

The Hindu

Front Page

Fiscal deficit reined in, CAD a concern: Finance Ministry (Page no. 1)

(GS Paper 3, Economy)

India's macro risks have receded in recent weeks and concerns about the fiscal deficit target being breached may be misplaced, the Finance Ministry, while conceding that the current account deficit could, however, deteriorate this year primarily due to rising trade deficits, especially if global food and energy prices don't cool off.

Identifying elevated inflation and a widening trade deficit as 'twin challenges' for the economy, the Ministry, however, emphasised that economic activity in the country remained resilient almost five months into the Russian-Ukraine conflict.

Updated trade data released separately on Thursday showed the trade deficit had widened in June to an all-time high of \$26.2 billion as imports surged past \$66 billion.

Retail inflation moderated slightly to 7.01% in June, and the ministry attributed it to measures taken by the government and the central bank as well as fears of a global recession that dragged oil prices lower.

The government would still need to 'continue to walk the tightrope of balancing inflation and growth concerns' as long as price gains remain above the 6% mark, the Ministry said in its monthly economic review for June.

Softening of global commodity prices may put a leash on inflation, but their elevated levels also need to decline quickly to reduce India's current account deficit (CAD)," the ministry noted, stressing that the boom in gold imports was also a concern though the government had raised import duties in a bid to curb them.

A sudden and sharp surge in gold imports amid wedding season (as many weddings were postponed to 2022 from 2021 due to pandemic-induced restrictions) is also exerting pressure on the CAD.

If recession concerns do not lead to a sustained and meaningful reduction in the prices of food and energy commodities, then India's CAD will deteriorate in 2022-23 on account of costlier imports and tepid exports on the merchandise account.

Kerala reports India's first monkeypox case (Page no. 1)

(GS Paper 2, Health)

The first known lab-confirmed case of monkeypox in India — the official declaration should come from the Union Health Ministry — has been reported in a 35-year-old male in Kerala, who reached the State capital three days ago from the UAE.

State Health Minister Veena George, who earlier on Thursday informed media about a possible suspected case of monkeypox, said here at 7 p.m. that the National Institute of Virology, Pune had confirmed the disease.

The person, a Kollam native, has been isolated for treatment at the Thiruvananthapuram Government Medical College Hospital (MCH). His condition was stable, though he seemed very anxious.

He had first consulted a private hospital at Kollam after he developed fever and other symptoms. He himself volunteered the information that a close contact of his in the UAE had been confirmed as having contracted monkeypox. He was referred to the MCH here.

His close contacts — father and mother — have also been isolated at the same hospital. Ms. George said a few other persons who might qualify as contacts — the driver who took the person from the airport to his home at Kollam, the driver of the autorickshaw in which he travelled to the private hospital, the healthcare personnel who attended to him at the first hospital as well as 11 persons who had occupied the seats near him on his flight from the UAE — have all been informed about the new development. They will also have to go into isolation and monitoring for the next 21 days.

States

Centre's response on buffer zone issue positive: Minister (Page no. 7)

(GS Paper 3, Environment)

The government is likely to take a decision on whether to file a modification or review petition to circumvent the Supreme Court order to impose an ecologically sensitive buffer zone within a 1-km radius of national parks and wildlife reserves.

The decision was taken after Minister for Forest A. K. Saseendran met Union Minister for Environment, Forest and Climate Change Bhupender Yadav in New Delhi, seeking the centre's intervention to resolve the deadlock over the buffer zone issue.

The Minister responded positively to the concerns raised by the government against the apex court order on creating sensitive zones around wildlife sanctuaries and national parks. He informed us that the issue is not confined to Kerala alone, but a common issue affecting other States too.

Mr. Saseendran said that the Principal Secretary, Forest Department and Principal Chief Conservator of Forests and Wildlife will hold discussions with the Advocate General to decide on whether to file a review or modification petition before the apex court.

The Union government is learnt to have taken a position that the States concerned can approach the Supreme Court seeking relief in the buffer zone issue.

The government had requested the centre to exempt population centres from the mandated zone. It had also decided to review a Cabinet decision taken three years ago that imposed a 1-km eco-sensitive zone around protected areas.

Editorial

The great omission in the draft disability policy (Page no. 8)

(GS Paper 2, Polity and Governance)

The Department of Empowerment of Person with Disabilities (DoEPwD) recently released the draft of the national policy for persons with disabilities (“Policy”) — public comments have been invited till July 15, 2022 (at: panda.dk@nic.in).

The necessity for a new policy which replaces the 2006 policy was felt because of multiple factors such as India’s signing of the United Nations Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities; enactment of a new disability legislation (Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 2016) which increased the number of disabilities from seven conditions to 21 and being a party to the Incheon Strategy for Asian and Pacific Decade of Persons with Disabilities, 2013-2022 (“Incheon commitment”).

The last was prepared under the aegis of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), which identifies 10 goals for Asia-Pacific countries to ensure the inclusion and the empowerment of persons with disabilities and conformity with the Sustainable Development Goals 2030.

These commitments have changed the discourse around disability by shifting the focus from the individual to society, i.e., from a medical model of disability to a social or human rights model of disability.

The principle of the draft policy is to showcase the Government’s commitment to the inclusion and empowerment of persons with disabilities by providing a mechanism that ensures their full participation in society.

In furtherance of this commitment, the policy document highlights a detailed commitment to education, health, skill development and employment, sports and culture, social security, accessibility and other institutional mechanisms. However, a glaring omission is the absence of any commitment to the political uplift of persons with disabilities.

Bridging the gap (Page no. 8)

(GS Paper 2, Polity and Governance)

The struggle to achieve gender equality and bridge the gap between men and women is a long and difficult one. India has got another opportunity to do much better for half of its population with the Global Gender Gap Index for 2022, released by the World Economic Forum, placing it at 135 out of 146 countries.

But the new data — India’s ranking in 2021 was 140 out of 156 countries — hardly brings cheer as India has fared the worst in at least one of the parameters — ‘health and survival’ — in which it took the last spot.

The Global Gender Gap Index benchmarks the current state and evolution of gender parity across four dimensions: economic participation and opportunity; educational attainment; health and survival, and political empowerment.

India ranks poorly among its neighbours and is behind Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Bhutan. Only Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan perform worse than India in the region.

In 2022, coming on the back of a pandemic, war and economic crises, the global gender gap has been closed by 68.1%, which means at the current rate of progress it will take 132 years to reach full parity.

Among all the regions, it will take the longest for South Asia to reach the target — 197 years — “due to a broad stagnation in gender parity scores ... in the region”.

There have been enough numbers from the ground to indicate that India, with a female population of approximately 66 crore, has faltered on the road to gender parity.

In the pandemic years, as incomes shrank, women faced hurdles on every front, from food, health, and education for the girl child to jobs.

The latest NFHS data (2019-2021) show that 57% of women (15-49 age bracket) are anaemic, up from 53% in 2015-16; though 88.7% of married women participate in key household decisions, only 25.4% of women, aged 15-49 years, who worked in the last 12 months (2019-2021), were paid in cash.

Women having a bank account or savings account that they themselves use have increased to 78.6%, with schemes such as the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana helping, but women participation in the labour force has shrunk.

Explainer

The debate around the Forest Conservation Rules (Page no. 10) (GS Paper 3, Environment)

The Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) sparred earlier this week on the latest version of the Forest Conservation Rules. Congress spokesperson, Jairam Ramesh, alleged that the latest version of the rules, updated last month, allowed forest land to be diverted to industry without settling questions of the rights of forest dwellers and tribals who resided on those lands.

The Union Minister of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Bhupender Yadav and Tribal Affairs Minister, Arjun Munda, denied these claims.

The Forest Conservation Rules deal with the implementation of the Forest Conservation Act (FCA), 1980. They prescribe the procedure to be followed for forest land to be diverted for non-forestry uses such as road construction, highway development, railway lines, and mining.

The broad aims of the Forest Conservation Act are to protect forest and wildlife, put brakes on State governments' attempts to hive off forest land for commercial projects and striving to increase the area under forests.

For forest land beyond five hectares, approval for diverting land must be given by the Central government. This is via a specially constituted committee, called the Forest Advisory Committee (FAC).

This committee examines whether the user agency, or those who have requested forest land, have made a convincing case for the upheaval of that specific parcel of land, whether they have a plan in place to ensure that the ensuing damage — from felling of trees in that area, denuding the local landscape — will be minimal and the said piece of land doesn't cause damage to wildlife habitat.

Once the FAC is convinced and approves (or rejects a proposal), it is forwarded to the concerned State government where the land is located, who then has to ensure that provisions of the Forest Right Act, 2006, a separate Act that protects the rights of forest dwellers and tribals over their land, are complied with.

The FAC approval also means that the future users of the land must provide compensatory land for afforestation as well as pay the net present value (ranging between ₹10-15 lakh per hectare.)

The road to rolling out labour codes (Page no. 10) (GS Paper 2, Polity and Governance)

The Code on Wages (passed in Parliament in August, 2019), the Industrial Relations Code, the Code on Social Security, and the Code on Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions (all passed on September 22 and 23, 2020 in the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha) have not yet been implemented.

The Centre claims that the four codes are a major step in the process of labour reforms. The central trade unions (CTUs) have held three general strikes against the codes so far, alleging that the codes will result in taking away whatever little social and economic security is left in the employment sector.

The farmers' organisations had also supported the trade unions in their protests. The employers' associations, too, had mixed feeling towards the codes, but had generally welcomed them.

The government says the delay in implementation is due to the delay in framing rules by the States. As labour is a concurrent subject, both the States and the Centre will have to prepare rules for the codes. The Centre had also offered help to the States so that the codes can be implemented from July 1, 2022.

Union Minister for Labour, Bhupender Yadav, recently said that only a few States have not yet framed the rules. According to a recent report, 24 States have so far published draft rules to all four codes.

The States are publishing draft rules and inviting comments from stakeholders on those draft rules. The Centre had also published draft rules for certain sections of the four codes.

The trade unions have been asking the Centre to stop this piecemeal approach and release the complete rules of four codes.

Since the four labour codes are an amalgamation of 29 Central laws and about 100 State laws that are similar to various Central laws, drafting, publishing and holding consultations with stakeholders is taking considerable time. There are also complaints by the Opposition-ruled States that the codes are “poorly drafted.

Text and Context

How to grease the wheels of justice (Page no. 11)

(GS Paper 2, Judiciary)

Speaking at an event organised by the Karnataka Bar Council, Chief Justice of India N.V. Ramana quoted a former Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, Warren Burger, “The notion that ordinary people want black robed judges, well-dressed lawyers in fine courtrooms as settings to resolve their disputes is incorrect.

People with problems, like people with pains, want relief and they want it as quickly and inexpensively as possible.” He made a plea to ‘Indianise’ courts to make them responsive to the needs of the Indian citizens.

The Chief Justice of India has the historic opportunity to make this happen. At present, despite good intentions, the nation’s judiciary is hurtling towards a disaster and needs immediate attention.

A measure of the justice delivery system is the pendency of cases in courts across the country. We have seen a significant deterioration in this aspect as shown in the table.

More than 40% of cases are decided after three years in India, while in many other countries less than 1% of cases are decided after three years. If India does not act decisively and quickly, this percentage will keep increasing.

The rich, the powerful and the wrongdoers have a field day by getting their cases expedited or delayed as they wish. The increase in corruption and crime is a direct fallout of the sluggish justice delivery system.

This severely impacts the poor and marginalised. For them, the judicial process itself becomes a punishment. Data show that about 70% of prisoners in India are undertrials and are mostly poor citizens.

Two measures can be implemented within two years to tackle this issue. First, reduce the pendency of cases by filling sanctioned judicial positions.

Analysis shows that between 2006 and 2019, the average increase in pendency was less than 2% per year whereas the average vacancy in sanctioned judicial positions was about 21%. If the sanctioned positions had been filled, pendency of cases would have gone down each year.

The nation neither needs 70,000 judges, as claimed by former Chief Justice of India T.S. Thakur, nor does it need to double the present number of judges. It needs to add about 20% of judges.

This is in line with the sanctioned strength. This figure has been endorsed by Justice B.N. Srikrishna, Justice R.C. Chavan and 100 IIT alumni.

The responsibility of selecting judges is largely with the judiciary itself. The responsibility of appointments in the subordinate judiciary lies with the State governments and their respective High Courts.

News

India to give land for I2U2 backed food parks (Page no. 14)

(GS Paper 2, International Relation)

India will provide "appropriate land" for "food parks" across the country that will be built in collaboration with Israel, United States and the United Arab Emirates.

The plan for the "integrated food parks" was announced in a Joint Statement after the leaders of the I2U2 grouping - India, Israel, the UAE and the USA - announced that they would bring in private capital for specific projects in the fields of water, energy, transportation, health, space and food security.

U.S. and Israeli private sectors will be invited to lend their expertise and offer innovative solutions that contribute to the overall sustainability of the project.

These investments will help maximize crop yields and, in turn, help tackle food insecurity in South Asia and the Middle East," said the Joint Statement announcing that it is India that will "facilitate farmers' integration into the food parks.

In his comments at the event, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said, "Right from the first summit held today, I2U2 has established a positive agenda.

The food parks aimed at cutting down "food waste and spoilage" are a few of the collaborations that the four countries declared after leadership summit that was hosted by Israeli PM Yair Lapid and included UAE's President Sheikh Mohammed Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, US President Joe Biden and Prime Minister Narendra Modi.