

The Indian Express

Front Page

35-yr-old from Kerala is India's first monkeypox case; Centre sends team (Page no. 1)

(GS Paper 2, Health)

The Centre rushed a high-level multi-disciplinary team to Kerala to collaborate with state authorities in implementing public health measures after the first confirmed case of monkeypox in the country was detected in Kollam district. Kerala Health Minister Veena George said the infection was diagnosed in a 35-year-old man who had returned from the UAE this week. The infected person is believed to have come in contact with another confirmed case in the emirates, George said.

Since January this year, multiple cases of monkeypox have been identified in over 50 countries. The case in India was confirmed after samples were tested at the National Institute of Virology in Pune, said the Minister.

The confirmed case, a native of Kollam, has been isolated after he developed symptoms of the disease. He has been admitted to an isolated facility at the Government Medical College in Thiruvananthapuram.

Eleven persons, who have been in touch with the infected person on his return from the UAE on July 12, have been identified as contacts and are under observation.

Monkeypox is a viral zoonotic disease with symptoms similar to smallpox, although with less clinical severity. According to the WHO, it is usually a self-limited disease with symptoms lasting two-four weeks. In recent times, officials said, the case fatality ratio has been around three-six per cent.

The virus is transmitted through close contact with another infected person or animal, and spreads from lesions, body fluids, respiratory droplets and contaminated materials such as bedding.

For new projects, NHAI back to build-operate-transfer model (Page no. 1)

(GS Paper 3, Economy)

After funding highway projects through public money for a better part of the last decade, the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) is set to return to funding through private investments and plans to offer at least two highway upgradation projects to private players using the build-operate-transfer (BOT) model during the current quarter.

Under the BOT model, a private player is granted a concession to finance, build and operate a project for a specified period of time (20 or 30 year concession period), with the developer recouping the investments by way of user charges or tolls charged from customers using the facility, and thereby taking on a certain amount of financial risk.

We have funded road projects during the Covid period through public money and will continue to do so if required. We plan to see whether the private sector has an appetite for road projects or not and we plan to offer two projects during this quarter

Express Network

PM: I2U2 has set good model for cooperation (Page no. 7)

(GS Paper 2, International Relation)

It is clear that both the vision and the agenda of I2U2 are progressive and practical, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said while addressing the first virtual summit of the four-nation grouping.

Besides Modi, the virtual summit was attended by US President Joe Biden, Israel Prime Minister Yair Lapid and UAE President Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan.

Modi said the grouping will make important contributions in areas of energy security, food security and economic growth.

This is a meeting of strategic partners in the true sense. We are all good friends, and we all have common perspectives and common interests as well. Modi noted that the grouping has identified joint projects in many areas, and prepared a road map to move forward.

The I2U2 grouping was conceptualised during the meeting of foreign ministers of the four countries held on October 18 last year.

It intends to mobilise private sector capital and expertise to help modernise infrastructure, low carbon development pathways for industries, improve public health, and promote development of critical emerging and green technologies.

Under the I2U2 framework, we have agreed to increase joint investment in six key areas — water, energy, transport, space, health, and food security. It is clear that the vision and agenda of I2U2 is progressive and practical.

By mobilising the mutual strengths of our countries — capital, expertise and markets — we can accelerate our agenda, and contribute significantly to the global economy.

Our cooperative framework is also a good model for practical cooperation in the face of increasing global uncertainties. I am confident that with I2U2, we will make significant contributions to energy security, food security and economic growth on a global scale.

Beti Bachao Beti Padhao to be extended to all districts (Page no. 8)

(GS Paper 2, Polity and Governance)

Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, the Centre's flagship programme for women's empowerment, which focuses on education of girl child and improving sex ratio, will now be extended across the country, according to guidelines issued by the Women and Child Development (WCD) Ministry. The programme is operational in 405 districts at present.

The ministry published comprehensive guidelines for Mission Shakti — the guidelines are applicable from April.

The component will aim for zero-budget advertising and encouraging greater spend on activities that have on-ground impact...for promoting sports among girls, self-defence camps, construction of girls' toilets, making available sanitary napkin vending machines and sanitary pads, especially in educational institutions, awareness about PC-PNDT Act, etc.

In December, the committee on empowerment of women, chaired by BJP MP from Maharashtra, Dr Heena Vijaykumar Gavit, tabled in Lok Sabha its fifth report on "Empowerment of women through education with special reference to 'Beti Bachao Beti Padhao' scheme".

It stated that nearly 80 percent funds for the BBBP scheme has been used for advertising, and not on sectoral interventions such as women's health and education.

The committee had said that the scheme's performance in states has not been "up to the mark" and expressed "dismay" at under-utilisation of funds.

Explained Page

Fasal Bima: who's in, out & why (Page no. 9)

(GS Paper 3, Economy)

The Union Agriculture Ministry announced that Andhra Pradesh has decided to rejoin the crop insurance scheme Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana (PMFBY) from the ongoing kharif season.

Andhra Pradesh was one of six states that have stopped implementation of the scheme over the last four years. The other five, which remain out, are Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Jharkhand, and Telangana.

The state left the PMFBY from the rabi season 2019-20. Sources said the state had mentioned several reasons:

That the scheme should be voluntary; that states should be given the option of choosing the risks covered; that the scheme should be universal; that the cut-off date for enrolment should be flexible; and that Andhra Pradesh should be given the option of using its own database of E crop, an application used by the state government to collect information about crops.

All these issues have been resolved now," the sources said. On Tuesday, the Agriculture Ministry announced that Andhra Pradesh has decided to rejoin the PMFBY following talks between Agriculture Minister Narendra Singh Tomar and Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Y S Jagan Mohan Reddy.

The move comes days after Union Agriculture Secretary Manoj Ahuja met the CM. On July 7, a team headed by Ahuja gave a presentation to Reddy.

What are 'unparliamentary words' unfit for the House, how are they listed? (Page no. 9)

(GS Paper 2, Polity and Governance)

Ahead of the Monsoon session from July 18, a row erupted over a 50-page compilation of words deemed unfit for use in Parliament, released by the Lok Sabha secretariat.

With the Opposition terming the un-parliamentary words list a "gag order", Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla clarified that "no words had been banned".

The new list has words and phrases dis allowed not only in Parliament in India, but also in various Assemblies in the states, as well as the parliaments of some other countries.

While Article 105(2) of the Constitution lays down that "no Member of Parliament shall be liable to any proceedings in any court in respect of anything said or any vote given by him in Parliament or any committee thereof, MPs do not enjoy the freedom to say whatever they want inside the House.

Whatever an MP says is subject to the discipline of the Rules of Parliament, the "good sense" of Members, and the control of proceedings by the Speaker. These checks ensure that MPs cannot use "defamatory or indecent or undignified or unparliamentary words" inside the house.

Rule 380 ("Expunction") of the Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business in Lok Sabha says: "If the Speaker is of opinion the words have been used in debate which are indecent or unparliamentary the Speaker may, while exercising discretion order that such words.

Rule 381 says: "The portion of the proceedings of the House so expunged shall be marked by asterisks and an explanatory foot-note shall be inserted in the proceedings as follows: "Expunged as ordered by the Chair".

There are phrases and words, literally in thousands, in English and Indian languages, that are considered "unparliamentary.

The Lok Sabha Speaker and Rajya Sabha Chairperson have the job of keeping. For their reference, the Lok Sabha Secretariat has brought out a bulky book titled Unparliamentary Expressions.

It has several words and expressions that would probably be considered rude or offensive in most cultures. It also has some likely to be seen as fairly harmless or innocuous. The state legislatures too are guided mainly by this book first compiled in 1999 and last updated in 2009.

Editorial Page

Srilanka, a cautionary tail (Page no. 12)

(GS Paper 2, International Relation)

When I first met Mahinda Rajapaksa at a conference of women panchayat members at Avdhash Kaushal's training institute in Dehradun in the mid-Nineties, he was a modest backbencher in the Sri Lankan parliament with an impassioned interest in local self-government which he believed was the only way to govern his fractious nation.

Empowering the people for self-government seemed to be his primary preoccupation. When he became PM, he invited me, as Minister of Panchayati Raj, to Colombo to address a mammoth meeting of elected local government representatives gathered from all over the island-nation in the impressive Bandaranaike Hall (their equivalent of our Vigyan Bhawan) and obliged most of his cabinet ministers to also attend.

This was followed by a detailed interaction with a group of experts he had put together to draft an amendment to the Sri Lankan constitution that drew its inspiration from our 73rd and 74th amendments, initiated by Rajiv Gandhi.

While his arch political opponent, Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, warned me repeatedly to not trust the old fox, I continued my cordial relationship with Mahinda because I saw no reason to get entangled in the coils of our island neighbour's internal affairs.

Soon thereafter, however, Mahinda lost all interest in panchayat raj in Sri Lanka as he became obsessed with terminating — by brutal military action — the ongoing three-decades-long insurgency led by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Once he inducted his brothers, Gotabaya and Basil, into his active circle, the only priority became military action to root out the LTTE, whatever the cost in lives, limb and property to the local Tamil population.

This was much applauded by the Sinhala Buddhist population at large. He thought he was now destined to rule his realm forever.

Idea Page

No winners in this war (Page no. 13)

(GS Paper 2, International Relation)

Over the past four and a half months, since the beginning of the Russian "special military operation" in February, the war in Ukraine has become the leitmotif of politics in the West.

Solidarity with Ukraine and resistance against the incursion of Russian forces into Ukrainian territory are the main refrain of the Western media.

The NATO, EU and G-7 have sprung into action, offering support of various kinds — from the supply of arms, intelligence, cash and logistics and training of Ukrainian troops, to imposing severe sanctions intended to "cripple" the Russian economy.

Western troops have not been directly involved in combat so far but mercenaries of Western provenance are actively engaged, and some have actually been caught in action.

Weakening Russia is the hidden agenda of the Ukraine war. President Joe Biden of the United States — who has vowed to stand with Ukraine “as long as it takes” — and Prime Minister Boris Johnson of the UK have been the leading spirits behind the mobilisation of the West on “both sides of the Atlantic”, to confront the “common enemy”.

The West has been at war before, in Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria. But this is different. This is a war on European soil and a war of attrition that has pitted Western firepower against Russia.

Unlike other wars, this one has snapped the flow of global trade, sports and cultural and scientific exchanges. The understanding at the end of the Cold War in 1989-1990 that NATO would not expand to the east was the bedrock of that new era.

However, successive NATO expansions and the emergence of a more resolute leadership in the Russian Federation which has looked with alarm at the shrinking of its sphere of influence have radically altered the equations.

Russian President Vladimir Putin articulated these apprehensions in a meeting with top intelligence officials in 2007 in his speech to the Munich Security Conference.

But these warning signals did not elicit any effective, reciprocal moves at accommodating the apprehensions, nor were any new security arrangements made that could instil trust and confidence among adversaries.

Seen in terms of structural realism, the war in Ukraine was a tragedy on hold that had to break out, sooner or later.

Preparing for GST 2.0 (Page no. 13)

(GS Paper 3, Economy)

The last five years of the GST journey have been like the samudra manthan that began with the unwanted elements of transition, but slowly yielded the nectar of higher revenues.

Many of those who complained about the teething problems of GST perhaps failed to recollect what the indirect tax situation was prior to the implementation of GST: The multiplicity of the Centre and state levies that masked the actual incidence of tax on products, the debilitating effects of the entry tax and the uncertainty of tax rates.

Today, in contrast, we have a single tax across the country combined with a stability in rates and a common technology platform in the form of a GSTN where key business processes of registration, payment of duties and filing of returns are done online in a transparent manner.

The ease of payments has improved over time with the technical glitches having been slowly sorted out, leading to a record number of GST registrants – increasing from 1.08 crore in April 2018 to 1.36 crore in 2022.

The revenue gains have been significant. If we compare the data of 2020-2021 to 2021-2022, the proportion of GST collected to GSDP (Gross State Domestic Product) rose from 5.8 per cent to 6.4 per cent.

If we factor in the three-percentage point decline in the incidence of GST duty from 14.8 to 11.8 per cent as suggested by the RBI, the actual proportion in 2021-2022 would have been 7.4 per cent of the GDP.

If this momentum is maintained, the GST collections would help the country to move towards a tax/GDP ratio of 20 per cent in the medium term which would be a great achievement.

A lot of this improvement can be traced to stricter compliance flowing from three factors. First, denial of input credit to the buyer without the supplier uploading the invoice.

Second, the introduction of e-invoicing. And third the introduction of e-waybills for transporters for value exceeding Rs 50,000 per consignment.

Another less acknowledged factor is greater coordination between the Central Board of Excise and Customs (CBIC) and Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT) in compliance verification.

An equally significant achievement is the broad justification of the optimism that GST being the destination-based tax would help in fiscal equity for the augmentation of revenues of the states that consume less.

Economy

Costlier imports may pull down CAD: Finance Ministry (Page no. 17)

(GS Paper 3, Economy)

Costlier imports and tepid merchandise exports are expected to lead to deterioration in current account deficit (CAD) in the current financial year, according to the Finance Ministry’s monthly economic review.

Global headwinds, however, would continue to pose a downside risk to growth as crude oil and edibles, which have driven inflation in India, remain major imported components in the consumption basket.

Strong goods and service tax revenue and the windfall tax levied on July 1 will help the Centre to meet its fiscal gap target, which had come under pressure after the cut in excise duty on petrol and diesel, along with the high capital expenditure target.

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.

The deterioration of CAD could, however, be moderate with an increase in service exports in which India is more globally competitive as compared to merchandise exports.

The widening of CAD, has depreciated the Indian rupee against the US dollar by 6 per cent since January of 2022. The rupee, however, has performed well in 2022 compared to other major economies unlike in 2013, where it depreciated against other major economies, thus reflecting strong fundamentals of the Indian economy.

The depreciation of rupee, in addition to elevated global commodity prices, has also made price-inelastic imports costlier, thereby making it further difficult to reduce the CAD.