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, and could not benefit from the Forest Rights Act, 2006, which provides for giving land rights to those living on forest land for at least three generations before December 31, 2005.

WHO drops being transgender from list of mental disorders

The World Health Organization (WHO) will no longer categorise being transgender as a “mental disorder”.

Health care needs

The global health organisation said, “Evidence is now clear that gender incongruence is not a mental disorder, and indeed classifying it as such can cause enormous stigma for people who are transgender. Also there remain significant health care needs that can best be met if the condition is coded under the ICD (International Classification of Diseases).” Gender incongruence has now been listed under sexual health conditions.

The WHO added that a “significant change in the mental disorders section of ICD-11 is the attempt of statisticians to simplify the codes as much as possible to allow for coding of mental health conditions by primary health care providers rather than by mental health specialists. This will be a critical move since the world still has a scarcity of mental health specialists — upto 9 out of 10 people needing mental health care don’t receive it.”

Health and human rights activists are now hoping that the ICD-11 will be implemented by the WHO’s 194 member states over the next three years. The WHO’s removal of “gender identity disorder” from its diagnostic manual will have a liberating effect on transgender people worldwide, they said.

Cauvery Authority directs Karnataka to release 9.19 TMCFT water

The Cauvery Water Management Authority (CWMA) ordered Karnataka to release 9.19 tmcft of water for the month of June from the Biligundlu reservoir to the Mettur Dam in Tamil Nadu.

“It was a unanimous decision. The forecast, so far, is for a normal monsoon and keeping in view the water level in the dams and reservoirs, we have directed 9.19 tmcft of water to be released for the month of June,” Masood Hussain, Chairman, CWMA.

12% of live storage

The total live storage is 6.38 bcm (billion cubic metre) which is 12% of total live storage capacity.

The storage during corresponding period of last year was also 12% and the average storage of the last 10 years during corresponding period was 15% of live storage capacity of these reservoirs, according to the CWC's May 23 bulletin.

The quantum of water to be released is in line with the Supreme Court's order on February 16 last year. While conferring authority to the CWMA to decide on releasing Cauvery water, the Supreme Court said Karnataka's share of the water was 284 tmcft, Tamil Nadu's 404 tmcft, Kerala 30 tmcft and Puducherry 7 tmcft. Besides this, the court reserved 10 tmcft for environmental purposes and four tmc ft for natural flow into the sea.

Frame Uniform Civil Code: petition

The Delhi High Court on Friday issued notice to the Centre on a petition seeking framing of a uniform civil code to promote "unity, fraternity and national integration."

High Court has asked for direction to the Central government to constitute a Judicial Commission or a High Level Expert Committee, to draft a Uniform Civil Code in the spirit of Article 44 of the Constitution within three months.

A uniform civil code would replace the personal laws, based on the scriptures and customs of various religious communities, with a common set of rules governing every citizen, Goa is the only State as of now with a common civil code since 1965

A green initiative by Khadi at PM swearing-in ceremony

Around 7,000 handmade carry bags made from paper and waste plastic were distributed at the swearing-in ceremony of Narendra Modi as the 16th Prime Minister of the country, the Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC) said

The KVIC said preliminary studies showed that polyethylene waste could be used to make cost effective handmade paper — reducing the existing production cost by 34 per cent— which in turn can be used to make cheaper carry bags.

In its project called REPLAN (Reducing Plastic in Nature), the waste plastic from nature is collected, de-structured and de-gradated and then mixed with paper pulp in a ratio of 80 is to 20, it said.

REPLAN aims to remove the existing waste plastic material from nature and use it in a semi-permanent manner, so that availability of plastic in nature is reduced to a large extent, it added.

ECONOMY

IMF bails out cash-strapped Pakistan with new loan

Under the new loan deal, Pakistan will receive \$6 billion from the IMF in addition to \$2 to \$3 billion from the World Bank and Asian Development Bank over the next three years.



IMF bails out cash-strapped Pakistan with new loan

IMF bails out cash-strapped Pakistan with a new loan deal

Following months of negotiations, Pakistan and the International Monetary Fund have reached an agreement, wherein the IMF has agreed to provide the cash-strapped nation with bailout fund worth \$6 billion. The agreement is Pakistan's 22nd bailout with the IMF, as the country struggles to deal with its falling economy, triggered by low growth, soaring inflation and mounting debt.

Key Highlights

- In a televised address recently, Pakistan's finance advisor Abdul Hafeez Sheikh announced that the nation has a \$12 billion gap in its annual payments and it doesn't have the capacity to pay them. Sheikh made the announcement while announcing the new agreement with the IMF.
- Under the new loan deal, Pakistan will receive \$6 billion from the IMF in addition to \$2 to \$3 billion from the World Bank and Asian Development Bank over the next three years.

The agreement comes weeks after former World Bank official Sheikh was appointed as Pakistan's adviser on finance, following the sudden resignation of Pakistan's Finance Minister Asad Umar.

The loan deal aims to support Pakistan's strategy to enable a more balanced growth by reducing the internal and external imbalances, improving the business environment, increasing transparency, strengthening institutions and protecting social spending.

Impact: The IMF deal announcement comes just when there is growing discontentment over the measures taken by Imran Khan-led Pakistani government to resolve the economic crises, including devaluation of the Rupee by 30 percent since January 2018, sending inflation to five-year highs. As per a government report published on May 10, Pakistan's growth rate is set to hit an eight-year low, with the country's GDP rate likely to sink to 3.3 percent as against a projected target of 6.2 percent.

Background

Since Pakistan joined the IMF in 1950, the nation has had 21 bailouts, with the last one worth \$6.6 billion being issued in 2013.

The country is facing a huge financial crunch after the United States cut \$300 million worth military aid to the nation.

Pakistan is also facing possible sanctions from the Financial Action Task Force, an anti money-laundering monitor based in Paris, for failing to control terror financing. The organization is expected to soon take a decision on whether to add Pakistan to a blacklist. If initiated, the move would trigger automatic sanctions, which would further weaken Pakistan's economy.

In international bailout efforts, the UAE, which is Pakistan's largest trading partner in the Middle East,

recently offered \$3 billion to support the nation's dwindling economy.

Saudi Arabia also pledged \$6 billion in funding and entered a 12-month deal with the nation during Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan's visit to the kingdom in October 2018.

However, the gulf funding has failed to reverse the economic situation of the nation, as high fuel prices, low tax yields and rising inflation continue to stall its growth.

India hosts two-day WTO meeting

India is hosting a two-day ministerial meeting of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) from May 13-14, 2019 in New Delhi. Ministers from 16 developing nations and six least developed would be taking part in the meeting.

The issues that are expected to be discussed during these two days include deadlock on the appointment of WTO's appellate body members and the way forward on reforms at the global trade body.

Significance: The meeting aims to bring together developing nations and the least developed nations on a common platform to share their concerns on various issues affecting the trade organization and work together to address these issues. It is being held at a time when the multilateral rules-based trading system is facing serious and grave challenges.

Key Highlights

- The two-day meeting aims to be interactive, in order to give an opportunity to the ministers to discuss various issues and future course of the organization.
- The first day will involve a meeting of senior officials of the participating countries and on the second day, the ministerial meeting will be held.
- During the meeting, the developing countries and the LDCs will be given an opportunity to build consensus on the way forward regarding the WTO reforms, while preserving the

fundamentals of the multilateral trading system enshrined in the WTO.

- The discussions will primarily focus on getting a direction on how to constructively engage on issues in the WTO, both institutional and negotiating, in the run-up to the Twelfth Ministerial Conference of the WTO to be held in Kazakhstan in June 2020.

Background: There have been increasing unilateral measures and counter measures by members in recent past and standoffs in key areas of negotiations and appointments in the appellate body that threaten to dismantle the dispute settlement mechanism of the WTO and impact the position of the trade body as an effective multilateral organization.

The stand offs and deadlocks have given rise to demands from various quarters to reform the WTO.

RBI releases vision document for e-payment system

The Payment Systems Vision 2021 states 36 specific action points and 12 specific outcomes. The document deliberates on boosting customer awareness, setting up a 24X7 helpline and self-regulatory organisation for e-payment service providers.

RBI releases 'Vision 2021' for e-payment system: The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on May 15, 2019 released 'Payment and Settlement Systems in India: Vision 2019 - 2021', a vision document for safe, secure, quick and affordable e-payment system.

The document was released after considering that the number of digital transactions are expected to increase over four times to 8707 crore by December 2021.

Theme

The core theme of the vision document is 'Empowering Exceptional (E)payment Experience', that stresses on empowering every Indian to access a bunch of e-payment options safely and conveniently.

Highlights of Payment Systems Vision 2021

o The Payment Systems Vision 2021 states 36 specific action points and 12 specific outcomes.

o The document deliberates on boosting customer awareness, setting up a 24X7 helpline and self-regulatory organisation for e-payment service providers.

o The main agenda of the vision document is the 'no-compromise' approach towards safety and security of payment systems.

Benefits

The e-payment world is expected to evolve with further innovation in this system. With entry of more players in this line, customers will get benefit of optimal cost and freer access to several payment system options.

What's in the box for the RBI?

The RBI will implement the approach highlighted in the Vision document during the period 2019 - 2021. RBI's efforts will focus towards facilitating the operation of efficient and price-attractive payment systems.

However, there will be minimal intervention of the RBI in fixing charges for customers to avail of digital payments.

Expected Outcomes

o Decline in the share of paper-based clearing in retail payments

o Growth in individual retail electronic payment system

o Digital payment transaction turnover in terms of GDP is expected to increase to 10.37 in 2019, 12.29 in 2020 and 14.80 in 2021

o Rise in use of digital payment modes for purchasing goods and services

o Shift from Cash on Delivery (CoD) transactions to digital modes in e-commerce segment

o Further facilitation of mobile based payment transactions

o Reduction in the marginal cost

o Enhanced security of payment systems

o Healthy competition in the payments space

The Vision Document 2018

The previous Vision document covered the period 2016-2018. It envisaged building of best payment and settlement systems for a 'less-cash' India through the four strategic pillars:

o Responsive regulation

o Robust infrastructure

o Effective supervision

o Customer centricity

Jet Airways top management team of CEO, CFO resigns

The grounding of Jet's operations has put the future of over 20,000 employees at stake who were left with no work at hand. Besides facing heavy losses in the stock market, Jet also faces the challenge of passenger refunds of thousands of crores, dues to vendors and over Rs 8,500 crore bank debt.

Jet Airways crisis: Jet Airways top management team of CEO, CFO resigns

Vinay Dube, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Jet Airways, resigned from his post with immediate effect on May 14, 2019 citing personal reasons. Dube had joined the airline in August 2017 after serving varied roles at Delta Airlines, Sabre, and American Airlines..

Dube's resignations came just hours after the resignation of airline's Deputy CEO and Chief Financial Officer (CFO) Amit Agarwal.

The airline's Chief People Officer Rahul Taneja and Company Secretary and Compliance Officer Kuldeep Sharma also resigned from their posts. Earlier in May 2019 itself, Jet Airways accepted the resignation of its whole-time Director Gaurang Shetty.

Grounding of Jet Airways' flights

Cash-strapped Jet Airways on April 17, 2019 suspended all its domestic and international flights indefinitely with immediate effect after the lenders refused to release emergency funds for the carrier.

Once India's top airlines, Jet Airways flew its last flight on Amritsar-Mumbai-Delhi route at 10:30 pm on April 17 after flying for 25 years.

Uncertainty over fate of employees, passengers, suppliers, pilots

The grounding of Jet's operations has put the future of over 20,000 employees at stake who were left with no work at hand. Besides facing heavy losses in the stock market, Jet also faces the challenge of passenger refunds of thousands of crores, dues to vendors and over Rs 8,500 crore bank debt. Jet Airways also owes to lessors, suppliers, pilots and oil companies.

Once a premier airline, now a troubled carrier

Jet Airways started its operations on May 5, 1993 with its maiden flight 9W321 plying between Mumbai and Ahmedabad. During its peak days, Jet operated over 120 planes and over 600 daily flights. The carrier operated on 380 international routes including flights to London, Amsterdam and Paris. However lately, the airline was forced to cancel hundreds of flights and to halt all flights to overseas destinations.

Jet first went into financial crisis in 2010 wherein four back-to-back quarterly losses forced the company into defaulting on payments to banks, lessors, employees. However, it managed to clear off the dues with infusion of funds from the lenders.

The recent crisis, which began in March 2018 with delayed salary payments and 25 percent payout for top management, has eventually led to the shutdown of the carrier itself.

Parallels between Jet Airways & Kingfisher Airlines

The fall of Jet corresponds that to the fall of Kingfisher Airlines which was shutdown in 2012, costing thousands of jobs and breeding losses to lenders and lessors. Kingfisher Airlines was also first grounded

temporarily when the aviation regulator, Directorate General of Civil Aviation suspended its flying licence, but the airline could never flew again.

Jet Airways: A defaulter

Indian full-service carrier Jet Airways on January 1, 2019 informed the stock exchanges that it had defaulted on its loan repayments to banks. Soaked in financial losses and debt of over USD 1 billion, the airline is struggling to even pay out salaries to employees. It defaulted in making payments to banks, suppliers, lessors and pilots.

Resultantly, Jet Airways Founder and Chairman Naresh Goyal and his wife Anita Goyal were forced to resign from the board in March 2019. Post this, the Bank Led Interim Resolution Plan (BLIRP) came into effect for the revival of the airline.

SBI-led consortium of lenders took the management control of the airline and proposed to infuse as much as Rs 1,500 crore to the carrier till it gets investors, as a debt-restructuring plan.

Action by Lenders

The lenders consortium invoked the entire 51 percent stake of Naresh Goyal in the airline, and are looking for a new buyer.

Note: Once a company announces its failure to make payments, lenders are given a total of 180 days from the first day of default to implement a resolution plan for large stressed accounts. If lenders fail to implement the resolution plan, they then refer the firm for insolvency proceedings.

Why 'Insolvency' route won't be easy for Jet Airways? Though lenders may advice insolvency route, however, it will not be easy for Jet Airways having no prospect of any obvious investor.

On the other hand, if due to non-payment of dues and salaries, lease agreements for planes are cancelled and the employees move to other organisations, the recoveries might be low. Lenders may not find any tangible assets of to attract new buyers under the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC), 2016.

This situation will leave the lenders with the only option to operate the airlines themselves for some time and look for a suitable buyer thereafter.

Increasing cost of aviation fuel

The airlines operate on the Aviation Turbine Fuel (ATF), the price of which is determined by global players. The increasing cost of the fuel took a heavy toll on Indian airlines, especially on Jet Airways as it operates on international routes as well. However, the increase in fuel cost could not be dealt with by increasing the cost of passenger tickets due to low-cost model of the planes.

Low-cost model

The low-cost model of Jet Airways' planes is one of the biggest factors behind rising operational costs of the airline. Though the airline undertook various measures to cover-up the same by offering heavy discounts on flight tickets, it only contributed to increasing costs and losses at the same time.

Decline in operations

Due to the increasing financial losses and inability to pay for fuel and services, Jet Airways had to cancel over 40 flights a week in nine Gulf country routes, thus, leading to reduced flight operations that directly hamper the airline reputation and prominence.

RBI imposes fines on PPI issuers

A penalty of Rs 3.05 crore has been imposed on Vodafone m-pesa and Rs 1 crore each on Mobile Payments, PhonePe, Private and GI Technology

RBI imposes fines on prepaid payment instrument issuers for violating norms. The Reserve Bank of India on May 3, 2019 announced that it has imposed penalties on five prepaid payment instrument (PPI) issuers, including Vodafone m-pesa and PhonePe, for violation of regulatory norms. The central bank said in a statement that in exercise of the powers vested to it under Section 30 of the Payment and Settlement Systems Act, 2007, the Reserve Bank of India has imposed monetary penalty on five PPI Issuers for non-compliance of regulatory guidelines.

Key Highlights

- o A penalty of Rs 3.05 crore has been imposed on Vodafone m-pesa and Rs 1 crore each on Mobile Payments, PhonePe, Private and GI Technology.
- o A penalty of Rs 5 lakh has also been imposed on Y-Cash Software Solutions.
- o Penalties have also been imposed on Western Union Financial Services Inc and MoneyGram Payment Systems Inc, both US firms, for non-compliance of the guidelines.
- o While, a penalty of Rs 29,66,959 has been imposed by the RBI on Western Union Financial Services Inc, USA, a penalty worth Rs 10,11,653 has been imposed on MoneyGram Payment Systems Inc, USA.
- o The penalty of the two American firms has been imposed by the RBI under the provisions of the Payment and Settlement Systems Act, 2007, for compounding of the contravention.

Unemployment rate at 45-year high, confirms Labour Ministry data

The data released by Labour Ministry showed 7.8% of all employable urban youth being jobless, while the percentage for the rural was 5.3%

The unemployment rate in 2017-18 was 6.1 per cent, corroborating the pre-election leaked report that had claimed joblessness at a 45-year high.

The leaked report on periodic labour force survey (PLFS) from July 2017 to June 2018 had on comparison with previous surveys concluded that the joblessness was at the highest level in 45 years. However, releasing the survey report after taking into account the expert committee recommendations, Statistics Secretary Pravin Srivastava told reporter, "It is a new design and a new matrix. It would be unfair to compare it with the past. This 45-year high is your interpretation. I don't want to claim that it is 45-year low or high."

Elaborating further, he said, "The point is that it is different matrix. From 2017-18 onwards, you will be

getting regular estimates and this (labour force survey) can be used as a base. When we change the matrix, it is very difficult to measure (compare) because there is no means to do a retrospective analysis in that year based on earlier matrix."

The data released by the government on a day when ministers of the Narendra Modi cabinet took charge showed 7.8% of all employable urban youth being jobless, while the percentage for the rural was 5.3%. The joblessness among males on all-India basis was 6.2%, while it was 5.7% in case of females. It also showed that the unemployment rate for males was higher at 7.1% in cities compared to 5.8% in rural areas. Similarly, the joblessness for women was also higher in urban areas at 10.8% compared to 3.8% in rural areas. The ministry said the PLFS needs to be seen as a new series for measuring employment and unemployment on an annual basis. It is important to note that with the rise in education levels in the economy and rise in household income levels, the aspiration levels of educated youth have also risen.

Thus they may no longer be willing to join the labour force or work force requiring low skills and low remuneration. The PLFS results give the distribution of educated and unemployed persons across the country which can be used as a basis for skilling of youth to make them more employable by industry.

About the National Statistical Commission (NSC), Mr. Srivastava said, "The NSC makes its recommendation but the ministry has to consider it. They can only make recommendations. The NSC has the role to see statistical system in entirety in addition to statistics ministry and states. There is no change in the functioning of ministry. The restructuring of ministry was approved by the Cabinet." He also informed, "The data for PLFS for January to March will be released next month. We have brought two quarterly data on labour survey. We are coming out with consumption expenditure survey for 2017-18. We are expecting it in June. You can then compare unemployment captured by that survey with PLFS."

India GDP growth slows to five-year low at 5.8%, falls behind China

The Central Statistics Office also revealed that GDP growth during the 2018-19 fiscal stood at 6.8%, lower than 7.2% in the previous financial year. India's economic growth rate slowed to five-year low of 5.8% in January-March 2018-19, due to poor performance in agriculture and manufacturing sectors, official data released. The Central Statistics Office also revealed that GDP growth during the 2018-19 fiscal stood at 6.8%, lower than 7.2% in the previous financial year. The growth in gross domestic product was slowest since 2014-15. The previous low was 6.4% in 2013-14. The fourth quarter growth was below China's 6.4%.

India to see 'big bang' reforms in Modi's second term, says NITI Aayog

In the first 100 days of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's second term, a slew of 'big-bang' economic reforms that should please foreign investors are likely to be pursued, according to a top official at NITI Aayog, the government's think tank. The reforms will include changes in labour laws, privatisation moves, and creation of land banks for new industrial development, said Rajiv Kumar, vice chairman of NITI Aayog (National Institute for Transforming India), who reports directly to Mr. Modi. "They (foreign investors) will have reasons to be happy. You will see a slew of reforms I can assure you of that. We are going to pretty much hit the ground running," Mr. Kumar told Reuters in an interview. Mr. Modi is chairman of the think tank. Mr. Kumar was speaking before Mr. Modi on Thursday announced members of his new Cabinet. Mr. Kumar said reforms in India's complicated labour laws will see the light of day as early as the next parliamentary session in July, when the government will place a new bill before the Lower House for approval. It will aim to combine 44 central laws into four codes wages, industrial relations, social security and welfare, and the fourth - occupational safety, health and working conditions.

INDIA AND WORLD

S-400 Triumph missile shield deal: U.S. repeats threat of sanctions

Acquisition sends the wrong message to Russia, said a senior State Department official.

India should not assume it will get a waiver from U.S. sanctions if it goes ahead with its purchase of the S-400 Triumph missile shield from Russia, Washington made it clear on Thursday. The purchase could also hamper the future of Indo-U.S. defence relationship, an official said.

“The [U.S.] President has been very clear that the acquisition of advanced Russian technology sends the wrong message to **Russia** at a time when it continues its aggressions in Ukraine, has interfered in our internal elections...And so those concerns...we hold high,” a senior State Department official told a group of reporters on Thursday.

\$5 billion deal

India had committed last October to purchasing a Russian S-400 Triumph long-range missile defence shield for about \$5 billion. The deal has run the risk of attracting sanctions from the U.S. under a 2017 law — the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA).

While sanctions can kick in only when payments start being made, the U.S. Congress’s annual defence budget authorisation, the National Defence Authorisation Act (NDAA) passed last year, allows the President to grant waivers from CAATSA sanctions under certain conditions.

6 Indian-origin students among 8 win US National Spelling Bee

It is the first time in the 94-year history of the competition that more than two co-champions have been named.

Six Indian-origin students are among the eight participants who won the prestigious Scripps National

Spelling Bee, taking home more than USD 50,000 in cash and prizes, after defeating over 550 other contestants in an unprecedented competition in the US. It is the first time in the 94-year history of the competition that more than two co-champions have been named.

Rishik Gandhasri, 13, of California; Saketh Sundar, 13, of Maryland; Shruthika Padhy, 13, of New Jersey; Sohum Sukhatankar, 13, of Texas; Abhijay Kodali, 12, of Texas; Rohan Raja, 13, of Texas; Christopher Serrao, 13, of New Jersey and Erin Howard, 14, of Alabama were named as co-champions, *The Washington Post* reported on Friday. Each will receive the full winner’s prize of USD 50,000 in cash.

Indian jailed in US for call centre scam

A 23-year-old Indian national was sentenced to over seven years in federal prison by a US court for his role in an Indian call centre scam involving conspiracy to commit wire fraud and aggravated identity theft.

Sharvil Patel, who pleaded guilty to the **crime** in February this year, was sentenced to seven years and six months in prison on Thursday, becoming the third Indian to be sentenced for his involvement in the call centre scam.

According to court documents, from 2014 through at least 2016, Patel conspired with US-based co-conspirators and India-based call centres to extort money from US residents by impersonating IRS officers and misleading victims to believe that they owed money to the IRS and would be arrested and fined if they did not pay their alleged back taxes immediately.

The conspirators collected the fraud proceeds by withdrawing cash from prepaid cards purchased and funded by victims; hiring other conspirators (runners) to retrieve money wired by the victims to those runners; and hiring runners to open bank accounts into which victims deposited fraud proceeds.

Patel collected the proceeds by providing the runners with the victims' names, locations, and amounts paid.

The runners were directed to retrieve the fraud proceeds in cash and turn the funds over to the defendants, often less a payment to the runner for opening the account or conducting the transaction, the Department of Justice said.

Indian-origin Anita Bhatia appointed UN Deputy Executive Director

Indian-origin Anita Bhatia, a veteran in strategic partnerships, resource mobilisation and management, has been appointed by UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres as the Deputy Executive Director in the global body's agency focussed on women empowerment and gender equality.

Ms. Bhatia holds a Bachelor of Arts in History from Calcutta University, a Master of Arts in Political Science from Yale University and a Juris Doctor in Law from Georgetown University.

She has been appointed the Deputy Executive Director of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) for Resource Management, Sustainability and Partnerships, a statement from the UN Spokesperson's Office and UN Women said Thursday.

She has had a distinguished career at the World Bank Group, serving in various senior leadership and management positions, both at the headquarters and in the field. Ms. Bhatia brings extensive experience in the area of strategic partnerships, resource mobilisation and management.

India to lose preferential trade terms with U.S. under Generalized System of Preferences programme

India will lose access to preferential trade terms with the U.S. under the latter's Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) programme, a Senior State Department official told reporters in. The official, who did not want to be named, said the restoration of benefits remained a possibility if underlying trade issues

were resolved, but the withdrawal of India's GSP eligibility, was "a done deal".

U.S. President Donald Trump had written to the U.S. Congress on March 4 stating his intention to withdraw GSP benefits for India, saying India had failed to assure the U.S. that it would provide "equitable and reasonable access to the markets of India". Mr. Trump had issued a similar notification for Turkey as well, on the same day, because Turkey was economically developed enough to no longer warrant it getting GSP benefits.

Now that the statutory 60-day notification has passed since Mr. Trump's notification, GSP can and is expected to be terminated via a Presidential proclamation imminently. Mr. Trump terminated Turkey's GSP program effective May 17.

Narendra Modi to address Maldivian Parliament

In his first visit abroad since being re-elected to office, Prime Minister Narendra Modi will travel to the Maldives on June 7 and 8 and address the Parliament, according to authorities in Male.

It will also mark Mr. Modi's first state visit to the island nation, about six months after he attended Maldivian President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih's swearing-in ceremony.

On Wednesday, the Maldivian Parliament or People's Majlis — in its first session since newly-elected legislators assumed charge — voted to invite Mr. Modi to address the House. Foreign Minister Abdulla Shahid said in a tweet: "#Maldives Parliament has unanimously passed a resolution to invite PM @narendramodi to address a sitting of the house during his upcoming visit to the Maldives."

"The PM is due to visit the Maldives after receiving a fresh mandate from the people of India. It will be a tremendous honour to welcome him," former President and newly-elected Speaker Mohamed Nasheed told *The Hindu* from Male. "In the House today, all MPs pointed out that close cooperation between India and the Maldives is in the interests of both countries, and helps bring stability to the Indian Ocean region," he

said. Mr. Modi's trip to the Maldives comes two months after President Solih's Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), that Mr. Nasheed leads, won a massive mandate in the April 6 general elections, securing 65 seats in the 87-member People's Majlis. The MDP's landslide victory consolidated the party's position in parliament, paving way for the progressive reform it earlier promised.

India removed from currency monitoring list

The U.S. on Tuesday removed India from its currency monitoring list of major trading partners, citing steps being taken by New Delhi that addressed some of the Donald Trump administration's major concerns. For the first time, the US placed India in its currency monitoring list of countries in May 2018 with potentially questionable foreign exchange policies. Switzerland is the other nation that was removed from the list.

"India has been removed from the monitoring list in this report, having met only one out of three criteria — a significant bilateral surplus with the United States — for two consecutive reports," the Treasury Department said in its report on macroeconomic policies.

After purchasing foreign exchange on net in 2017, the central bank steadily sold reserves for most of 2018, with net sales of foreign exchange reaching 1.7 per cent of GDP over the year, it said.

India maintains ample reserves according to the IMF metrics for reserve adequacy, the Treasury Department said in its report.

India for the first time was placed by the US in its currency monitoring list of countries with potentially questionable foreign exchange policies in May 2018 along with five other countries - China, Germany, Japan, South Korea and Switzerland.

In its next report in October 2018, the Treasury had said that India has made improvements and its name would be removed from the currency manipulation list in the next report.

"India's circumstances have shifted markedly, as the central bank's net sales of foreign exchange over the first six months of 2018 led net purchases over the four quarters through June 2018 to fall to USD 4 billion, or 0.2 per cent of the GDP," the Treasury had said in its October 2018 report.

Sri Lanka, Japan, India sign deal to develop East Container Terminal at Colombo Port

Sri Lanka, Japan and India on Tuesday signed an agreement to jointly develop the East Container Terminal at the Colombo Port. The joint initiative is estimated to cost between \$500 million and \$700 million, a senior official of the Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Southern Development told *The Hindu*.

The signing of the Memorandum of Cooperation (MoC) is significant, given that the countries had been negotiating the deal since last year, with little success. As per the agreement signed on Tuesday, the Sri Lanka Ports Authority (SLPA) retains 100% ownership of the East Container Terminal (ECT), while the Terminal Operations Company, conducting its operations, is jointly owned, the SLPA said in a statement.

Sri Lanka will hold a 51 per cent-stake in the project and the joint venture partners will retain 49%.

The ECT is located some 3 km away from the China-backed international financial city, known popularly as "port city", being built on reclaimed land on Colombo's sea front.

"Japan is likely to provide a 40-year soft loan with a 0.1 percent interest rate," said Sudarshana Gunawardana, Director of Development Communications at the Prime Minister's office. The SLPA described the "envisaged Japanese loan" as "one of the best loan terms Sri Lanka has obtained".

Details of India's contribution to the initiative are awaited, but New Delhi's interest in partnering the project is well known. Over 70 per cent of the transshipment business at the strategically located ECT is linked to India, according to official sources.

Kartarpur corridor hits roadblock as consensus eludes India, Pakistan

The ambitious Kartarpur corridor linking Pakistan's Gurudwara Darbar Sahib with India's Dera Baba Nanak shrine has hit a roadblock after the technical experts from both the countries could not find a consensus on building a bridge over the Ravi's floodplain, a media report said on Tuesday.

The experts from Pakistan and India on Monday held a meeting to discuss the modalities for the corridor at the Kartarpur Zero Point.

The Express Tribune reported that the meeting lasted only one hour during which the representatives of both the sides exchanged details of the construction work.

India wants the construction of a km-long bridge on the Ravi river while Pakistan suggested the need to construct a road, it said.

The Indian officials objected to the road, citing the possibility of floods in the river. However, the Pakistani officials said that a dam could be built around the road and the inclination of the road could be kept high to avoid flood waters, the report said.

The two countries also could not agree on the date for the next meeting.

The group from the Indian side had officials from the Ministry of External Affairs, Ministry of Home Affairs, Land Ports Authority of India, National Highways Authority of India, among others.

The Pakistani side was represented by the officials of Federal Investigation Agency, customs, construction, Pakistan Rangers Punjab and Survey of Pakistan.

Earlier in April, technical experts and foreign ministry officials from both the sides participated in the talks held at the same venue.

In the March meeting, the two sides decided to present surveys and maps for border fencing and developmental work on the Dera Baba Nanak-Kartarpur Sahib Corridor to their respective governments.

In November 2018, India and Pakistan agreed to set up a border crossing linking Gurudwara Darbar Sahib in Pakistan's Kartarpur - the final resting place of Sikh faith founder Guru Nanak - to Dera Baba Nanak in Punjab's Gurdaspur district.

Pakistan has said that the work on the corridor will be completed before the 550th birth anniversary of Baba Guru Nanak in November this year.

The Kartarpur corridor is expected to provide visa-free access to Indian Sikh pilgrims to the Gurudwara in Kartarpur Sahib - a small town in Narowal, four kilometres from the Pakistan-India border, where Sikhism founder Baba Guru Nanak spent the last 18 years of his life.

Pakistan will build the corridor from the Indian border to the Gurudwara Darbar Sahib in Kartarpur, while the other part from Dera Baba Nanak in Gurdaspur up to the border will be con

Indian Army officer appointed the commander of UNMISS

UN Secretary, General Antonio Guterres, has appointed Indian Army officer, Lieutenant General Shailesh Tinaikar, as the new Force Commander of the United Nations Mission in **South Sudan** (UNMISS). The UN chief made the announcement on Friday that 57-year-old Lieutenant General Tinaikar will succeed Lieutenant General Frank Kamanzi of Rwanda who completes his assignment on May 26.

The decorated Indian Army officer "has had a long and distinguished career with the Indian Armed Forces spanning over 34 years," a statement by the UN Spokesperson said. He has won the Sena Medal and the Vishisht Seva Medal for his service. Mr. Tinaikar graduated from the Indian Military Academy in 1983 and is currently serving as the Commandant of the Infantry School since July 2018.

He previously served as the Additional Director General of Military Operations at the Army Headquarters from 2017 to 2018 and commanded a division, a recruit training centre and a brigade between 2012 and 2017.

From 1996 to 1997, he served in the **United Nations** Angola Verification Mission III, and from 2008 to 2009, in the United Nations Mission in Sudan.

He also holds a Master of Philosophy (M.Phil) in Defence and Strategic Studies from The University of Madras.

India, the fourth largest contributor of uniformed personnel to the UN peacekeeping missions, currently contributes more than 6,400 military and police personnel to the UN peace operations in Abyei, Cyprus, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Haiti, Lebanon, the Middle East, South Sudan and the Western Sahara.

The UN Mission in South Sudan, a country born in July 2011, has 19,400 personnel deployed with it as of March 2019.

India is the second highest troop contributing country to UNMISS with 2,337 Indian peacekeepers, second only to Rwanda with 2,750. In addition, India currently contributes 22 police personnel to UNMISS.

India votes in favour of UNGA resolution demanding UK withdraw from Chagos Archipelago

India was among 116 nations to vote in favour of a UN General Assembly resolution that demanded the UK withdraw its “colonial administration” from the Chagos Archipelago unconditionally within six months, supporting **Mauritius** in its quest for the restoration of sovereignty over the island chain in the Indian Ocean.

The General Assembly adopted the resolution on Wednesday ‘Advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice on the legal consequences of the separation of the Chagos Archipelago from Mauritius in 1965’ with 116 votes in favour, 56 abstentions and six nations voting against, including the UK, the United States, Australia, Israel and the Maldives.

The UK retained sovereignty over the islands after Mauritius gained its independence from Britain in 1968. The islands have since been used for defence purposes by the UK and the United States, which established a

military base on the island of Diego Garcia. The entire Chagossian population was forcibly removed from the territory between 1967 and 1973, and prevented from returning. The resolution welcomed the February 25, 2019 advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on the legal consequences of the separation of the Chagos Archipelago from Mauritius in 1965.

The principal judicial body of the UN had said in its opinion that the UK Government is “under an obligation” to end its administration of the Chagos Archipelago “as rapidly as possible”.

The resolution affirmed, in accordance with the advisory opinion of the Court, that the Chagos Archipelago forms an integral part of the territory of Mauritius. It demanded that the UK withdraw its colonial administration from the Chagos Archipelago unconditionally within six months, enabling Mauritius to complete the decolonization of its territory as rapidly as possible.

India voted in support of the resolution, with its Permanent Representative to the UN Ambassador Syed Akbaruddin telling the 193-member that as part of New Delhi’s longstanding support to all peoples striving for decolonisation, India has consistently supported Mauritius in its quest for the restoration of sovereignty” over the Chagos Archipelago.

Narendra Modi greets Widodo on re-election as Indonesian president

Prime Minister Narendra Modi flies kites with Indonesian President Joko Widodo during the India-Indonesia kite exhibition in Jakarta on May 30, 2018

Prime Minister Narendra Modi greeted Joko Widodo on Tuesday for his re-**election** as the Indonesian president, saying he looked forward to working with him to further deepen the bilateral partnership.

Widodo was re-elected as the leader of **Indonesia**, the third-biggest democracy in the world, on Tuesday.

“Heartiest congratulations @jokowi on your re-election! As two large democracies, we take collective pride in successful celebration of democracy. We wish

you and people of Indonesia all success under your dynamic leadership,” Mr. Modi said in a tweet. He added that as the two nations marked seven decades of diplomatic relationship, “I look forward to working closely with you to further deepen our bilateral Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.”

Moin-ul-Haq appointed new Pakistan High Commissioner to India

Career diplomat Moin-ul-Haq has been appointed as Pakistan’s new High Commissioner to India to start a new process of engagement with the country where a new government will be formed soon, amid strained relations between the two nuclear-armed neighbours.

Prime Minister Imran Khan on Monday approved appointments of over two dozen ambassadors in various countries including India, China and Japan.

Mr. Haq, in his mid-fifties is the current ambassador to France. He has previously served as chief of protocol at the Foreign Office. He joined Foreign Service of **Pakistan** in 1987 and was posted in countries like Turkey, Canada and Sri Lanka.

The post of High Commissioner to India fell vacant after Sohail Mehmood was appointed Pakistan’s new foreign secretary in April.

The decision came after a detailed meeting with Prime Minister Khan, who formally approved the new appointments, Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi said in a video message on Monday night.

Mr. Qureshi said, “New Delhi, India, is very important After consultation I have decided to appoint Mr. Moin-ul-Haq, the current ambassador in France, who will be sent to Delhi, and I hope that he [Haq] will deliver.”

Indian peacekeeper to be honoured posthumously with UN medal

An Indian peacekeeper is among the 119 military, police and civilian personnel who will be honoured this year with a prestigious UN medal this year for courage and sacrifice in the line of duty.

Police Officer Jitender Kumar made the supreme sacrifice while serving in the UN Organisation

Stabilisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO).

He will be honoured with the Dag Hammarskjold Medal on Friday as the world organisation observes the International Day of **United Nations** Peacekeepers. India’s Permanent Representative to the UN Ambassador Syed Akbaruddin would collect the medal on behalf of the fallen Indian peacekeeper at a solemn ceremony here.

India is the fourth largest contributor of uniformed personnel to the UN peacekeeping. It currently contributes more than 6,400 military and police personnel to the UN peace operations in Abyei, Cyprus, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Haiti, Lebanon, the Middle East, South Sudan and the Western Sahara.

According to the UN information last year, India has lost the highest number of its peacekeepers deployed in various UN peacekeeping operations in the last 70 years, with 163 military, police and civilian personnel from the country making the supreme sacrifice in the line of duty.

Of the 3,737 peacekeepers who have died since 1948, 163 have been from India.

Secretary-General Antonio Guterres will preside over the ceremony this week at which the Dag Hammarskjold Medal will be awarded posthumously to 119 military, police and civilian peacekeepers, who lost their lives in 2018 and early 2019.

The commemoration of the International Day of United Nations Peacekeepers will begin with the UN Chief laying a wreath to honour all UN peacekeepers who have lost their lives since 1948, when the UN’s first peacekeeping mission, the UN Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO), began operations in Palestine.

In a video message, the Secretary-General said the day honours more than one million men and women who have served as UN peacekeepers since the first UN mission in 1948.

“We remember that more than 3,800 personnel paid the ultimate price. And we express our deepest gratitude to the 100,000 civilian, police and military

peacekeepers deployed around the world today and to the countries that contribute these brave and dedicated women and men.”

The Secretary-General added that this year, the United Nations marks 20 years since the Security Council first mandated a peacekeeping mission to protect civilians.

“Peacekeepers protect men, women and children from violence every day, often at great personal risk.”

Under-Secretary-General for Peace Operations Jean-Pierre Lacroix said UN Peacekeeping deploys to some of the most complex and difficult places, protecting some of the world’s most vulnerable.

“We are working in partnership with Member States to implement the Secretary-General’s Action for Peacekeeping initiative to strengthen peacekeeping, including to improve how we protect civilians, which is at the heart of our work. For hundreds of millions, peacekeeping is the last best hope and it needs all our support,” he said.

The International Day of United Nations Peacekeepers was established by the General Assembly in 2002, to pay tribute to all men and women serving in peacekeeping, and to honour the memory of those who have lost their lives in the cause of peace. The General Assembly designated May 29 as the International Day of UN Peacekeepers.

Indian’s charity in UAE enters Guinness World Records for holding longest iftar

A charity run by an Indian in the UAE has entered the Guinness Book of World Records for its hunger relief efforts during the holy month of Ramzan in Abu Dhabi.

Joginder Singh Salaria, founder of PCT Humanity, said the efforts were in continuation to the vegetarian iftar held daily at the premises of his company Pehal International, Dubai Industrial Park.

The charity set the new Guinness World Records for “Longest Line of Hunger Relief Package” in Abu Dhabi on Saturday, Gulf News reported.

“This is an incredible moment for all of us in the long journey of transforming lives of people and bringing smiles to them. Besides the **record**, our main aim is to feed people pure vegetarian food to stay healthy and fit and also save animals. We are glad people are joining us in spreading this message,” Salaria said in a statement.

Adjudicated by Douglas Palau, the attempt saw iftar meals containing seven items spread in a line without keeping any gap between the packages for a kilometre, the report said.

China blocks Wikipedia in all languages

Authorities in China have blocked Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia.

Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other social media sites have long been blocked in China. Individual Wikipedia articles about sensitive issues, such as the pro-democracy protests in Tiananmen Square and Tibet, have long been blocked in China, however, even while the main site was accessible. Suspicion of a total block on Wikipedia surfaced in late April when some Chinese Internet users took to social media to complain that the site was no longer accessible.

Since 2015, Wikipedia’s Chinese-language site was blocked by China’s “Great Firewall”, which prevents Internet users from accessing certain foreign websites. Versions in other languages, however, have largely remained accessible, albeit with some interruptions.

Alabama passes toughest abortion Bill in U.S.

The Alabama Senate has passed the most restrictive abortion Bill in the U.S., which places a near-total ban on the termination of pregnancy — even in cases of rape and incest — and could punish doctors who perform the procedure with life in prison. The text passed by the Republican-led Senate has been sent to Governor Kay Ivey’s desk for signature into law and, if approved, is expected to trigger a legal battle. Under the Bill, performing an abortion is a crime that could land doctors who perform it in prison for 10 to 99 years. Abortions would only be legal if the life of the

mother is in danger or the foetus has a fatal condition. The largest human rights defence organisation in the United States, the ACLU, promised to file a lawsuit to block its implementation.

Several other conservative States are weighing or have recently implemented harsh anti-abortion laws. The Governor of the U.S. State of Georgia last week signed into law a ban on abortion from the moment a foetal heartbeat is detected, becoming the sixth US. State to outlaw abortion after six weeks of gestation.

North Korea says it is suffering worst drought in decades

North Korean officials have blamed the food shortage on bad weather and international economic sanctions that were toughened after the country conducted a series of high-profile nuclear and missile tests in recent years. North Korea said it is suffering its worst drought in nearly four decades amid reports of severe food shortages.

The report came after U.N. food agencies said in a joint assessment earlier this month that about 10 million people in North Korea were facing “severe food shortages” after the country had one of the worst harvests in a decade. North Korea suffered a devastating famine in the mid-1990s that is estimated to have killed hundreds of thousands of people.

Tree ring data helps track rainfall levels

Rainfall from the Asian summer monsoon, which influences water availability, ecosystems and agriculture in India, has been decreasing over the past 80 years, according to a study. Man-made atmospheric pollutants are likely the reason for the decline unprecedented in the last 448 years, said researchers from the University of Arizona in the U.S.

The study, published in the journal *Geophysical Research Letters*, used tree ring records to reconstruct the Asian summer monsoon back to 1566. The study found the monsoon has been weakening since the 1940s, resulting in regional droughts and hardships.

Previous studies have looked at tree ring chronologies from this region but the new study, “surpasses in terms of the timespan covered and the number of trees involved”, scientist Steve Leavitt. “We were able to gather nearly 450 years worth of tree ring data with clear annual resolution,” Mr. Leavitt said.

Taiwan approves same-sex marriage in a first for Asia

Taiwan’s legislature voted to legalize same-sex marriage, in a first in Asia and a boost for LGBT rights activists who had championed the cause for two decades. Lawmakers pressured by LGBT groups as well as church organizations opposed to the move approved most of a government-sponsored bill that recognizes same-sex marriages and gives couples many of the tax, insurance and child custody benefits available to male-female married couples.

That makes Taiwan the first place in Asia with a comprehensive law both allowing and laying out the terms of same-sex marriage.

Taiwan’s acceptance of gay and lesbian relationships began in the 1990s when leaders in today’s ruling Democratic Progressive Party championed the cause to help Taiwan stand out in Asia as an open society.

India, Singapore Begin SIMBEX 2019 Naval Exercises in South China Sea

Singapore India Maritime Bilateral Exercise (SIMBEX) is an annual bilateral naval exercise conducted by the Indian Navy and the Republic of Singapore Navy (RSN). Last year’s exercises took place in the Indian Ocean, off India’s Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

INS Kolkata, the lead ship of the Kolkata-class guided missile destroyers, and INS Shakti, a Deepak-class fleet tanker, participated in the exercise

The exercise has been held annually since 1994. Over the years, SIMBEX has progressed beyond its original emphasis on anti-submarine warfare to include elements of maritime security, anti-air and anti-surface warfare.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Trump announces new Mexican tariffs in response to migrants

In a surprise announcement that could compromise a major trade deal, President Donald Trump announced on Thursday that he is slapping a 5% tariff on all Mexican imports, effective June 10, to pressure the country to do more to crack down on the surge of Central American migrants trying to cross the U.S. border.

Mr. Trump made the announcement by tweet after telling reporters earlier on Thursday that he was planning “a major statement” that would be his “biggest” so far on the border.

“On June 10th, the United States will impose a 5% Tariff on all goods coming into our Country from Mexico, until such time as illegal migrants coming through Mexico, and into our Country, STOP. The Tariff will gradually increase until the Illegal Immigration problem is remedied,” he wrote, “at which time the Tariffs will be removed.”

Arab leaders meet in Mecca to unify ranks amid Iran tensions

Arab heads of state have gathered for the start of a trio of high-level summits in Islam’s holiest city of Mecca as Saudi Arabia attempts to present a unified regional stance in response to a spike in tensions with its top rival, **Iran**.

Saudi Arabia hastily called for the meetings on Thursday after attacks on Saudi oil targets blamed on Iran. That King Salman could quickly bring regional leaders and heads of state to Mecca so rapidly reflects the kingdom’s weight in the region and its desire to project a unified position on Iran.

Upon their arrival at the airport in Saudi Arabia, each leader was shown Yemeni rebel military items, such as a destroyed drone, missiles and mortar shells used

in the conflict with the Saudis. The leaders were given a brief explanation of the weapons on display by Col. Turki al-Maliki, spokesman for the Saudi-led coalition at war in Yemen.

Saudi Arabia accuses Tehran of helping arm the rebel Houthis and being behind a Houthi drone attack on a key Saudi oil pipeline earlier this month.

Earlier on Thursday, Saudi Foreign Minister Ibrahim al-Assaf urged Muslim nations to confront with “all means of force and firmness” an alleged sabotage of oil tankers off the coast of the United Arab Emirates this month and the Saudi oil pipeline attack.

“We should confront it with all means of force and firmness,” he said.

Mr. Al-Assaf made the comments at a preparatory meeting of foreign ministers of the 57-nation Organization of Islamic Cooperation, or OIC, ahead of the Mecca summits.

White House asked Navy to hide warship John McCain: Report

U.S. President Donald Trump said on Wednesday that he was unaware of any effort to move the USS John S. McCain that was stationed near the site of his recent speech in Japan.

A U.S. official confirmed to Reuters that an initial request had been made to keep the John McCain out of sight during Mr. Trump’s speech but was scrapped by senior Navy officials.

The Wall Street Journal, which first reported the news, said the White House wanted the Navy to move the ship, named for the late Arizona Senator, “out of sight.”

The email to Navy and Air Force officials had a number of directives, including: one telling officials that “USS John McCain needs to be out of sight”.

Speaking with reporters en route to Singapore, acting U.S. Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan said he had

not approved any movement of the ship, but would ask his Chief of Staff to look into the details of what happened.

China accuses the U.S. of ‘naked economic terrorism’

Provoking trade disputes is “naked economic terrorism”, a senior Chinese diplomat said on Thursday, ramping up the rhetoric against the U.S. amid a bitter trade war that is showing no signs of ending soon.

Trade tensions between Washington and Beijing escalated sharply earlier this month after the Trump administration accused China of having “renege” on its previous promises to make structural changes to its economic practices.

Washington later slapped additional tariffs of up to 25% on \$200 billion of Chinese goods, prompting Beijing to retaliate.

Speaking to reporters in Beijing, Chinese Vice-Foreign Minister Zhang Hanhui said China opposed the use of “big sticks” like trade sanctions, tariffs and protectionism. “We oppose a trade war but are not afraid of a trade war. This kind of deliberately provoking trade disputes is naked economic terrorism, economic homicide, economic bullying,” Mr. Zhang said, when asked about the trade war. Everyone loses in a trade war, he added, addressing a briefing on Chinese President Xi Jinping’s state visit to Russia next week, where he will meet President Vladimir Putin and speak at a major investor forum in St. Petersburg.

Singapore eyes a farming revolution

Singapore, the tiny Southeast Asian city-state, is an unlikely place for a farming revolution. With tiered fish farms, vegetable plots atop office buildings and lab-grown shrimp, the island aims to beef up its own food production and rely less on imports to feed its 5.6 million people.

Space a challenge

Singapore produces about 10% of its food but as climate change and population growth threatens global food supplies, it aims to raise that to 30% by 2030

under a plan known as ‘30-by-30’. With only 1% of Singapore’s 724 sq km land area devoted to agriculture and production costs higher than the rest of Southeast Asia, the pressure is on new urban farmers to answer the government’s call to “grow more with less”.

“Whenever I talk about food security in Singapore, I tell folks don’t think land think space. Because you can go upwards and sideways,” said Paul Teng, a professor specialising in agriculture at Nanyang Technological University.

Sustenir Agriculture is one of more than 30 vertical farms in Singapore, which has seen a doubling in so-called sky farms in three years.

The hydroponic farm grows non-native varieties like kale, cherry tomatoes and strawberries indoors under artificial lights and sells the produce to local supermarkets and online grocers.

Sustenir raised \$16 million from backers, including Singapore state investor Temasek and Australia’s Grok Ventures last year, which will be used for an expansion in Singapore and opening in Hong Kong.

Temasek is also providing funds to Apollo Aquaculture Group which is building a S\$70 million highly-automated, eight-storey fish farm.

Apollo says the new farm will deliver more than a twenty-fold increase in its annual output of 110 tonnes of fish. “It is too unpredictable to do things now in the traditional way,” said Apollo CEO Eric Ng, citing problems with algae blooms in recent years that have wiped out farmers’ fish stocks.

Hydrogen-powered flying machine readies for take off

A model of a Skai prototype, a hydrogen fuel cell powered aircraft, during an event in California.

A transportation company is betting its sleek new hydrogen-powered electric flying vehicles will someday serve as taxis, cargo carriers and ambulances of the sky, but experts say they will have to clear a number of regulatory hurdles before being approved for takeoff years in the future.

With six rotors on the roof and seats inside for five people, a passenger model of the Skai (pronounced “sky”) unveiled on Wednesday near Los Angeles resembles an oversized drone crossed with a luxury SUV.

Like a drone, the vehicle from Alaka’i Technologies takes off and lands vertically. It’s one of many similar electric flying crafts in production, including prototypes from Boeing and Airbus that made successful test flights this year, according to Vertical Flight Society, an industry group.

Most are powered by batteries, which can add a lot of weight. The Skai instead uses very light hydrogen fuel cells to run its rotors, giving it a range of 644 km and the capacity to carry 454 kilograms in people or freight, the company says.

“We just couldn’t get to the point where we could have enough batteries to get to the payload that we knew we needed,” CEO Stephan Hanvey said of the choice to switch to hydrogen power.

It would be flown by an on-board pilot using a pair of joysticks, but the technology exists to eventually fly it remotely and even autonomously, Mr. Hanvey said.

World’s smallest baby survives after 5 months in neonatal ICU

A California hospital on Wednesday disclosed the birth of the world’s smallest baby ever to survive, weighing a mere 245 grams the same as a large apple when she was born. The girl, nicknamed Saybie by hospital staff, was born 23 weeks and three days into her mother’s pregnancy at Sharp Mary Birch Hospital for Women and Newborns in San Diego, California.

The father was told by doctors that he would have about an hour with his daughter before she passed away. “But that hour turned into two hours which turned into a day, which turned into a week,” the mother said in a video released by the hospital. Doctors said Saybie was delivered via emergency caesarean section in December at 23 weeks and three days gestation in the womb after severe pregnancy complications that

put her mother’s life at risk. A typical pregnancy lasts 40 weeks. After nearly five months at the hospital’s neonatal intensive care unit, Saybie was discharged home earlier this month weighing a healthy 2.2 kg and sporting a graduation cap.

“She is a miracle, that’s for sure,” said Kim Norby, one of the nurses who cared for Saybie as she fought to survive — with a sign by her crib that read “tiny but mighty” cheering her on.

Miracle baby

Emma Wiest, another nurse featured in the video, said Saybie was so small at birth that “you could barely see her on the bed.” Doctors said that apart from Saybie’s fighting spirit, her survival as a micro preemie — a baby born before 28 weeks’ gestation — could be attributed to the fact that she suffered no serious complications after birth.

Saybie’s ranking as the world’s tiniest baby ever to survive is according to the Tiniest Babies Registry, maintained by the University of Iowa.

Nepal marks 1st Everest ascent amid debate over permits

Nepal commemorated the anniversary of the first ascent of Mount Everest on Wednesday amid a climbing season marred by the highest death toll in four years and a debate on whether the government should limit permits to prevent dangerous overcrowding on the world’s highest peak.

Government officials said at an event in Kathmandu celebrating the successful climb of Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay in 1953 that there were no plans to cap permits. Nepal, one of the world’s poorest countries, takes in \$300 million each year from climbing. A record number of 381 permits were issued this year. Eleven people have died on the southern side of Everest in Nepal, likely due to altitude sickness, which is caused by low amounts of oxygen at high elevation and can lead to headaches, vomiting, shortness of breath and mental confusion.

Because of the altitude, climbers have just hours to reach the top before they are at risk of a pulmonary edema, when the lungs fill with liquid causing respiratory failure. Mountaineers described traffic jams caused by exhausted rookies in the “death zone,” the final phase of the ascent from Camp Four at 8,000 meters (26,240 feet) to the 8,850-meter (29,035-foot) peak.

Scott Morrison sworn in as Australia’s PM

Scott Morrison was sworn in as Australia’s Prime Minister on Wednesday, 11 days after retaining the position in the country’s general election. Along with Deputy Prime Minister Michael McCormack, Mr. Morrison was sworn in by Queen Elizabeth’s official representative in Australia, Governor-General Sir Peter Cosgrove, at a ceremony in the capital, Canberra. Also sworn in was Morrison’s revamped Cabinet, which includes an equal-record seven women, and Australia’s first Aboriginal federal cabinet minister, Ken Wyatt.

Mr. Wyatt, the new indigenous affairs minister, received a standing ovation from the small gathering at the ceremony when he stepped up to be sworn in. He wore a traditional kangaroo skin, called a “booka”, given to him by indigenous people from his home state, Western Australia. Mr. Morrison became Australia’s 30th Prime Minister through an internal party vote last August in which he replaced Malcolm Turnbull as chief of the ruling Liberal Party.

China rejects U.S. call for dialogue with Dalai Lama

China on Tuesday rejected U.S. Ambassador Terry Branstad’s call to Beijing to engage in “substantive dialogue” with the Dalai Lama, saying that it was firmly opposed to “foreign interference” in Tibet and its internal affairs. Mr. Branstad visited Tibet from May 19 to 25, the first such visit by a U.S. ambassador to China to the remote Himalayan region since 2015, where access is restricted for diplomats and journalists. Mr. Branstad, during his visit to Tibet last week, had

asked the Chinese government to “engage in substantive dialogue with the Dalai Lama or his representatives without preconditions, to seek a settlement that resolves differences,” according to a U.S. Embassy spokeswoman.

“He also expressed concerns regarding the Chinese government’s interference in Tibetan Buddhists’ freedom to organise and practice their religion,” she said.

Asked about the U.S. envoy’s call for dialogue with the Dalai Lama, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Lu Kang told media that Chinese officials had briefed the Ambassador about China’s religious and ethnic policies and also about socio-economic development in Tibet. “The Chinese government’s policy on dialogue and contact with the Dalai Lama and foreigners access to Tibet [were made clear to the Ambassador]. Finally, it was also stressed that China firmly opposes any foreign interference in Tibet affairs in China’s domestic affairs,” said Mr. Kang.

“The ambassador thanked China for the hospitality given to him and spoke positively about socio-economic development in Tibet and said that the visit helped him have a better understanding of the situation in Tibet,” Lu said.

Beijing’s permission to Branstad came after the U.S. early this year passed the Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act of 2018, warning equal and reciprocal measures if Beijing denied access to American citizens, government officials and journalists to Tibet.

The new U.S. law would impose a visa ban on Chinese officials who deny American citizens, government officials and journalists access to Tibet.

Before the US’s envoy’s visit, Lu hoped that he would make an objective and unbiased judgement on the situation in Tibet. China, which accuses the Dalai Lama as a “splittist” working for Tibetan independence, has held talks with the Dalai Lama’s representatives to find an amicable solution to the Tibetan issue in the past. The last such dialogue took place in 2010.

The 14th Dalai Lama had fled to India in early 1959 to escape from the Chinese occupation and lives in exile in the hill town of Dharamshala.

Beijing criticises the Dalai Lama's demand for autonomy, saying that it is a ploy for separation of Tibet from China. Chinese officials have said in the past that the Dalai Lama's demand to unify all the Tibetan prefectures with the present Tibetan Autonomous Region and provide greater autonomy is unacceptable to Beijing. Over 120 Tibetans committed self-immolations in recent years calling for the return of the Dalai Lama from his exile in India.

German government asks people to wear kippah

The German government has called on people to wear the Jewish *kippah* ahead of an anti-Israel protest as a demonstration of solidarity and as Jews face a spike in anti-Semitism, withdrawing an earlier warning against wearing the traditional skullcap. At the weekend, Felix Klein, the country's commissioner on anti-Semitism, sparked uproar when he said in an interview that he could not "advise Jews to wear the *kippah* everywhere all the time in Germany."

Israeli President Reuven Rivlin voiced shock at Mr. Klein's warning and said it was a "capitulation to anti-Semitism" and evidence that Jews are unsafe in Germany. Late on Monday, Mr. Klein reversed course after Chancellor Angela Merkel's spokesman intervened. "The state must see to it that the free exercise of religion is possible for all... and that anyone can go anywhere in our country in full security wearing a *kippah*," said Steffen Seibert. In his latest statement, Mr. Klein said: "I call on all citizens of Berlin and across Germany to wear the *kippah* next Saturday if there are new, intolerable attacks targeting Israel and Jews on the occasion of al-Quds day in Berlin."

Al-Quds is an annual event against Israeli control of Jerusalem and will take place on Saturday.

Klein also addressed his earlier statements, saying that he "could no longer recommend that Jews wear the

kippah everywhere in Germany should be taken as an alarm signal."

Earlier Monday, German daily Bild published a cut-out-and-use *kippah* in a bid to fight rising anti-Semitism. Bild, Germany's top-selling daily newspaper, called on readers to "stand in solidarity with (their) Jewish neighbours" by making "their own *kippah*", bearing the star of David, to "raise the flag against anti-Semitism".

Ahead of Ramzan, Pakistan launches its first ever moon-sighting website

Pakistan has launched its first ever moon-sighting website in a bid to end decades-old controversy over the start of key lunar months that decides the beginning of the holy month of Ramazan and Eid festivals. The website "pakmoonsighting .pk" was inaugurated on Sunday, two weeks after Federal Minister for Science and Technology Fawad Chaudhry made an announcement regarding the preparation of a scientific lunar calendar. He said the website would show the exact dates of important Islamic occasions Ramazan, Eidul Fitr, Eidul Azha and Muharram, the *Dawn* reported.

Speaking at the launch of the website, Mr. Chaudhry said that it will end the "moon-sighting controversy" in the country and added that other countries can benefit from it to decide the sighting of moon. The website features sections such as Islamic calendar for the next five years, a day-to-day lunar calendar against dates from the Gregorian calendar, and the dates on which the first day of every lunar month will fall.

Everyone can access year-wise data about the new moon, its monthly visibility maps and monthly coordinates in major cities on the site as well. "A mobile phone app was also being prepared to make it further easier to know when the lunar month would begin," Mr. Chaudhry said. Pakistan has been facing controversies on key religious occasions like start of Ramzan and Eid as religious leader from different regions differ on sighting of the moon. This year, Ramzan started in Khyber-Pakhtunhwa on May 6

while in rest of the country it began on May 7. It is also possible the celebration of Eid will be held on two different dates. Mr. Chaudhry said such issues have been resolved and the coming Eid will be on June 5. But his efforts to resolve the dispute may not end as most of the clerics insist that sighting of moon with naked eye is essential.

Historical ‘Guru Nanak palace’ demolished in Pakistan

A centuries-old ‘Guru Nanak palace’ was partially demolished by a group of vandals who sold its precious windows and doors in Pakistan’s Punjab province, a media report said on Monday.

The walls of the four-storey building had pictures of Sikhism founder Guru Nanak as well as that of various Hindu rulers and princes, Dawn news reported.

The structure at a village in Narowal city — about 100 kms from the provincial capital Lahore — had 16 rooms with each of them having at least three delicate doors and at least four ventilators, it said.

The group of locals not only partially demolished the structure allegedly with the connivance of Auqaf department officials but also sold its precious windows, doors and ventilators, the report said.

A local resident Muhammad Aslam said: “This old building is called the Palace of Baba Guru Nanak and we have named it Mahalan. A number of Sikhs from across the world, including India, used to visit this building.” Once a six-member delegation, including a woman carrying a book with information about the historical building, had come from Canada. The delegation was elated upon visiting the site as if they had found a treasure, he said.

“The Auqaf department was informed about the demolition of the building by some influential persons, but no officer or official took any action or even reached here,” he added. “Three storeys of the building have already been demolished and new houses constructed. The influentials have demolished the building with the connivance of the Auqaf department

and sold its costly windows, doors, ventilators and wood,” another local Muhammad Ashraf said.

In an bid to determine its legal status, locate its owners or find out which government agency maintained its record, Dawn news reached out to various authorities from the deputy commissioner, Evacuee Trust Property Board (ETPB) to the family that lived in the building but to no avail.

Authorities are clueless about its owner. Narowal Deputy Commissioner Waheed Asghar, in charge of the record of all properties in the region said: “There is no mention of this building in the revenue record. As it seemed to be historical, we are checking the municipal committee’s record.”

ETPB Sialkot zone Rent Collector Rana Waheed said: “Our team is investigating the Guru Nanak Mahal Bathanwala. If this palace was the property of Evacuee Trust Property Board, legal action will be taken against those responsible.” The construction of the palace comprised of old bricks, sand, clay and limestone. The rooms were constructed with large broad walls with cupboards in them that had wooden doors with flowers carved on them. All the rooms were airy and their walls had small lamp enclosures in them. Expensive diyar wood beams of various sizes were used in the roofs, it said. The people in the area requested Prime Minister Imran Khan to take action against those responsible.

Germany holds talks with Afghan Taliban

Germany, a leading donor and member of the NATO-led coalition in Afghanistan, has been talking with the Taliban and the Afghan government in an effort to restart peace talks, officials said. Berlin’s special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Markus Potzel, has visited Kabul for talks with the Afghan government and met Taliban officials in Doha at least twice this month. “We realise that U.S.-Taliban talks will gain momentum only if the insurgent leaders start engaging with the Afghan representatives,” a senior German official said.

Sohail Shaheen, spokesman for the Taliban's political office in Doha, said that Germany was one among several countries to have offered help. Discussions were held with Germany about an Afghan-Taliban meeting in Germany but no decision has been made, said Mr. Shaheen. The moves come at a time when the Taliban controls or exercises influence over more than half of Afghanistan.

At least 3,804 civilians were killed in the war last year, according to a United Nations report, plus thousands of soldiers, police and Taliban militants.

The involvement of Germany, the second-largest donor and an influential member of the 39-member NATO-led coalition in Afghanistan, follows concern among several U.S. allies at being excluded from the talks.

Germany, which last year spent 23 billion euros (\$25.76 billion) in integrating hundreds of thousands of refugees from countries including Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, also has pressing domestic reasons for promoting peace. Next year, parliament will have to approve the continued presence of 1,200 German troops in Afghanistan. "Lawmakers will ask why they should extend the mandate again if there is no progress there whatsoever," said Conrad Schetter, an Afghanistan at the Bonn International Center for Conversion, an independent think-tank.

Papua New Guinea prime minister quits after weeks of turmoil

Papua New Guinea Prime Minister Peter O'Neill announced his resignation on Sunday after seven years in the top job following weeks of high-level defections from the ruling party. Mr. O'Neill told media in Port Moresby that he had handed over leadership of the Pacific nation to Sir Julius Chan. Mr. O'Neill had resisted calls to resign for weeks but stepped down on Sunday, saying recent movements in Parliament showed a "need for change", ABC News reported. Opponents of Mr. O'Neill said on Friday they had mustered enough support in parliament to oust him over a range of grievances including a gas deal with

France's Total TOTF.PA, which critics have questioned. Political instability is something of a fixture in the resource-rich but poverty-stricken South Pacific nation and Mr. O'Neill, who has been leader since 2011, has seen off previous attempts to topple him. Defections from the ruling coalition have been going on for weeks, and on Friday at least nine members switched sides, according to two ministers who were among them. O'Neill's opponents needed to rally 62 members of PNG's 111-seat parliament to vote him out.

Opposition politicians said on Friday they would push for investigations in Australia and Switzerland into a A\$1.2 billion (\$830.76 million) loan arranged by finance group UBS if there was a change of government, the Australian Financial Review reported.

A report by the Ombudsman Commission of PNG into the 2014 deal that allowed the South Pacific nation to borrow from UBS to buy a 10 per cent stake in Australian Stock Exchange-listed energy firm Oil Search is scheduled to be tabled in PNG's parliament next week.

Oil Search in turn used the money to buy into the Elk Antelope gas field being developed by France's Total. PNG is estimated to have lost 1 billion kina (\$287.00 million) on the deal after being forced to sell the shares when the price fell in 2017.

Cyril Ramaphosa takes oath as South Africa's President

Ramaphosa is seen by many as having the potential to clean up both the government and the ruling party's reputation. Cyril Ramaphosa was sworn in for a five-year term as South Africa's President on Saturday, with a delicate fight against government corruption ahead of him. The inauguration followed his ruling African National Congress party's 57.5% victory in this month's election. It was the party's weakest election showing since the ANC took power at the end of the harsh system of racial apartheid in 1994.

Mr. Ramaphosa first took office last year after former President Jacob Zuma was pressured to resign amid corruption scandals that badly damaged public faith in the ANC. A former protégé of South Africa's first black president Nelson Mandela, Mr. Ramaphosa is seen by many as having the potential to clean up both the government and the ruling party's reputation. Without him the ANC likely would have received just 40% of the vote, one party leader, Fikile Mbalula, has said.

There was no sign at Saturday's ceremony of Mr. Zuma, who has insisted he did nothing wrong and that allegations are politically motivated. His allies within the ANC leadership pose a challenge to Mr. Ramaphosa as he pursues reforms.

Ahead of the election Mr. Ramaphosa apologised to South Africans for the political turmoil. He also vowed to continue the fight against mismanagement and graft that has hurt the country's economy, the most developed in sub-Saharan Africa.

SpaceX launches 60 little satellites, with many more to come

SpaceX has launched 60 little satellites, the first of thousands that founder Elon Musk plans to put in orbit for global internet coverage.

The recycled Falcon rocket blasted off on May 23 night. The first-stage booster landed on an ocean platform following lift-off, as the tightly-packed cluster of satellites continued upward.

Elon Musk said on May 24 all 60 flat-panel satellites were deployed and online a few hundred miles (kilometres) above Earth. Each weighs 500 pounds (227kg) and has a single solar panel and a krypton-powered thruster for raising and maintaining altitude. The satellites have the capability of automatically dodging sizeable pieces of space junk.

The orbiting constellation named Starlink will grow in the next few years, Mr. Musk said.

Twelve launches of 60 satellites each will provide reliable and affordable internet coverage throughout

the U.S., he said. Twenty-four launches will serve most of the populated world and 30 launches the entire world. That will be 1,800 satellites in total, with more planned after that.

Mr. Musk told reporters last week there's "a fundamental goodness" to giving people in all corners of the globe choices in broadband internet service. He's especially interested in reaching areas without coverage or where it is expensive or unreliable.

Other companies have similar plans, including Project Kuiper from Jeff Bezos' Amazon and OneWeb.

According to Mr. Musk, California-based SpaceX can use Starlink revenue to develop more advanced rockets and spacecraft to achieve his ultimate goal of establishing a city on Mars.

Mr. Musk, who also runs the electric carmaker Tesla and other ventures, said Starlink is one of the hardest engineering projects he's encountered. The satellites include a lot of new technology, and he warned last week that some of them might not work.

The Starlink satellites are designed to re-enter the atmosphere after four or five years in orbit, burning up harmlessly over the Pacific. Mr. Musk stressed there will be no safety issues on the ground from falling chunks of debris.

The launch was delayed twice last week, first by high wind and then for software updates. It was the third flight for this booster.

Taiwan changing name of de-facto embassy in US

Taiwan says it is changing the name of its de-facto embassy in the US amid the strongest relations between the sides in decades.

The foreign ministry tweeted that the Coordination Council for North American Affairs was being renamed the Taiwan Council for US Affairs.

While the US severed formal diplomatic ties with Taiwan in 1979 in favor of Beijing, the sides retain close unofficial relations that have grown ever-closer

in recent years, including stepped-up military-to-military contacts.

The unofficial U.S. embassy in Taipei, the American Institute in Taiwan, recently moved into a substantially larger, purpose-built complex in a suburb of the capital. China, which claims Taiwan as its own territory, objects to all diplomatic and military contacts between Taiwan and the US and has been stepping-up pressure on the island.

‘Facebook plans to launch its own cryptocurrency next year’

Facebook, which owns WhatsApp and Instagram, is gearing up to launch its own cryptocurrency next year, the *BBC* reported on Friday.

Called “GlobalCoin,” the cryptocurrency would work with a new digital payments system in about a dozen countries starting in the first quarter of 2020.

Facebook has been in contact with US and British financial regulators to launch it.

According to the *BBC*, Facebook is in touch with “Bank of England governor Mark Carney and officials at the US Treasury”.

With over two billion users across its platforms, Facebook could emulate WeChat in China which allows its users to chat, shop and play games without leaving its platform.

The Facebook cryptocurrency would need to overcome numerous technical and regulatory hurdles before it can be launched.

According to media reports, the Facebook currency could be designed to be a “stablecoin” with a value pegged to US currency in an attempt to minimize volatility.

A report last week said Facebook has reportedly set up a company called Libra Networks in Switzerland that is developing payments and Blockchain systems for the **social networking** giant.

According to a report in CNET quoting Swiss publication *Handelszeitung*, the Facebook cyrpto-

currency would be tied to the US dollar and could, therefore, remain stable unlike Bitcoin which has crashed.

“Facebook set up Libra Networks in Geneva several weeks ago. Libra is the social network’s internal project name for the digital currency,” the report said.

The Swiss company would focus on developing the software and hardware for currency-related functions like payments, Blockchain, analytics, big data and identity management.

Facebook declined to comment on the new report.

According to a report in *The Wall Street Journal* earlier this month, the social media giant is “recruiting dozens of financial firms and online merchants” towards its cryptocurrency-based system that would use a digital coin similar to Bitcoin.

The *New York Times* reported in February that Facebook had a team of 50 people working on its virtual currency project. In a public interview with Harvard Law professor Jonathan Zittrain in February, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg said he is “potentially interested” in putting the Facebook login on the Blockchain technology. According to Mr. Zuckerberg, Blockchain could give users more powers when granting data access to third-party apps.

Taiwan holds first gay marriages in historic day for Asia

Taiwan made history on Friday with Asia’s first legal gay weddings as same-sex couples tied the knot in jubilant and emotional scenes, the culmination of a three-decade fight for equality.

The weddings, which came a week after lawmakers took the unprecedented decision to legalise gay marriage despite staunch conservative opposition, places Taiwan at the vanguard of the burgeoning gay rights movement in Asia. Some dozen couples were among the first to arrive at a government office in downtown Taipei to legally register their relationships as marriages.

They embraced and kissed in front of the gathered press before proudly holding aloft their wedding certificates as well as new identity cards listing each other as spouses.

Among those tying the knot were social worker Huang Mei-yu and her partner You Ya-ting.

They held a religious blessing conducted by a progressive Buddhist master in 2012 but they longed for the same legal rights granted heterosexuals.

Brazil's supreme court votes to make homophobia a crime

A majority in Brazil's supreme court has voted to make homophobia and transphobia crimes like racism, a decision coming amid fears the country's far-right president will roll back LGBT social gains.

Six of the Supreme Federal Tribunal's 11 judges have voted in favor of the measure. The five other judges will vote in a court session on June 5, but the result will not be modified. The measure will take effect after all the justices have voted.

Racism was made a crime in Brazil in 1989 with prison sentences of up to five years. The court's judges ruled that homophobia should be framed within the racism law until the country's congress approves legislation specifically dealing with LGBT discrimination.

Brazil's Senate is dealing with a bill to criminalize discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender with sentences of up to five years.

"Racism is a crime against flesh and blood, whether it is a member of the LGBT community, a Jew or an Afro-descendant," justice Luiz Fux said Thursday.

The court's judges said the ruling was to address an omission that had left the LGBT community legally unprotected.

While same-sex marriage is legal in Brazil, it is still a dangerous country for members of the LGBT community and has a large evangelical movement often critical of gay rights. According to the rights group the Grupo Gay da Bahia, 420 LGBT people were killed

across Brazil in 2018, while at least 141 have been killed so far this year.

President Jair Bolsonaro, a former army captain who assumed office on Jan. 1, has a history of offensive comments about gays, blacks and other minorities, openly acknowledging he is a homophobe. He has said he would rather have a dead son than a gay son.

The ruling "comes at a very good moment, when we have a head of state who is LGBT-phobic," said Bruna Benevides, president of the Niteroi Diversity group. "The Supreme Court assumed the responsibility to protect us."

Pakistan successfully test-fires ballistic missile Shaheen-II capable of hitting India

Pakistan on Thursday successfully test-fired surface-to-surface ballistic missile Shaheen-II, capable of hitting targets as far as 1,500 kilometers away, bringing major Indian cities under its range. The Pakistan Army said in a statement that the launch was aimed at ensuring operational readiness of the Army Strategic Forces Command.

"Shaheen-II Missile is capable of carrying both conventional and nuclear warheads upto a range of 1,500 km. Shaheen-II is a highly capable missile which fully meets Pakistan's strategic needs towards maintenance of desired deterrence stability in the region," the Army said.

It said that the launch, having its impact point in the Arabian Sea, was witnessed by Director General Strategic Plans Division, Commander Army Strategic Forces Command, senior officers from the Army Strategic Forces Command, scientists and engineers of the strategic organisations.

Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee and Services Chiefs congratulated the scientists and engineers on conduct of successful launch. President Arif Alvi and Prime Minister Imran Khan have also congratulated scientists on their achievement, the statement said.

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

PSLV-C46 successfully launches

RISAT-2B

India's Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle (PSLV-C46) successfully launched the RISAT-2B satellite from Satish Dhawan Space Centre (SDSC) SHAR, Sriharikota in Andhra Pradesh. This was the 72nd launch vehicle mission from SDSC SHAR, Sriharikota and 36th launch from the First Launch pad.

RISAT-2B is a radar imaging earth observation satellite weighing about 615 kg. The satellite is intended to provide services in the field of Agriculture, Forestry and Disaster Management.

PSLV-C46 is the 14th flight of PSLV in 'core-alone' configuration lifted-off from the First Launch Pad and injected RISAT-2B into a orbit of 556 km km at an inclination of 37 degrees.

The Chinese spacecraft became the first mission to land on the lunar far side

The mission may help unlock secrets of Earth and Moon's evolution China's Chang'e-4 mission, the first to perform a soft landing on the far side of the Moon, has shed light on the chemical and mineralogical composition of the lunar mantle, an advance that could unravel the mystery of the evolution of Earth and its natural satellite.

The rover Yutu-2 then rolled off the lander to explore its surroundings. Using data obtained by the visible and near infrared spectrometer installed on Yutu-2, a research team led by Li Chunlai, with the National Astronomical Observatories of China under the Chinese Academy of Sciences, found that the lunar soil in the landing area of the Chang'e-4 probe contains low-calcium (ortho) pyroxene and olivine. pyroxene which came from the lunar mantle deep inside the Moon.

But since the lunar crust is very thick, and there has been no volcanic activity and plate movement on the

Moon for billions of years, it's hard to find materials from the lunar mantle on the surface. As a result of the tidal locking effect, the Moon's revolution cycle is the same as its rotation cycle, and the same side of the Moon always faces the Earth. The lunar far side, which is turned away from Earth, is more rugged than the familiar near side and has fewer "maria" - dark plains formed by ancient volcanic eruptions. The rover landed inside a 180 kilometer wide impact bowl called Von Karman crater. But that smaller crater lies within the 2,300 kilometer wide South Pole Aitken (SPA) Basin, which covers nearly a quarter of the Moon's circumference.

Chandrayaan-2 will be the first spacecraft to land on the moon's

South Polar Region

Chandrayaan-2, India's second lunar mission, has three modules namely Orbiter, Lander (Vikram) & Rover (Pragyan).

The Orbiter and Lander modules will be interfaced mechanically and stacked together as an integrated module and accommodated inside the GSLV MK-III launch vehicle.

The Rover is housed inside the Lander. After launch into earth bound orbit by GSLV MK-III, the integrated module will reach Moon orbit using Orbiter propulsion module. Subsequently, Lander will separate from the Orbiter and soft land at the predetermined site close to lunar South Pole. Further, the Rover will roll out for carrying out scientific experiments on the lunar surface. Instruments are also mounted on Lander and Orbiter for carrying out scientific experiments.

The ISRO is cautious about Chandrayaan-2, its first mission to land on any celestial body, as it is wary of failure after Israel's Beresheet spacecraft crashed during moon landing on April 11.

Scientists complete genetic sequencing of chickpea

A team of scientists from International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT) and 21 research institutions across the world have successfully completed the sequencing of 429 chickpea lines from 45 countries.

The new development assumes importance as chickpea is an important crop with high nutrient value and there is a need to generate new varieties with better traits including heat, drought, pests and disease resistance, besides higher yield and productivity particularly in the context of the growing global population and threats posed by climate change.

Uncovering problem of mercury exposure in humans

An investigation conducted by a team from Indian Institute of Technology, Hyderabad, has highlighted the problem of mercury exposure in humans.

Many natural phenomena like volcanic eruptions, weathering of rocks and forest fires emit traces of Mercury into the environment. These spread through land, air and water, and enter the food chain via seafood and freshwater fish where they bio-accumulate in organic form. The mercury passes on to humans when they consume contaminated fish.

Human activities such as burning of coal and metal processing also add far higher amounts of mercury to the environment, escalating the contamination. Prolonged exposure to the heavy metal can cause neurological, cardiovascular and endocrinal disorders in humans. Small-scale gold artisans too contribute to the burden of mercury in the environment. They use mercury to amalgamate gold from jewellery works, exposing them and their families to the toxic element. Minamata Convention, the world's first legally binding treaty, to phase out this highly toxic substance. The treaty sets a phase-out date of 2020 for a list of products and gives governments about 15 years to end all mercury mining.

Free radicals may not be all bad, say scientists

Free radicals could have a big role in regulating the growth and size of organisms. Free radicals are hyper reactive molecules that are implicated in a range of diseases ranging from cancers to neurodegenerative disorders to cardiovascular complications. But, these biological molecules, which are perceived to be villains and are destroyed using antioxidants, may have a positive role to play too, according to a team of Indian scientists.

In a finding that may alter our fundamental understanding about free radicals, or reactive oxygen species (ROS) as they are called in scientific parlance, a team of researchers from the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research (IISER), Mohali, has found that these unstable and highly reactive molecules may be vital in regulating growth and the size of organisms. Insulin, a hormone, plays a key role in promoting growth at the cellular level. Another hormone, ecdysone, does the opposite applying the brakes on growth. The spree of growth that an animal undergoes during larval stages is brought about by insulin. But the continuous spell of growth needs to be controlled and this is done by ecdysone. In other words, there is an antagonistic relationship between these two hormones, which needs to be stabilised.

Arsenic in drinking water may change heart structure

Drinking water contaminated with arsenic may lead to thickening of the heart's main pumping chamber in young adults, increasing the risk for future heart problems, a study warns. Several studies have shown that Long-term intake of arsenic contaminated water leads to arsenic poisoning or arsenicosis, with cancer of skin, bladder, kidney or lung or diseases of skin (colour changes, and hard patches on palms and soles), or blood vessels of legs and feet. Fresh evidence indicates possible association between intake of contaminated water to onset of diabetes, hypertension and reproductive disorders

Arsenic is a naturally occurring element that is widely distributed in the Earth's crust. It is found in water, air, food, and soil. It can leach into groundwater through rocks and soil, and is used in pesticides, wood preservatives, and tobacco. It is also released into the environment by volcanoes and mining processes.

In India, the states of West Bengal, Jharkhand, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Assam, Manipur and Chhattisgarh are reported to be most affected by arsenic contamination of groundwater above the permissible level. WHO's provisional guideline value for arsenic in drinking water - 0.01 mg/l (10 µg/l). Permissible limit of arsenic in India in absence of an alternative source - 0.05 mg/l (50 µg/l).

Indian scientists discover how serotonin helps brain cells cope with stress

Serotonin is sometimes called the happy chemical. The scientific name for serotonin is 5-hydroxytryptamine, or 5-HT. It is a chemical that relays information from one part of the brain to another, and is known to play a key role in a number of functions ranging from sleep to social behaviour.

Now Indian scientists have discovered that serotonin boosts energy production in brain cells and helps them survive under stress. This new knowledge can potentially be used to develop anti-stress drugs in future.

Mitochondria in brain cells generate energy to carry out cellular functions and play a role in survival of brain cells under stress. In addition, serotonin also increases production of energy by mitochondria. Serotonin reduces toxic reactive oxygen species in neurons, boosts anti-oxidant enzymes and buffers neurons from the damaging effects of cellular stress.

Giant viruses found in water samples from Mumbai

Bandra megavirus or Kurlavirus are some new giant viruses found in water samples in Mumbai by Indian scientists. But there is no cause to worry, as all viruses are not disease causing. It is hypothesised that giant viruses hold the key to understanding the evolution of living organisms from simpler forms. The DNA of giant

viruses has genomic signatures of bacteria, eukaryotes (cells of higher organisms) and other viruses. They are like mosaics showing similarity in DNA sequence with a number of life forms.

The order in which giant viruses acquired genetic sequences from their hosts is difficult to determine and currently not known. But by introducing new genes, these viruses play a role in both their own evolution and that of the other organisms, inhabiting the same ecosystem. However, there isn't enough evidence to suggest that they are directly linked to infections in humans

The database called 'SLTChemDB' has been developed for Chewing tobacco products

Smokeless tobacco products like gutka and khaini are known to be cancer-causing. Over 350 million people use smokeless tobacco globally and about 0.65 million die every year due to its use. Now Indian scientists have prepared a database of toxic substances found in different chewing tobacco products sold not only in India and South Asia but globally.

As of now, they have been able to identify a staggering 233 unique chemical compounds from 82 types of chewing tobacco products sold in nine countries including America and Sweden. Of the 233 chemical compounds, 69 are known carcinogens as classified by the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC). Among the chemical compounds, major categories present in smokeless tobacco products include polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), followed by radionucleotides, metals and metalloids as well as additives.

The database called SLTChemDB has been developed by researchers at the Noida-based National Institute of Cancer Prevention and Research (NICPR) of the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR). This is supposed to be the first such comprehensive database of smokeless tobacco products globally, according to scientists. One can search for any tobacco product and get information relating to its chemical composition,

pH, moisture, free nicotine and tobacco content, besides biological, toxicological and physico-chemical information of chemical compounds.

Aussie scientists find antidote for deadly box jellyfish sting

Australian researchers believe they have found an antidote to a sting from the world's most venomous creature, the much-feared box jellyfish, the venom is so deadly that one box jellyfish can kill 60 people. The team noticed the venom needs cholesterol to kill human cells.

ICMR calls for ban on e-cigarettes

The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) has recommended complete ban on e-cigarettes and other electronic nicotine delivery systems (ENDS), based on currently available scientific evidence. In a white paper released today, the council noted that e-cigarettes and other such devices contained not only nicotine solution, which was highly addictive, but also harmful ingredients such as flavoring agents and vaporizers.

“Use of ENDS or e-cigarettes has documented adverse effects on humans, which include DNA damage; carcinogenic, cellular, molecular and immunological toxicity; respiratory, cardiovascular and neurological disorders; and adverse impact on fetal development and pregnancy,” the paper noted.

The paper has rejected the argument that e-cigarettes could help smokers quit tobacco consumption. “While such benefits have not been firmly established, there is also evidence that there is risk of people continuing to use both them as well as tobacco products. In addition, these devices could encourage non-smokers to get addicted to tobacco,” it said.

Nanotechnology can make plant-based food preservatives more effective

Stored and packaged food products are prone to growth of bacterial and fungal growth especially in tropical countries like India. These, in turn, produce toxins making food stuff unfit for consumption. Some of these toxins produced by fungus can be detrimental to human health.

Presently, the food industry uses synthetic preservatives to prevent mold growth. Such preservatives, however, may have residual toxicity and there is a danger of the microbes developing resistance to them. The industry has been looking for plant-based preservatives. Since such preservatives have to be applied in higher doses to be effective, it leads to additional problems like changes in smell, colour and characteristics of food.

A team of researchers at Banaras Hindu University (BHU) has found a solution to this problem. It has developed a nano-formulation that promises to result in more effective plant-based food preservatives.

Based on available knowledge, researchers decided to use a formulation of three essential oils - Thymol, Methyl cinnamate, and Linalool (TML), which are plant-derived and possess antibacterial activity. The formulation was encapsulated in a nanomaterial-based on chitosan, which is a polysaccharide made by treating shells of shrimp and other crustaceans with an alkaline substance, like sodium hydroxide. The nano-based formulation could restrict the growth of two microbes at 0.4 microliter per ml and 0.3 microliter per ml respectively. This means the formulation could arrest the growth of microbes at lower concentration.

The nano-encapsulated formulation exhibited superior effect when compared to application of TML in free form. It is probably because of increased surface area, and protection from air, light, and moisture as well as internal factors such as variation in pH, chemical composition of food and water activity

The researchers also performed experiments to understand the mechanism of action of this newly constituted preservative. They found that the preservative decreases ergosterol content in fungal cells which is required for fluidity of its cell membrane. It also impaired anti-oxidant defence mechanism of the microbe. In accordance with earlier research, the study also found that this essential oil based nano-formulation could also restrict toxin production by preventing the microbe from utilizing carbon source for its growth.

Microplastic pollution load on seashore linked with coastal cities population size

A study of microplastics in three coastal cities in the country has found that population size has a direct impact on the abundance and nature of microplastics on their seashore. It has also been found that fibrous microplastic is more prevalent than granular microplastics on Indian shores. The microplastics content was directly proportional to the population load of the cities. This indicated lacunae in the disposal and management of plastics.

Soil samples were collected from the seashore and microplastics were separated using density separation method. Several analytical techniques like fluorescence microscopy, fourier-transform infrared spectroscopy, scanning electron microscopy and energy-dispersive X-ray spectroscopy were used to identify and characterize microplastics.

Plastic is a versatile, multi-utility substance used throughout the world. It is susceptible to disintegration into smaller particles and particles smaller than 5 millimetres are termed microplastics. Microplastics are omnipresent: they are in the water, soil and even air. However, there is very little information on the source of different type of microplastics. For instance, one study has reported that certain cosmetics containing micro-beads is a major source of granular plastic, while another study has found that a single shirt made of polyester releases approximately 1900 microplastic fibres during every wash. At present, there is no internationally accepted method for estimation of microplastic content in the soil.

Environmental toxins may impair fertility of future generations

Exposure to environmental pollutants can cause alterations in brain development that affect sexual development and fertility for several generations, Researchers from the University of Liege in Belgium monitored the sexual development of three generations of rats. Pregnant rats were exposed to a mixture of common endocrine-disrupting chemicals (EDCs), at

doses equivalent to those commonly experienced by people.

Their offspring showed impairments in sexual development and maternal behaviour that were passed on through several generations. The female rats born in the first and second generation showed impairments in their care for their own pups. However, the female rats in the second and third generation exhibited a delayed onset of puberty and altered reproductive cycle and ovarian follicle development, indicating that their fertility was affected, even though they were never themselves exposed to the EDCs.

These changes were associated with altered gene expression in their brains that are known to affect how reproductive hormones are regulated. Endocrine-disrupting chemicals can interfere with the normal function of our hormones and have previously been associated with infertility and altered sexual development in animals and people.

Delhi adopts new standards for 4 base measuring units

India adopted a global resolution to redefine four of the seven base units kilogramme, kelvin, mole and ampere a move expected to have far-reaching effects, including changes in textbooks. A resolution to redefine four of the seven base units was passed by representatives of 60 countries at the General Conference on Weights and Measures (CGPM) of the International Bureau of Weights and Measures (BIPM), Paris on November 16 last year.

Over 100 countries have adopted the metric system of measurements, also known as the International System of Units (SI), which has been in practice since 1889. The other base units are second, metre and candela.

Cows Confined to shelters for long end up suffering chronic stress levels

Cows in these shelters face health and management issues such as old age, low quality feeding practices, less area/cow, improper flooring and cleanliness, says the study published in the journal Animals.

Hair cortisol & stress levels Veterinary research is increasingly using hair cortisol levels as a marker for stress levels in animals. Cortisol, a lipid-based hormone, is known to be released under physiological stress conditions. Because of the hair sebum's affinity for lipids, the circulating cortisol gets accumulated in the hair shaft over time.

New medicinal plants found in Manipur

Scientists attempting to document indigenous medicinal knowledge of Zeliangrong ethnic group in Manipur have now stumbled upon few plants whose medicinal or pharmacology properties are not known previously. Zeliangrong ethnic group is one of the 32 tribes in Manipur, living in the Tamenglong district. It comprises of three groups - Zeme, Liangmai and Rongmei - collectively known as Zeliangrong. The team documented 145 medicinal plants that the healers use for treating 59 ailments. They found that ethnic group used more than 40 species for treating more than one ailment. Scientists identified plants like *Gynura cusimbua*, *Hedyotis scandens*, *Mussaenda glabra* and *Schima wallichii* whose medicinal usage are reported for the first time and its pharmacological properties are not explored so far.

3D-printed artificial corneas mimic human eyes

Scientists have 3D printed artificial corneas that mimic the human eye using the bioink made of stem cells an advance that may help reduce the need for eye donations. When a person has a severely damaged cornea, a corneal transplant is required. However, patients often have to wait for years to receive eye donations. Many scientists have put their efforts in developing an artificial cornea. The existing artificial cornea uses recombinant collagen or is made of chemical substances such as synthetic polymer. Therefore, it does not incorporate well with the eye or is not transparent after the cornea implant. Researchers at the Pohang University of Science and Technology and Kyungpook National University in South Korea 3D printed an artificial cornea using the bioink which is made of decellularised corneal stroma and stem cells.

The cornea is made of corneal tissue-derived bioink, according to the research published on Biofabrication. It is biocompatible, and 3D cell printing technology recapitulates the corneal microenvironment, therefore, its transparency is similar to the human cornea.

The cornea is a thin outermost layer that covers the pupil and it protects the eye from the external environment. It is the first layer that admits light and therefore it needs to be transparent, move as the pupil moves, and have flexibility.

However, it has been limited to develop an artificial cornea using synthetic biocompatible materials because of different cornea-related properties.

In addition, although many researchers have tried to repeat the corneal microenvironment to be transparent, the materials used in existing studies have limited microstructures to penetrate the light.

To solve this problem, the research team used shear stress generated in the 3D printing to manufacture the corneal lattice pattern and demonstrated that the cornea by using a corneal stroma-derived decellularised extracellular matrix bioink was biocompatible.

In the 3D printing process, when ink in the printer comes out through a nozzle and passes through the nozzle, frictional force which then produces shear stress occurs.

A fungus that can degrade endosulfan identified

The excessive use of chemicals used as pesticides and insecticides poses danger to the environment as well as human health. A group of scientists at Delhi University has now identified a fungus that can help degrade residue of one such insecticide. endosulfan was a commonly used insecticide until its ill effects came to light in Kasaragod district of Kerala. The insecticide was used to get rid of insects in cashew plantations there and exposure to it is reported to have led to several health impacts in humans. Although there is a general ban on its use, authorities allow its use for some cases such as to take care of bollworm infestation

in cotton fields, in the absence of any alternative. In such a scenario, it is important to develop strategies to degrade excess endosulfan in soil and environment so that it does not reach water bodies and ultimately humans.

Researchers first searched the protein database online for an enzyme that can bind and thereafter degrade endosulfan and its other toxic form of endosulfan sulphate, which is formed when microbes act on it. Based on the results from this survey, scientists speculated that two enzymes phenol Hydroxylase from fungus *Trichosporon cutaneum* and bacterial CotA laccase from *Bacillus subtilis* (3ZDW) may be effective in neutralizing the toxic chemical.

CMFRI develops nutraceutical product Cadalmin™ from seaweeds

The extract contains 100 per cent natural marine bioactive ingredients from selected seaweeds by a patented technology

In a major development in utilising the medicinal prospects of marine organisms, the Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute (CMFRI) has come up with a nutraceutical product from sea to combat hypertension.

The product - Cadalmin™ Antihypertensive extract (Cadalmin™ Ahe) - was developed from seaweeds, which are commonly available in the Indian coastal waters and are known for their extraordinary medicinal properties.

ICRISAT hosts multi-nation meet to tackle Fall Army Worm

'Fall armyworms' are native to the Americas but they have been moving eastwards since 2016, sweeping across Africa, where they caused \$1-3 billion in damage, before arriving in Asia. In India, its infection was first reported in Karnataka last year. FAW is a lepidopteran pest that feeds in large numbers on the leaves and stems of more than 80 plant species, causing extensive damage to crops such as maize, rice, sorghum and sugarcane. It also attacks vegetable crops and cotton.

MANAV : Human Atlas Initiative

It is a project funded by DBT, which aims at creating a database network of all tissues in the human body from the available scientific literature. The student community, who will be the backbone on assimilating the information, will be trained and imparted with skills to perform annotation and curation of information that will ultimately form the online network. DBT has invested Rs 13 crore shared between two institutions in Pune – National Centre for Cell Science (NCCS) and Indian Institute of Science, Education and Research (IISER), Pune. Besides, Persistent Systems Limited has co-funded the project and is developing the platform, and has contributed Rs 7 crore. It is a project that involves scientific skill development for annotation, science outreach along with handling big data. The programme will involve gaining better biological insights through physiological and molecular mapping, develop disease models through predictive computing and have a wholistic analysis and finally drug discovery.

Square Kilometre Array supercomputer design completed

The Square Kilometre Array (SKA) is a radio telescope project proposed to be built in Australia and South Africa. If built, it would have a total collecting area of approximately one square kilometer

India has been actively involved in the SKA planning process from the very beginning. The National Centre for Radio Astrophysics (NCRA) in Pune and the Raman Research Institute (RRI) in Bangalore were, for instance, among the eight institutions from six countries that signed an agreement in 1997 to work on a technology study for a very large radio telescope.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

US environment agency says glyphosate is not a carcinogen

The US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) said that glyphosate, a chemical in many popular weed killers, is not a carcinogen, contradicting decisions by US juries that found it caused cancer in people.

In 2015, the World Health Organization's cancer arm classified glyphosate as "probably carcinogenic to humans." But the EPA in 2017 said a decades-long assessment of glyphosate risks found the chemical was not likely carcinogenic to humans.

The EPA's announcement reaffirms its earlier findings about the safety of glyphosate, the key ingredient in Bayer's Roundup. The company faces thousands of lawsuits from Roundup users, who allege it caused their cancer.

Suspected Bt brinjal crop being evaluated: Haryana govt official

The Haryana government has picked up samples of suspected Bt brinjal crop from a farm belonging to a farmer in Fatehabad district in the State and has sent the same for testing at the National Bureau of Plant Genetic Resources (NBPGR) in New Delhi to



establish the transgenic trait, a top State Government official said. On April 25, activists belonging to the Coalition for a GM-Free India told a press conference here that a Fatehabad farmer has been allegedly

growing Bt brinjal crop illegally in his field and preliminary tests carried out by them on the sample collected from the farm tested positive for Cry1Ac protein, produced by a gene found in a soil bacterium and used by biotechnologists to confer protection against pests that attack plants, including brinjal.

Bt brinjal is not approved for commercial cultivation in India, unlike neighbouring Bangladesh as further scientific studies are still required to assess its long-term impact on human health as well as on the environment. The anti-GM activists are worried that the introduction of the transgenic variety may genetically contaminate domesticated as well as wild varieties of brinjal for which India is a centre of diversity.

"The regulatory body Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee behaves as a promotional body than a regulator and therein lies a major problem. This is not the first time that this is happening. This is the fourth such instance of illegal GM crop entry into India. Bt cotton was approved in India after large-scale illegal cultivation was discovered in Gujarat. The regulators turned a blind eye to illegal herbicide-tolerant cotton cultivation thereafter, while it spread to lakhs of hectares. In late 2017, when illegal GM soya cultivation was discovered in Gujarat and a complaint was lodged with the GEAC, the response was quite slow and dangerously lackadaisical," the activists said.

Pepsico India withdraws all cases against Gujarat potato farmers

The company put in applications for the withdrawal of four suits it had filed against the farmers in early April 2019. Pepsico India had filed the case on grounds that the farmers had "illegally" grown its registered potato variety used to make Lay's chips.

According to the farmer groups, the law allows them to grow and sell any variety of crop or even seed as long as they don't sell branded seed of registered varieties, and warned that the case could set a precedent for other crops.

After pressure from farmers' groups, PepsiCo has decided to withdraw cases against about 10 farmers in Gujarat and Rajasthan who were allegedly cultivating its FC-5 variety — registered by it under the Protection of Plant Varieties and Farmers' Rights Act 2001 (PPVFRA) — for their own use.

“This development today in no way means that the public campaign is over. While the defendant farmers at least have the profit-hungry MNC off their back in court, the battle is only half won on the field. The Government of India had maintained an ominous silence on the legal situation in the country on farmers' seed freedoms, taking cover of the matter being sub judice. Now it must make it amply clear that such litigation is not acceptable”, activists from the non-profit Kisan Swaraj said in a statement.

A million species under extinction.

Blame humans

The first-ever **Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services** by Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) rings alarm bells on the state of the planet's biodiversity.

According to the global assessment, one million animal and plant species are under extinction. More to it, thousands of these would extinct within decades. “More than ever before in human history” is how the assessment report has termed the extinction rate. Since the beginning of the last century (1900), availability of native species in most of the land-based habitats has declined by 20 per cent. Similarly, 40 per cent of the amphibian species are threatened with extinction. If one tracks back extinction of species to the 16th century, 680 vertebrate species have been pushed into extinction since then, while 9 per cent of all domesticated breeds of mammals used for food and agriculture went extinct by 2016. Add to it, 1,000 more such breeds are under threat of extinction. The assessment report says, “Almost 33 per cent of reef-forming corals and more than a third of all marine mammals are threatened.” “This loss is a direct result of human activity and constitutes a direct threat to human well-being in all regions of the world,” he says.

On the human-induced loss in ecosystems, the assessment is precise. Three-quarters of the land-based environment and about two-thirds of the marine environment have been significantly altered by human actions, says the assessment. Nearly 75 per cent of all freshwater resources are now used for crop and livestock rearing activities.

The impacts are equally scary. For example, productivity in 23 per cent of global land has reduced due to land degradation. “Up to \$577 billion in annual global crops are at risk from pollinator loss and 100-300 million people are at increased risk of floods and hurricanes because of loss of coastal habitats and protection,” says the assessment.

Gujarat facing massive water crisis

The scarcity is particularly acute in the Saurashtra region, Kutch, North Gujarat and parts of tribal pockets in central and South Gujarat. The available water in all the dams of these regions is negligible. However, Sardar Sarovar dam and the Narmada canal network has enough water to sustain population till July end.

The Sardar Sarovar dam is built on the Narmada River near Navagam in Gujarat. It is one of the largest water resources project of India covering four major states – Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Rajasthan. It is a part of the Narmada Valley Project, a large hydraulic engineering project involving the construction of a series of large irrigation and hydroelectric multi-purpose dams on the Narmada River

Deer spotted in cyclone-ravaged park

The whole of Odisha's seaside Balukhanda Wildlife Sanctuary near Puri has been severely damaged by extremely severe cyclonic storm Fani, which made landfall in Odisha on May 3, 2019. Around 60 lakh trees, mostly of casuarina and cashew, were uprooted by the wind. The crowns of many tamarind, karanja, polanga, neem and other trees were also severely damaged. The sanctuary is home to a wide range of fauna, including 4,000 spotted deer or *chital*, birds and other species such as jackals, hyenas, jungle cats and monitor lizards. It has an area of 87 square kilometres and is located along the Bay of Bengal between Puri and Konark

More than half of the spotted deer have already returned to the forest. To locate other ungulates (hooved animals), we have decided to use drone cameras. The belief that animals possess a sixth sense and know in advance if a storm is going to hit has been proved by the behaviour of spotted deer in Balikhanda.

A grizzled giant squirrel spotted at Pakkamalai Reserve Forests near Gingee in the Eastern Ghats

The species is usually known to nest only in Western Ghats, For the first time, researchers have sighted nests of the grizzled giant squirrel, an endangered species listed under Schedule I of the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 at Pakkamalai Reserve Forests near Gingee in the Eastern Ghats.

The grizzled giant squirrel is usually known to nest in the Western Ghats in Southern India ranging from Chinnar Wildlife sanctuary in Kerala to Anamalai Tiger Reserve and Palani hills in Tamil Nadu. Owing to habitat loss and poaching, the species has been categorised as near threatened by the Red List and listed under Schedule II of CITES.

NGT seeks report on 'illegal' road in Rajaji Tiger Reserve

The National Green Tribunal constituted a committee, drawing representatives from various departments including Wildlife and PWD, to provide it a factual report on alleged illegal construction of Laldang-Chillarkhal road for use by commercial vehicles in the ecologically sensitive Rajaji Tiger Reserve in Uttarakhand.

On 15th April 2015, Center Government notified Rajaji as 48th Tiger Reserve of India, and 2nd Tiger Reserve (1st is Jim Corbett) of Uttarakhand State. Sanctuary was named after C. Rajagopalachari lovingly known as Rajaji, the first Governor General of independent India. Rajaji Tiger Reserve is predominantly formed from dense green jungles, and this environment forms a habitat for a number of animals. wild animal species found in the Park include: - Asian Elephant, Bengal Tiger, Leopard, Jungle Cat, Striped Hyena, Goral, Indian Hare, sloth Bear, Himalayan Black Bear, King

Cobra, Jackal, Barking Deer, Sambhar, Wild Boar, Rhesus Macaque, Indian Langur, Indian Porcupine, Monitor lizard, Python.

India needs national and state missions to modernise the brick sector

Demand-side regulations like mandating a certain percentage of building materials from fly ash in the building by-laws of cities could go a long way in increasing the utilization of fly ash.

Maximising utilisation of fly ash

For the past 20 years, the environment ministry has promoted utilisation of fly ash bricks by mandating manufacture of fly ash bricks within a certain distance of thermal power plants (TPPs). In the draft notification, the distance has been fixed as 300 km. The implicit assumption here is that within 300 km of a TPP there is a perfect match between the availability of fly ash and demand for bricks. This is obviously incorrect. The availability of fly ash in and around TPP clusters like Korba in Chhattisgarh and Singrauli in Madhya Pradesh far outweighs the demand for bricks. In contrast, there is not enough fly ash to meet the demand of the brick industry in Delhi-NCR.

This variation in demand and supply in different parts of the country is the reason why a blanket approach to fly ash utilisation has failed so far. To address this, we should adopt a regional approach to fly ash regulation. That is, regulation should be tailored depending on the availability of fly ash and the demand for the material in a region. In general, regions with high fly ash availability should be mandated to produce more of their building materials from fly ash and vice versa.

But, mandating the manufacture of fly ash bricks is not sufficient. There should also be demand for it. Demand can be created by putting in place demand-side regulations and by promoting use of fly ash bricks and other products. Demand-side regulations like mandating a certain percentage of building materials from fly ash in the building by-laws of cities could go a long way in increasing the utilisation of fly ash. But the most important thing required for generating demand is quality control and certification of fly ash products.

There is a serious concern with the quality of fly ash bricks. Most of the people who commented on my previous column complained about the poor quality of fly ash bricks. Many suggested that instead of only bricks, other fly ash products like AAC blocks, fly ash concrete blocks, FaL-G blocks, fly ash foam concrete, etc, should be promoted. I agree with these suggestions. If we need to promote utilisation of fly ash, we should promote a wide variety of fly ash products and not just bricks. For this, we need promotion and certification programmes to enhance the acceptability of fly ash products in the market.

Lastly, there has to be credible deterrence for non-compliance for TPPs. TPPs have flouted the fly ash notification for two decades because they know that the penalty is small. Any new law must increase the penalty for non-compliance and set up a transparent system for supply of fly ash to different users. A regional-level online portal for compliance assurance can be established to improve the enforcement of the law.

Reducing clay consumption and pollution

The environmental footprint of fired clay bricks can be significantly reduced by finding an alternate source of clay, changing the brick kiln technology and by producing different kinds of fired clay bricks. Clay can be sourced sustainably from desilting of rivers, lakes, ponds, ports, reservoirs, etc. In West Bengal, clay is sourced in many districts from desilting of floodplains. It is estimated that in Howrah, Hooghly and West Medinipur, close to 2 billion bricks are produced annually from desilting of floodplains after high tide. Similarly, silt from desilting of tanks in and around Bengaluru is now becoming an important source of clay for brick manufacturers. Clay can also be commercially mined from large clay deposits, as is being done in major brick producing countries like Vietnam and China.

The fact is that we can get enough clay from sources other than agricultural land to meet the demand for clay bricks. What we need for this is a proper assessment of the availability of clay in different parts of the country followed by regulations on desilting and clay-mining.

We can also reduce clay-mining by making different varieties of fired clay bricks. In Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, clay is mixed with fly ash or waste such as lime slurry to make bricks. Similarly, instead of making solid bricks, hollow or perforated bricks can be made which reduces clay requirements by 20–30%. Hollow and perforated bricks and blocks have the added advantage of better insulation properties and lower energy demand for heating and cooling in buildings.

We can reduce pollution from brick kilns by using better technology. Currently, most Indian kilns use outdated tech such as clamps and fixed chimney bull's trench kiln (FCBTK). These are highly inefficient and polluting and should be replaced with zigzag technology or the more advanced vertical shaft brick kiln or tunnel kiln to significantly reduce coal consumption and air emissions.

It is clear that maximising fly ash utilisation and reducing the environmental impacts of fired clay bricks require much more than just a simple law that bans fired clay bricks. It requires a holistic view of the brick sector, from sourcing of raw materials and production of bricks and building materials to sales and promotion of alternative building materials. It requires a vision on how we will meet the material requirements of the building sector in a climate-constrained world. For this, we need National and State Brick Missions (and many laws) that can transform the brick sector by facilitating large-scale adoption of cleaner technologies and by bringing innovation in the building material sector.

Namami Gange is still far from its touted goals RBI

Even though other major Indian rivers suffer far worse pollution—the Yamuna, the Godavari and the Kaveri, for instance—Ganga has historically received disproportionate attention from policymakers because the lives of nearly 400 million on its banks are tied to its fate and it is the holiest of holies as far as rivers in Hinduism are concerned.

Ganga flows just as maili (dirty) as before. Three rounds of testing in four states—Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal—showed no material improvement in the state of the river between 2014

and 2018. Its waters were safe for bathing at just 13 points out of 61 live monitoring stations, with faecal bacteria above the acceptable level—this, after the government claimed that 4,465 villages along the Ganga were now open-defecation free. In 2018, as per Central Pollution Control Board data, 211 of 961 industrial units along the river were violating effluent disposal norms. Of the 304 projects that were to be undertaken under the National Mission for Clean Ganga (NMCG), as of March 2019, only 85 have been completed.

Ganga clean-up minister Nitin Gadkari has talked of 254 projects sanctioned at a cost of ‘24,000 crore that will clean up the river by March 2020 (the original deadline was March 2019). The expenditure will be on 133 sewerage management projects, 11 bioremediation projects, a modular Sewerage Treatment Plant, a rural sanitation project, 64 ghat and crematoria, six bio-diversity and 16 afforestation projects.

UK Parliament declares climate change emergency

The U.K. Parliament became the first recently to declare a climate emergency. There is no single definition of what that means but many local areas say they want to be carbon-neutral by 2030. It’s a much more ambitious target than the UK government’s, which is to reduce carbon emissions by 80% (compared to 1990 levels) by 2050. The state of emergency was one of the key demands of the environmental group Extinction Rebellion, which led extensive climate protests in London in April. Several U.K. cities, including London and Manchester, and Scotland and Wales have already declared climate emergencies.

A 2018 report from the U.N.’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change stated that greenhouse gas emissions would have to be lowered to net zero by 2050 to limit global warming to 1.5°C. The report urged governments to act quickly to avert disaster.

Schools need a roadmap for rainwater harvesting

Last year, NITI Aayog released a report on the composite Water Management Index, warning that

India was facing its “worst” water crisis and that demand for potable water would outstrip supply by 2030 if steps were not taken. Twenty-one cities, including Delhi, will run out of groundwater by 2020, affecting 100 million people

The National Green Tribunal (NGT) has been directing all educational institutions in the Capital to install rainwater harvesting (RWH) systems in their premises at their own cost since 2017. The need of the hour is to provide an enabling environment to these institutions. The following points can help in achieving this goal:

Awareness about water sustainability through RWH: Firstly, schools/institutions need to be made aware of the enormous benefits of implementing RWH in their premises and how suitable it is to apply this concept in educational institutes than in any other land use type.

Creation of zones according to site conditions of the school: Let us take the example of Delhi here. All schools located in the National Capital Territory (NCT) of Delhi have varied site conditions in terms of groundwater depth (ranging from 2 metres below ground level to more than 60 metres below ground level); terrain (rocky near the Ridge to alluvial near the Yamuna flood plain) and the surrounding land-use pattern. These attributes can be categorised into different zones namely North, South, West, East and Central. The current guidelines provided by the Delhi Jal Board (DJB) only cover different options of groundwater recharge. However, according to the site conditions, the type of RWH system to be implemented would vary.

Support from government engineers: For appropriate RWH implementation, there is a need to provide technical and managerial support to schools. It is the duty of government engineers to provide the handholding to these schools.

Capacity building programmes at different levels: Capacity building is key to disseminating knowledge related to planning, designing, operations and maintenance of RWH system in schools. Short-term training programmes covering different subject areas on RWH systems should be conducted for target audiences.

Great Indian bustard is on the verge of extinction

Only 50 Great Indian Bustards left in the wild, no action on plan to save them. Almost two years after the Rajasthan government proposed setting up of captive breeding centres for the Great Indian Bustards to boost their wild population, the wildlife activists here have called for enforcement of recovery plan for the country's most critically endangered bird. The GIB's last remnant wild population of about 50 in Jaisalmer district accounts for 95% of its total world population.

GIB, Listed in Schedule I of the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, in the CMS Convention and in Appendix I of CITES, as Critically Endangered on the IUCN Red List and the National Wildlife Action Plan (2002-2016). It has also been identified as one of the species for the recovery programme under the Integrated Development of Wildlife Habitats of the Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of India.

Zig-Zag technology

Zig-Zag technology in construction and operations of kilns can minimise the effects of burning coal on environment and reduce the fuel consumption up to 40 per cent. Zigzag technology is not only environment-friendly but also cost-effective.

Problem for the environment, agriculture and humans

Crop residue burning in Punjab, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh has been known, but nowadays it's spreading more frequently in other parts of country. Wheat stubble burning is a relatively new issue which started with mechanised harvesting using combine harvesters. Burning crop residue is a crime under Section 188 of the IPC and under the Air and Pollution Control Act of 1981.

Environmental and health risk: A study estimates that crop residue burning released 149.24 million tonnes of carbon dioxide (CO₂), over 9 million tonnes of carbon monoxide (CO), 0.25 million tonnes of oxides of sulphur (SOX), 1.28 million tonnes of particulate matter and 0.07 million tonnes of black carbon. These directly contribute to environmental pollution, and are

also responsible for the haze in Delhi and melting of Himalayan glaciers. The heat from burning paddy straw penetrates 1 centimetre into the soil, elevating the temperature to 33.8 to 42.2 degree Celsius. This kills the bacterial and fungal populations critical for a fertile soil.

According to a report, one tonne stubble burning leads to a loss of 5.5 kilogram nitrogen, 2.3 kg phosphorus, 25 kg potassium and more than 1 kg of sulfur — all soil nutrients, besides organic carbon. It found that 76.8 per cent people reported irritation in eyes, 44.8 per cent reported irritation in nose, and 45.5 per cent reported irritation in throat. Cough or increase in cough was reported by 41.6 per cent people and 18.0 per cent reported wheezing.

Solutions to the burning problem

In 2014, the Union government released the National Policy for Management of Crop Residue. Since then, crop residue management has helped make the soil more fertile, thereby resulting in savings of Rs 2,000/ hectare from the farmer's manure cost. Farmers can also manage crop residues effectively by employing agricultural machines like:

- Happy Seeder (used for sowing of crop in standing stubble)
- Rotavator (used for land preparation and incorporation of crop stubble in the soil)
- Zero till seed drill (used for land preparations directly sowing of seeds in the previous crop stubble)
- Baler (used for collection of straw and making bales of the paddy stubble)
- Paddy Straw Chopper (cutting of paddy stubble for easily mixing with the soil)
- Reaper Binder (used for harvesting paddy stubble and making into bundles)

On other hand, these machines are too costly and the state governments should come forward and provide better subsidy so that farmer can afford these machines. A provision of Rs 1,151.80 crore for two years has been made under this scheme for states like Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and the National Capital Region.

AWARDS

Ex ISRO Chairman A S Kiran Kumar conferred France's Highest Civilian Honour

Former ISRO chairman A S Kiran Kumar was conferred with France's highest civilian award - Chevalier de l'Ordre national de la Legion d'Honneur - for his contribution to India-France space cooperation.

Chevalier de l'Ordre national de la Legion d'Honneur, It was established in 1802 by Napoleon Bonaparte and retained by all later French governments. It is the highest civilian award conferred by France for outstanding service to nation, irrespective of recipient's nationality.

Ex-President Pratibha Patil awarded Mexico's Highest Civilian Honour

Former Indian President of India Pratibha Patil has been conferred the "Orden Mexicana del Aguila Azteca" (Order of the Aztec Eagle) — the highest civilian award of Mexico given to foreigners.

Mexico's highest distinction for foreigners is in recognition of their outstanding services to the Mexican nation or humanity, significant contributions to strengthening the bilateral relations between Mexico and other countries, said an official spokesperson.

WHO award for Rajasthan Health Dept for Tobacco Control

The World Health Organization has selected the Rajasthan government's Medical & Health Department for its award this year in recognition of its achievements in the field of tobacco control.

WHO has selected five organisations from the South-East Asian region for the prestigious award. Three other organisations in the South-East Asian region have been selected from Thailand and Indonesia, while the Vallabhbhai Patel Chest Institute, New Delhi, is also among the recipients of the award.