The Indian Express

Front Page

Panel calls for boosting protein, nutrients in government meal programmes (Page no: 5)
(GS Paper 2, Polity and Governance)

The Covid-19 pandemic is likely to have "aggravated the silent crisis" of undernutrition in India, an inter-ministerial committee has observed, recommending that protein-rich food items like eggs, nuts and legumes, as well as micronutrients like calcium, iron, zinc, folate and vitamin A be legally mandated in meals given through food safety programmes in schools and anganwadis by revising Schedule II of the National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013.

The inter-ministerial committee includes officials from the Ministry of Food, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Women and Child Development, and the Ministry of Education, as well as scientists from the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) and the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI).

Currently, eggs are served in mid-day meals in 13 states and three UTs as part of "additional food items". It is served with a frequency varying from five days a week to once a month.

The states and UTs bear the cost of the supplementary provision. The inclusion of eggs in food safety nets have been opposed by many religious groups as well as chief ministers like Madhya Pradesh's Shivraj Singh Chauhan.

The committee has suggested that "urgent action" is needed to address the crisis, citing the National Family Health Survey-5 (NFHS-5), which has documented a rise in the "rates of child undernutrition, stunting and wasting in most of the states", along with an increase in prevalence of anaemia among pregnant women and those of reproductive age. The draft report, submitted in October 2021, is currently under the Centre's consideration.

Editorial Page

The new energy disorder (Page no: 10)
(GS Paper 3, Economy)

The Ukrainian crisis has radically altered the contours of the global energy landscape and created a tangle of relationships and issues for India. To smoothen this tangle and address the issues India should adopt "a whole of the system" approach to energy policy.

Six months back before the start of the Ukrainian conflict, there was a deepening sense that fossil fuels and the industry built around them were in terminal decline and that the era of oil, gas and coal was, if not at its end, certainly at the beginning of its end (to misquote Winston Churchill out of context).

Today, one is hard-pressed to support that contention. The petroleum market is tight and prices are ratcheting up. Oil prices are close to $120/bbl and gas prices have jumped 500 per cent year on year in Europe.

The regulatory constraints on petroleum exploration and distribution infrastructure have been eased and several countries have removed the output limits on thermal power generation and reopened mothballed coal mines. The share prices of the oil majors are trading at multi-year highs.

India is caught in the vortex of this turmoil. Three issues are of particular significance. One, as has been reported, India is now a major purchaser of Russian crude. Last month, it reportedly purchased an average of 1.2 mbd.

If this figure is correct, Russia is now our largest provider of crude oil surpassing Saudi Arabia and Iraq. The reason for this ramp-up is the price discount offered by Russia.

The decision is driven by good economics and energy security. The Western world does not, however, see it this way. They were initially publicly critical but when it was pointed out that the kettle must not call the pot black — Germany still imports 35 per cent of its gas from Russia — they limited their comments to private exchanges.

The US, UK and Europe are, however, partners of strategic and economic significance. So even though our differences are off the front pages, the question does arise: What might be the medium to longer-term implications of our "support" to Russia on relations with Capitol Hill, Whitehall and the European Commission?

Idea Page

High cost of agri trade bans (Page no: 11)
(GS Paper 3, Economy)

There are reports suggesting that the government is mulling a ban on rice exports to tame inflation. Earlier, on May 13, the government banned wheat exports to check the potential rise in prices in the face of low procurement. This is surely

not the first time an attempt is being made to ban wheat and rice exports. It was also done in 2007-08, in the wake of the global financial crisis.
By doing so again, some people in the government think that they can tame inflation in India. Perhaps they will also impose stocking limits on traders for a host of commodities, suspend futures trading in food items, and even conduct income tax raids on traders of food.
But all these extreme measures in the name of taming inflation only expose the hollowness and lack of understanding within the government as to how market economies function and what is really behind high inflation.
Let us take the case of rice first. India exported the highest-ever volume of 21 million metric tonnes (MMT) of rice in 2021-22 (FY22) in a global market of about 51.3 MMT, which amounts to about 41 per cent of global exports.
In an earlier article in this column ('The carbon footprint cost', IE, May 23), we had argued that such large volumes of rice exports brought down global prices of rice by about 23 per cent in March (YoY), when all other cereal prices, be it wheat or maize, were going up substantially in global markets by 44 and 27 per cent respectively.
Our rough calculations suggest that if India exports more than about 25 per cent of the global trade in rice, it starts having a dampening effect on global prices. In fact, in FY22, the unit value of exports of common rice was just $354/tonne, which was lower than the minimum support price (MSP) of rice.
This meant that rice exporters were either buying rice (paddy) from farmers and millers at below the MSP or that quite a substantial part of rice was given free under the PM Garib Kalyan Ann Yojana (PMGKAY) was being siphoned away for exports at prices below MSP.

Explained Page

What GST rate changes mean (Page no: 15)
(GS Paper 3, Economy)
The Goods and Services Tax (GST) Council in its 47th meeting held last week undertook a series of rate changes as part of correction of inverted duty structure, withdrawal of certain exemptions in what could be a precursor for an overall tweaking of tax slabs and rate rationalisation in future.
In the changes, which are expected to affect consumers at the most basic level, GST exemption has been withdrawn from 'pre-packaged and labelled' retail packs which will include food items such as curd, lassi, puffed rice, wheat flour, buttermilk, but items sold loose or unlabelled shall continue to remain exempt. The rate changes will be effective July 18.
The GST Council discussed recommendations of four ministerial panels — on rate rationalisation, on movement of gold and precious stones, system reforms, and casinos, horse racing and online gaming.
The report by the Group of Ministers (GoM) on rate rationalisation, headed by Karnataka Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommai, was an interim report covering correction of inverted duty structure and withdrawal of exemptions. The GoM has been given a three-month extension to further work on tax slabs changes and rate rationalisation.
The GoM on casinos, horse racing and lottery had finalised a uniform 28 per cent tax on all three categories, but now has been given more time of 15 days to review its recommendations that will then be taken up in the next GST Council meeting, which is likely to be held in first week of August at Madurai.

India's largest floating solar plant, why it is significant (Page no: 15)
(GS Paper 3, Environment)
India's largest floating solar plant is now fully operational at Ramagundam in Telangana's Peddapalli district. The 100-megawatt (MW) floating solar power photovoltaic project was commissioned by the National Thermal Power Corporation, the country's foremost public-sector power generator.
As of July 1, following the commissioning of the plant, the total commercial operation of floating solar capacity in the southern region has risen to 217 MW, according to the NTPC.
According to an official release, the 100MW floating solar plant spread over 500 acres of the NTPC's reservoir at Ramagundam is built at a cost of Rs 423 crore through Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited on an EPC (engineering, procurement and construction) contract.
Having moved past fossil fuels to hydro-, nuclear and renewable energy sources for power generation, the NTPC has set a target of producing 60GW (gigawatts) capacity through renewable energy sources, constituting nearly 45 per cent of its overall power generation capacity, by 2032.
Solar plants or solar farms can be either ground-mounted or set up on the surface of waterbodies. Though these floating farms are a bit more expensive than the traditional ones mounted on land surfaces, there are advantages as well.

At a time when large tracts of land are unavailable, floating farms do not require land to be acquired for the installation of photovoltaic panels.
They are more efficient as the presence of water underneath helps them keep cool. They also reduce water evaporation, thereby saving more water for hydropower generation.

Eco Sensitive Zones: what centre wants, why Kerala is seeing protests (Page no: 15)
(GS Paper 3, Environment)

For over a month now, Kerala farmers living along the Western Ghats have been protesting a June 3 directive of the Supreme Court for setting up buffer or eco-sensitive zones (ESZ) for all protected forests in the country. The protesting farmers have been backed by both the ruling CPM and the opposition Congress.
A three-judge bench of the Supreme Court, in its order on June 3, said national parks, wildlife sanctuaries and such protected forests must have an ESZ of minimum 1-km from their boundaries.
The court said the guidelines issued by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MEF & CC) on 9 February, 2011, which have either banned or regulated a bunch of activities within the ESZ, should be strictly adhered to.
In 2011, the environment ministry had issued a set of guidelines, which either completely banned or regulated certain activities in ESZ. The banned activities are mining, running of saw mills, polluting industries, commercial use of fire woods, mega hydel-power projects and manufacturing of hazardous objects.
Mining would be allowed only for local use, the guidelines said. The regulated or restricted activities in the ESZ are felling of trees (only with permission from authorities), establishment of hotels and resorts as per approved master plan, drastic change in agricultural systems, commercial use of natural water resources including ground water harvesting, erection of electrical cables with stress on underground cabling, fencing of building premises, widening of roads, ban on vehicular traffic at night.
The permissible activities are ongoing agricultural and horticulture practices, rain water harvesting, organic farming and adoption of green technology for all activities.

Pan African flag (Page no: 15)
(Miscellaneous)

A Pan-African flag, flying outside the headquarters of a Black socialist group in Florida, was set on fire using a flamethrower Saturday.
In a video released by the group, the Uhuru Movement, a man is seen pulling a flamethrower from the trunk of his car and shooting at a tower 30-ft above the ground.
The Pan-African flag is a tricolour flag made up of red, black and green colours. It is a symbol of solidarity for people of African ancestry around the globe.
In the flag, the red stripe represents a unifying bond of blood, and also that shed fighting for freedom. Colour black stands for the Black people who can claim one identity under the flag.
And finally, the green stripe is a symbol of the abundant natural wealth of Africa. It is also known as the Black Liberation flag. the RBG (Red-Black-Green) or the UNIA (Universal Negro Improvement Association) flag.
The flag was adopted by the UNIA during its New York meeting in 1920. The outfit had been founded to promote Black nationalism and anti-colonialism.