

G.K snippets...



Law, Policy and Governance



[Daily snippets](#)

1. [House panel members want free grain scheme extended](#)

- At a meeting of a parliamentary committee, members demanded the extension of the free food grain scheme started by the government as part of the COVID-19 relief package. The scheme ended on November 30. The members were of the view that till a vaccine was approved and distributed to the public, the scheme should be extended.
- The **Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana** was announced in March by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman as part of the package. The scheme covers 80 crore ration card holders. Each household gets five kg of rice or wheat each month and one kg of pulses. The scheme was announced only for three months in the first round till June 30 and later it was extended till November 30.

2. [SC finds HC order on A.P government 'disturbing'](#)

- The Supreme Court stayed an Andhra Pradesh High Court order intending to embark on a judicial inquiry into whether there is a constitutional breakdown in the State machinery under the Jagan Mohan Reddy government, requiring a declaration of President's rule. The "unprecedented" order of the High Court, on October 1, came while deciding habeas corpus petitions filed by relatives of persons remanded in judicial custody or out on bail.
- The High Court had *suo motu* summoned the State counsel to assist it in deciding "whether in circumstances prevailing in the State of Andhra Pradesh, the court can record a finding that there is constitutional breakdown in the State or not". The government said the High Court's observation violated the **Basic Structure doctrine** of the Constitution.

3. [Ordinary people cannot afford COVID-19 care: SC](#)

- The Supreme Court said it was the government's duty to ensure affordable medical treatment for COVID-19 patients. It said medical care during the pandemic had become so costly that ordinary people could not afford it at all. In a 17-page order, the court said right to health is a **fundamental right guaranteed under Article 21 of the Constitution**.
- *"Right to health includes affordable treatment. For whatever reasons, the treatment has become costlier and costlier and it is not affordable to the common people at all... Even if one survives from COVID-19, many times financially and economically he is finished,"* the Bench said the State and local authorities should either make more provisions for affordable treatment in their hospitals or there shall be cap on the fees charged by the private hospitals in exercise of the powers under the **Disaster Management Act**.

4. All have equal right to practice religion : HC

- The Allahabad High Court said no coercive action should be taken against a Muslim labourer Nadeem, who had filed a petition seeking the quashing of an FIR against him under the new Uttar Pradesh Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion of Religion Ordinance, 2020. **Article 25** provides that all persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the **right to freely profess, practice and propagate religion**.
- The court said in the relevant case that *"Present is a case where all the allegations are prima facie based on suspicion"*.

5. Parliamentary panel calls for migrant workers' database

- A **national database of migrant workers** should be collated at the earliest to ensure that if ever there is a repeat of a COVID-19 like pandemic, the relief measures should reach the intended beneficiaries, the **Standing Committee on Home Affairs** has noted in its report. The committee also recommended an urgent review of the 123-year old **Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897**.
- *"The Committee observes that the provisions of the Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897, have helped in managing COVID-19 but this Act is outdated as it was framed in the colonial era. Therefore, the committee recommends that the Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897, should be revisited, updated and amended so that it is fully equipped to respond to the challenges posed by the an anticipated onset of the pandemic in the future"*.

6. Court takes cognizance of offence of sedition against Sharjeel Imam

- A Delhi court took cognizance of the offence of sedition against JNU student Sharjeel Imam in a case related to the violence during protests against the CAA in December last year, which resulted in damage to public property and injuries to police near Jamia Millia Islamia. Additional Sessions Judge took cognizance of the offences under : **Sections 124 A** (sedition); **153 A** (promoting enmity between different groups on grounds of religion, race, place of birth, residence, language); **153 B** (imputations, assertions prejudicial to national integration) and **505** (public mischief) **of the IPC**.
- The court took cognizance of the offences after the Delhi Police filed a supplementary charge sheet mentioning the requisite sanctions granted by the authorities concerned. The charge sheet said Mr. Imam allegedly gave speeches inciting hatred, contempt and disaffection towards the Centre and instigated the people, which led to the violence.

7. States get more time to set up biodiversity committees

- **The National Green Tribunal (NGT)** has extended the time limit for constitution of biodiversity management committees (BMC) and preparation of **people's biodiversity registers (PBR)** in view of the ongoing pandemic. The Bench said: *"...The indigenous and local community are a repository of traditional knowledge and their knowledge and practices help in conservation and sustainable development of biodiversity."*

8. 'Prison population reduced by 10.42% between April and June'

- A report released by the **Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI)** said the population in Indian prisons reduced by 10.42% from April to June due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The report urged the State governments and prison authorities to continue the measures to decongest prisons.
- The report, titled '**Responding to the Pandemic: Prisons and Overcrowding**', said that after high-powered committees were formed on the orders of the Supreme Court to reduce overcrowding, the occupancy in prisons of 22 States and Union Territories reduced from 107.8% on December 31, 2019 to 103.1% on April 1, 2020 and then to 93.3% on June 30.
- Speaking during the virtual launch of the report, retired Supreme Court judge **Justice Madan B. Lokur** said: "*We talk about bail not jail, but the issue of prison overcrowding can be addressed at a much earlier stage... It is where the role of the investigating officer, the prosecution, the judge and the legal aid lawyer become very important.*"

9. Farmers have constitutional right to continue protest : SC

- The Supreme Court said farmers have a constitutional right to continue with their "absolutely perfect" protest as long as their dissent against the controversial agricultural laws **did not slip into violence**. **The right to protest** is part of a fundamental right and can as a matter of fact, be exercised subject to public order. The court, however, said the purpose of the farmers would not be served if they continued to sit without engaging in talks.
- The court reiterated its suggestion of forming an "impartial and independent committee" of experts in agriculture to hear from both the farmers and the Union government on the laws. The court cautioned the government against trying to "instigate" violence.
- Protesting farmer leaders will seek legal opinion before taking any position in the Supreme Court case on their agitation seeking repeal of three contentious agricultural reform laws. Most of them are not in favour of impleading themselves in this case.

10. 34 arrested under new U.P. ordinance so far

- With fresh cases in Shahjahanpur and Kannauj, the number of FIRs lodged under the **Uttar Pradesh Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion of Religion Ordinance, 2020**, has reached 11. The ordinance was promulgated on November 27 and since then, it has been invoked roughly once in 48 hours. At least 34 persons have been arrested so far.

11. NGT panel for protection of Mahanadi floodplain

- **The National Green Tribunal** has constituted a high-level committee to identify floodplain zones of the Mahanadi - Odisha's largest river - in wake of the State government reclaiming 424 acres of land from the river for development projects.
- Dillip Kumar Samantray had moved the NGT accusing that the Mahanadi riverbed was slated to be affected by setting up of a Medical College and other permanent constructions in the floodplain of the river. The tribunal has directed the committee to consider the issue and laid down norms so as to ensure that the proposal of the State for construction of the medical college and river front development takes place in accordance with law, **without damage to the floodplains of the rivers**.

12. International branch campuses in India

- One of the recommendations of the **National Education Policy 2020** was to allow universities in the **top 100 category of the World University Rankings to operate in India**. Although this recommendation has generated a

lot of discussion, one major gap is the inadequate focus on the **potential role and suitability of international branch campuses (IBC)** in the Indian environment.

- **Lessons from Monash University's South Africa campus:** One, the public nature of a foreign university may not be reflected in its branch campus. Two, even a university that is among the top 100 could become a local private institution through mergers and acquisitions. Three, ensuring parity with the quality of programmes offered at the home campus would be a challenge. Four, domestic market demand influences course offerings, and there is dependence on contract academic staff. Finally, there are limitations in substituting existing institutions. Therefore, reviewing the various delivery models existing in different national contexts may be helpful in the policy formulation process.

13. [House panel moots law to keep a check on private hospitals](#)

- There should be a comprehensive Public Health Act with suitable legal provisions to keep checks and controls over private hospitals in times of a pandemic and to curb black marketing of medicines, the **parliamentary Standing Committee on Home Affairs**, headed by Congress leader **Anand Sharma**, said in a report submitted to Rajya Sabha Chairman Venkaiah Naidu.
- The Act, it stated, should keep a check on black marketing of medicines and on product standardisation. It suggested that the government should be proactive by holding awareness campaigns on cheaper and effective repurposed medicines.

14. [NHRC seeks report on witchcraft in Odisha](#)

- The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) has directed the Odisha Chief Secretary and the Director General of Police to submit a report on the steps being taken to create awareness on witchcraft accusations and violence and compensation for the victims. The commission issued the direction on a petition by human rights lawyer Radhakant Tripathi.
- Mr. Tripathy had demanded that the State agencies expedite probe and trial of offences under the **Prevention of Witch Hunting Act, 2013** to ensure protection of basic human rights of the victims. Hearing the matter, the NHRC directed to submit a report on steps taken to conduct the awareness programmes in all villages and the compensation provided to the victims in the next 15 weeks.

15. [Postal ballots to help those abroad](#)

- The Election Commission (EC), in response to concerns raised over the provision of postal ballots to NRIs (Non-resident Indians), said last week that its proposal to the Law Ministry was an extension of its efforts to facilitate voting by overseas electors. *"The proposal to extend ETPBS voting option in favour of overseas electors sent to the M/o Law & Justice on 27.11.2020 is an extension of the continuing efforts to facilitate voting to the overseas electors, who are unable to exercise franchise in spite of amendment in Act, in 2011,"* it said in a statement.

16. [Health data indicates that India does not need a two-child policy](#)

- The latest data from the **National Family Health Survey5 (NFHS5)** provide evidence of an uptake in the **use of modern contraceptives** in rural and urban areas, an improvement in these demands being met, and a decline in the average number of children borne by a woman, and prove that the country's population is stabilising and fears over a "population explosion" and calls for a "two child policy" are misguided, experts say. The first part of the NFHS5 report, which was made public earlier this month, records data for **17 States and five Union Territories**.

- The analysis of the data by the international non-profit **Population Council of India (PCI)** shows that the total fertility rate (number of children born per woman) has decreased across 14 of 17 States and is at 2.1 children per woman or less. This also implies that most States have attained **replacement level fertility** - the average number of children born per woman at which a population exactly replaces itself from one generation to the next.
- While during **NFHS3 and 4**, conducted between **2005 and 2016**, there was a decline in the use of modern methods of contraception (oral pills, condoms, intrauterine device) across 12 of 22 States and UTs, in NFHS5, 11 of 12 States where there was a slump saw an increase in their use.

17. Opinion : Pandemic resilience

- The report of the **parliamentary Standing Committee on Home Affairs** calling for a comprehensive **Public Health Act**, as a response to the extreme stresses caused by COVID-19, is a welcome call to reform a fragmented health system. Presently, there are 0.55 government hospital beds for 1,000 people. Prolonged underinvestment in public health infrastructure. The situation is even worse in rural areas, where care facilities are weaker, and urban workers have fled to their villages, afraid of the cost of falling sick in cities.
- The panel has called for an omnibus law that will curb profiteering during such crises and provide robust cashless health insurance. It can serve a larger purpose if it covers overall system reform, addressing the structural asymmetry created by misguided policies.
- One of the pandemic's impacts has been a staggering rise in premiums, especially for senior citizens, of even up to 25% of the insured value. What is more, the insurance regulator, IRDAI, set 65 as the maximum age of entry for a standard policy earlier this year, affecting older uninsured citizens. The answer to creating an equitable framework lies in a tax funded system, with the government being the single and sole payer to care providers. Legal reform must provide for a time bound transition to universal state provided health services under a rights based, non exclusionary framework, with States implementing.

18. HC: possession of dead animal's skin not an offence under MAPA

- Possession of a dead animal's skin will not amount to an offence under the **Maharashtra Animal Preservation Act (MAPA), 1976**, the Nagpur Bench of the Bombay High Court has said while quashing an FIR against a man for possession of skins of dead cows. The MAPA prohibits slaughter, purchase, sale, import, export and possession of beef.
- The person was booked under different MAPA sections. *"There is no doubt that the skin is not covered under the provisions of the MAPA. Thus, there is no prohibition for the possession of skin of dead animals,"* the court said, quashing the FIR.

19. Changes to SC scholarship scheme get government approval

- The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs approved changes to the post matric scholarship scheme for students from the Scheduled Castes, including a new funding pattern of 60:40 for the Centre and the States. The changes were aimed at **enabling four crore students** to access higher education over the next five years. Switching from the existing "committed liability" formula, the new funding pattern would **increase the Centre's involvement in the scheme**.

20. HC asks the Delhi government to prepare post-COVID SOPs

- The Delhi High Court directed the city government to prepare a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for people who have recovered from COVID-19, but are suffering from post COVID complications relating to lungs and other vital organs. The direction came after petitioner Rakesh Malhotra, who was infected with COVID-19, said

that people who have recovered from the virus continue facing serious health issues and are finding it difficult to get back to normal life.

- The court also directed the Delhi government to ensure testing and follow-up in view of the fact that a large number of people had flown into Delhi before suspension of flights from the U.K.

21. Sister Abhaya's case

- It was in 1992 that Sr. Abhaya, a pre degree student, was found dead in a well at the St. Pius X Convent hostel where she was an inmate. The police and the Crime Branch hurriedly concluded it as a case of suicide. But a people's action council led by activist Jomon Puthenpurackal sought judicial intervention, which resulted in the CBI taking over the investigation in 1993.
- Despite a forensic report suggesting the possibility of homicide, the CBI found itself up against a wall for want of material evidence that was originally collected by the police but later destroyed. Between 1996 and 2005, it approached the chief judicial magistrate, Ernakulam, thrice with closure petitions.
- In 2007, **Fr Kottoor, Sr Sephy and Fr Jose Poothrukayil**, another priest, were subjected to narcoanalysis following which they were arrested a year later by Nandakumar Nair, Dy SP of CBI, who has pursued the case ever since. But the Kerala High Court found gaping holes in the CBI's contentions and sought to monitor the case for a brief period.
- The CBI court allowed the discharge petition of Fr Poothrukayil and the High Court said that narco analysis was inadmissible as evidence. Eight of the 49 prosecution witnesses turned hostile, but a petty thief who had gone to the convent on the night of Abhaya's death, stood his ground. The case has exposed a lot of fault-lines in India's criminal justice system.

Opinion/Explainer : MSP - the factoids versus the facts

(Prankur Gupta, Reetika Khera & Sudha Narayanan, [Link to article](#))

1. Definition

- The MSP is meant to set a floor below which prices do not fall, and is announced by the government for 23 commodities. It is the price at which the government 'promises' to buy from farmers if market prices fall below it. However, the government **procurement is heavily concentrated on wheat and rice**, with other crops barely being procured.

2. More states under MSP

- Data sources cited : State-wise procurement from the Food Corporation of India (FCI) and agricultural household data for 2012-13 from the National Sample Survey (NSS) (the data is not available after this period).
- The Government of India has made a systematic effort to expand the reach of MSP to more States, via the **Decentralized Procurement (DCP) Scheme**. Introduced in 1997-98, it was not very popular in the initial years and began to be adopted by States in earnest only around 2005.
- Under the DCP scheme, the responsibility of procurement devolved to the State governments which were reimbursed pre approved costs. FCI data suggest that by July 2015, as many as 15 States had taken up this programme. Procurement began moving out of 'traditional' States (such as Punjab, Haryana, western Uttar Pradesh). Until 2000, barely 10% of wheat and rice was procured outside the traditional States. By 2012-13, the share of the DCP States rose to 25-35%.

3. What kind of farmers benefit from the MSP

- Procurement has benefited the small and marginal farmers in much bigger numbers than medium and large farmers. At the all-India level, among those who sold paddy to the government, 1% were large farmers, owning over 10 hectares of land. Small and marginal farmers, with less than 2 hectares accounted for 70%. The rest (29%) were medium farmers (210 hectares).
- In the case of wheat, 3% of all wheat-selling farmers were large farmers. More than half (56%) were small and marginal farmers. In the non-traditional States that adopted the DCP scheme, the overwhelming majority of farmers who sell to State procurement agencies are small and marginal.

4. **Getting the facts right**

- The proportion of farmers who benefit from (even flawed) government procurement policies is not insignificant.
- The geography of procurement has changed in the past 15 years. It is less concentrated in traditional States such as Punjab, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh, as DCP States such as Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Odisha have started participating more vigorously.
- It is predominantly the small and marginal farmers who have benefited from the MSP and procurement, even if the size of the benefits may be larger for larger farmers. This is true not just in the DCP States, but also in the traditional States.
- It is widely believed that for the first time, the new laws allow farmers to sell outside the Agricultural Produce Market Committee (APMC). Even for commodities for which MSP is announced, the proportion of sales via the *mandi* range is only between 10-64%. The demand for the MSP originates because the prices paid outside the *mandi* tend to be much lower. Countrywide, sales to *mandi* or government procurement agencies fetched on average 13.3% higher prices for paddy and 5.8% for wheat.

[Opinion/Explainer : Are NRIs likely to get postal voting rights soon?](#)

1. On November 27, the **Election Commission of India (ECI)** wrote to the Law Ministry, proposing to extend the facility of postal ballots to (eligible) overseas, non resident Indians (NRIs) for the Assembly elections in Assam, Kerala, Puducherry, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal in 2021. The ECI proposed amending the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961, in order to allow this facility.
2. The postal ballots will be sent to NRIs electronically and they will send these ballots after choosing their candidate via post. After the passing of the **Representation of the People (Amendment) Act, 2010**, eligible NRIs who had stayed abroad beyond six months have been enabled to vote, but only in person at the polling station where they have been enrolled as an overseas elector.
3. Now, **The Conduct of Election Rules, 1961** was amended in 2016 to allow service voters to use the Electronically Transmitted Postal Ballot System. The Election Commission proposes to extend this facility to overseas voters. For this to commence, the Law Ministry has to amend the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961.
4. There were news reports that the ECI had indicated to the Ministry of External Affairs that it would want postal voting introduced on a pilot basis in non-Gulf countries. To conclude, a postal ballot mechanism that allows for proper authentication of the ballot at designated consular/embassy offices and an effective postal system should ease this process for NRIs, but the rules must be clearly framed for eligibility on the basis of time spent away from the country.

[Opinion : Laying the foundation for faster growth](#) (C. Rangarajan)

[Link to article](#)

1. Background

- In the shadows of the pandemic, the economy has started to look-up. This can be seen very clearly from the performance of the Indian economy in Q1 and Q2 of 2020-21. In Q1, the economy declined by 23.9%; it declined by 7.5% in Q2, when the relaxations were eased.

2. Performance of the Indian economy in 2020-21

- If the Indian economy at least maintains the second half GDP in 2020-21 at the level of the previous year, the full year contraction can be limited to about 7.7%.. There are strong cues favouring an increase in GDP in Q4 which might cap the overall contraction in 2020-21 to the range of 6% to 7%. There are many indicators such as collection of Goods and Services Tax (GST), improved output of coal, steel and cement and positive growth in manufacturing in October 2020 which point to better performance of the private sector. This is a substantial improvement over the forecasts of some agencies such as the **International Monetary Fund** which had estimated the economy to decline by 10.3%.
- If the Indian economy grows at 8% in 2021-22 will we be compensating for the decline in 2020-21. This should be possible if by that time restrictions imposed because of COVID-19 are withdrawn and the nation goes back to a normal state. Some sectors can act as lead sectors or engines of growth attracting **increased government capital expenditure**.
- The global environment for trade and growth is an uncertain factor. Many developed countries are still struggling to find answers to COVID-19. Also, growth must not only be consumption driven but also investment driven. It is the latter which in a developing economy can sustain growth over a long period.

3. On how the Monetary policy will shape up

- The stance of monetary policy in 2020-21 has been extremely accommodative. Three major elements in the policy are: a **reduction in interest rate** through changes in policy rate ; **providing liquidity through various measures**, and regulatory changes such as moratorium. With a large injection of liquidity, inflation might remain high. Inflation is determined by **overall liquidity or money supply in the system** in conjunction with the availability of goods and services. There will be a need to exercise more caution as we move into the next year.

4. Different fiscal initiatives

- The performance of the sector "**Public Administration, Defence, and other services**" which is subject to policy intervention is disappointing. In the second quarter of 2020-21, there was a contraction of this sector by 12.2%. Slower momentum of government expenditure might impede the economic recovery. Government expenditures should be speeded up from now on so that the contraction in the current fiscal year as a whole can be reduced. What is required is a **sharp increase in government capital expenditures** which can act as a stimulus for growth.
- A detailed investment plan of the government and public sector enterprises should be drawn up and be made the part of the coming budget.

5. Growth and Investment scenario

- Over the past decade, the investment rate has been falling. In 2018-19, the rate fell to 32.2% of GDP from 38.9% in 2011-12. The National Infrastructure Pipeline is a good initiative to improve the investment climate. Also, the climate for investment is also influenced by **non-economic factors** of which social cohesion is most important. Recent controversies over reforms have shown that **timing, sequencing and consensus building** are equally important.
- The Indian economy in 2019 was at around \$2.7 trillion. To achieve the level of \$5 trillion, we need to grow continuously at 9% for six years from now. Jobs and employment will come from growth.

[Commentary : "The Maharashtra Shakti Criminal Law \(Maharashtra Amendment\) Bill, 2020"](#)

[Further Reading](#)

1. For any criminal justice system to be effective, fair and just laws, a robust investigative mechanism, a dynamic judiciary and adequate infrastructure are indispensable.
 2. The Bill proposes punishment in cases of false complaints and acts of providing false information regarding sexual and other offences against women with the intention to humiliate, extort and defame.
 - This provision only points to the patriarchal conception that women are manipulative liars and unworthy of being trusted.
 - Investigation and prosecution are often shabby and negligent. This results in unfair acquittals, and the victims, in turn, may be accused of having filed false complaints.
 - It does not define what cases would qualify as being "heinous in nature", thus leaving it open to the interpretation of courts.
 - The death penalty has been in the statute books for a long time, but there is no evidence affirming its potency as a deterrent in preventing crimes.
 - Another provision stipulating that investigation should be completed within 15 days, the trial in 30 days and the appeal in 45 days, even if well-intentioned, will only result in improper investigation and trial. Further, the Bill does not state what happens if the investigation, trial, or appeal is not completed within the prescribed time.
 - Lastly, the proposed amendments seem to have been recommended without considering similar, already existing provisions in the criminal laws.
 3. To conclude, the Bill was opposed by several women's rights organisations and lawyers from Maharashtra, which seems to have led the State government to refer it to a joint select committee.
 4. This is a welcome move and it would be in the interest of women, and justice itself, if the committee has a larger consultative process, engages with stakeholders and experts to understand the existing criminal laws, and reconsiders passing this regressive legislation.
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National News/ Interventions



Daily snippets

1. Strengthening ties with Bangladesh a priority, says PM

- Bangladesh is a major pillar of India's 'neighbourhood first' policy, **Prime Minister Narendra Modi** said at the inauguration of summit level talks held virtually on Thursday. **Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina** said many Indian nationals were working in Bangladesh and enhancing bilateral economic ties.
- The two leaders remotely launched the **rail link between Chilahati (Bangladesh) and Haldibari (West Bengal)**, which is the fifth such link between the countries. He greeted Bangladesh on the occasion of the centenary of **Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman**. A joint statement issued at the end of the summit said that the filming of a **biopic on Bangabandhu would begin under the direction of Shyam Benegal** in January 2021. The document also pledged to name the road from Mujib Nagar to West Bengal's Nadia as "**Shadhinota Shorok**".
- The two sides also concluded seven agreements covering areas such as hydrocarbon, High Impact Community Development Projects, elephant conservation, solid waste management, agriculture, and terms of reference of the IndiaBangladesh CEOs forum.

2. Meditate on this: yogasana is now a sport

- **Yogasana will be a competitive sport** in the country, officials of the Youth Affairs and Sports and AYUSH Ministries announced here on Thursday with a plan to take it global. State and national and **world championships in yogasana** are proposed in 2020
- **Minister of State for Sports Kiren Rijiju** said India had brought to the world the beauty and usefulness of this ancient tradition, which had evolved into a sport with the final aim of making it to the Olympics. **Minister of Ayush Shripad Yesso Naik** said an Olympic event would create an opportunity for expanding awareness of yoga.

3. India ranks 111 out of 162 nations in freedom index

- A global ranking of personal, civil and economic freedom released on Thursday placed India at 111 out of 162 countries. **The Human Freedom Index 2020 ranked India 110 in terms of personal freedom and 105 on economic freedom**, with an overall score coming to 6.43 out of 10.

4. Central Vista estimated cost rises to 13,450 crores

- The government's latest proposal for the redevelopment of Central Vista before an expert panel of the Ministry of Environment and Forest dropped the proposed new PM's Office from the plan, while revising the estimated cost from **₹11,794 crore to ₹13,450 crore**.
- The Central Public Works Department's proposal for terms of reference, which is a step before the application for environment clearance, was discussed by the **Ministry of Environment and Forest Expert Appraisal Committee (EAC)**. CPWD was given suggestions and asked to address the issues raised in representations from the public.
- The CPWD had first submitted a plan for the 10 secretariat buildings and conference centre and the TOR which was approved in October. Then, the CPWD applied for amending the TOR to include the PMO, PM's residence, SPG building and V P's Enclave, but the EAC in its meeting on November 25 returned the proposal. The EAC asked the agency to "**refrain from piecemeal approach**" and apply again with an "integrated approach," according to the minutes of the meeting

5. [Plea against arrest of Dr. Kafeel Khan rejected by the Supreme Court](#)

- The Supreme Court dismissed an appeal by the Uttar Pradesh government against an Allahabad High Court decision quashing the detention of Dr. Kafeel Khan under the **National Security Act (NSA)**.
- Chief Justice Bobde told Solicitor General Tushar Mehta that the court would not intervene against the quashing of detention order and told the State “to get on with whatever prosecution is pending”.
- Dr. Khan had been in custody since January 29 for his remarks during a speech at an ant Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) event in Aligarh Muslim University last year. The High Court had, in its order, said his speech did not “disclose any effort to promote hatred”.

6. [Government plans \\$60-billion investment to bolster gas infrastructure](#)

- **Petroleum Minister Dharmendra Pradhan** said the government had planned a \$60 billion investment for creating gas infrastructure in the country till 2024, and that **gas’s share in the energy mix** is expected to rise to 15% by 2030. Currently, gas accounts for 6% in the country’s total energy mix.
- The minister quoted, “*We are ushering a gas based economy by increasing the share of natural gas in India’s primary energy mix from 6.2% to 15% by 2030.*” India’s first automated national level gas trading platform was unveiled in June this year to promote and sustain an efficient and robust gas market and foster gas trading in the country. He also said, “*We are adopting clean mobility solutions with greater use of LNG (liquefied natural gas) as a transportation fuel, including long-haul trucking. We plan to have 1,000 LNG fuel stations across the country.*”

7. [India, China agree to hold another round of LAC talks](#)

- India and China agreed to hold **another round of talks between senior military commanders** to take forward the slow moving process of **disengagement on the Line of Actual Control (LAC)**.
- **Role of WMCC**: This was agreed to at the 20th meeting of the **Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs**, held via video link. The WMCC, ordinarily convened twice a year since its launch in 2012, has met six times since June this year, after the unprecedented crisis in Ladakh erupted in early May.
- **Corps Commander Level talks**: They also agreed to hold the ninth round of Corps Commander Level talks “at an early date” so that “both sides can work towards early and complete disengagement of troops along the LAC in accordance with the existing bilateral agreements and protocols, and fully restore peace and tranquillity.
- One of the sticking points is **China’s insistence on India first withdrawing** from the strategic heights it occupied in late August south of **Pangong Lake** in response to China’s transgressions.
- North of the lake, **China has moved troops up to Finger 4** since May and has **prevented India from reaching Finger 8**, up to where India has patrolled previously.
- Under the first phase of disengagement, **both sides had moved back in the Galwan Valley and in the Gogra Hot Springs area**. The situation at **Pangong Lake remains unresolved**, as also in the Depsang plains in the far north where India has been prevented from reaching patrolling points in the area.

8. [India, Nepal political parties improve ties as leaders meet](#)

- The latest visit by the leader of the Foreign Affairs department of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to Nepal is expected to open a new level of **interaction among the political parties of Nepal and India**, leaders on both sides have remarked. **Dr. Vijay Chauthaiwale’s** visit to Kathmandu earlier this month took place after **Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla** held a discussion with his counterpart in Nepal, which helped in normalising relations with Nepal after months of turmoil. During his visit to Kathmandu, Mr. Chauthaiwale met with **Prime Minister K. P. Sharma Oli** and Finance Minister Bishnu Paudel.
- The visit was significant as the ruling **Nepal Communist Party has been at loggerheads with several leaders of the BJP** in U.P. and Bihar. This tussle was complicated further because of certain remarks by the Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath.

9. [RSS ideologue Madhav Govind Vaidya passes away](#)

- **Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)** ideologue and the **organisation's first spokesperson Madhav Govind Vaidya** died after a brief illness. He was 97. Vaidya, who became a volunteer of the RSS almost two decades after the organisation was set up, had seen it all during his eight decades old association with it - the three bans, isolation, internal conflicts over joining politics, ferment and resurgence, changing power equations with the Bharatiya Janata Party, and the latter's storming to power at the Centre in 2014. A former chief editor of the city based pro-RSS Marathi daily *Tarun Bharat*, Vaidya became a member of the RSS in 1943 while at the Morris College in Nagpur. In his condolence message **RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat** described Vaidya as a multi-faceted personality and an excellent journalist.

10. [Government lists papers for vaccine registration](#)

- **The Union Health Ministry** listed out the documents that can be used for registering to get vaccinated against COVID-19. Beneficiaries can produce driving licence, health insurance smart card issued under the scheme of the Labour Ministry, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) job card, official identity cards issued to MPs, MLAs and MLCs, PAN card, bank or post office passbook, passport, pension document, service identity card issued to employees by the Union or the State government or public limited companies and voter ID cards.
- After online registration, a beneficiary will receive an SMS on the registered mobile number on the due date, place and time of vaccination. After all the doses of vaccine are administered, a QR code based certificate will be sent to the registered mobile number, the Ministry said.

11. [Exploitation of Sentinel Island](#)

- Any exploitation of the **North Sentinel Island of the Andamans** for commercial and strategic gain would spell the death knell for its occupants, **the Sentinelese**, a most secluded, **particularly vulnerable tribal group (PVTG)** who reside in complete isolation on the island, **the Anthropological Survey of India (AnSI)** has said.
- In a policy document, which comes almost two years after American national **John Allen Chau** was allegedly killed by the Sentinelese on the island, the AnSI says the "*right of the people to the island is non-negotiable*". The document also calls for building a knowledge bank on the Sentinelese. The AnSI has published the policy inputs in a paper titled '**Draft of the Policies for Great Andamanese and Sentinelese**' in their journal recently.
- The Sentinelese, with a **population of about 50 to 100** on the North Sentinel Island, are not only among the most isolated of nearly 70 PVTGs across the country, but also among the five in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands which include the **Great Andamanese, the Onge, the Jarawa, and the Shompens**.

12. [Stopping the slide of health care in India](#)

- India's health problem has a 80:20 rule; 20% of people can afford modern healthcare, **40% cannot afford it at all** and the other 40%, the so-called nonpoor, pay with difficulty. Even with avowedly **12 crore card holders under Ayushman Bharat**, **only 1.27 crore people have taken advantage** of the scheme.
- Ramp up the number of doctors with counterpart obligation to **serve in rural areas**.
- **Revive the Licentiate Medical Practitioner** as we had before Independence in the rural areas.
- **Empower graduates of BSc (Nursing) to be nursing practitioners** — as prevalent in many countries.
- **Primary health care should receive three times more allocation in the budget** and doctor and paramedic strength should be doubled merely on the basis of population increase. States should be incentivised to carry out the appointments of health workers and doctors.

13. [Improve APMCs, not close them, says AIKMS](#)

- The Left affiliated **AllIndia Kisan Mazdoor Sabha (AIKMS)** released a document **countering the claims of the Modi government on the three contentious farm laws**, saying the government's arguments for not repealing

the legislation were “deceptive” and “untruthful”. It also **accused the government of propagating “falsehood”** to claim that the laws would help farmers.

- It countered the government’s claim that the reforms were aimed at increasing private capital, infrastructure and development to reach villages, saying the functioning of the government mandis, supply of fertilizers, seeds, electricity and irrigation would not be promoted with the government promoting private companies under the new laws.
- On the government’s claim that it had decreased the input costs and aimed at doubling the income of the farmers till 2022, the document argued that the diesel cost had been raised tremendously by the present government, though international prices of crude oil had fallen from \$110 a barrel in 2014 to \$40.50 a barrel now.

14. **Young farmers weeding out ‘misinformation’ on Web**

- Nearly 50 youth hailing from protesting farmer families have come together to **counter “misinformation”** and a “negative campaign” against the demonstrations in the capital round the clock.
- They take turns to **bust falsehoods on social media platforms**, take questions and try to counter any negative perception. The youth say that because the elders in the family are not tech savvy and are often unaware of slander, they have taken it upon themselves to **engage with all those who doubt the motive of the campaign** and feel that there is anything beyond a genuine **anguish against the three proposed farm laws**. Another reason, says this bunch, is that the **traditional media has not been fair in reflecting their concerns**.

15. **India to bring more nations into coastal radar network**

- As part of **efforts to further expand the coastal radar chain network** meant to enable **real time monitoring of the high seas** for threats as also expand India’s assistance for capacity building to Indian Ocean littoral states, efforts are in advanced stages to **set up coastal radar stations in the Maldives, Myanmar and Bangladesh**, according to defence sources.
- Mauritius, Seychelles and Sri Lanka have already been integrated into the **country’s coastal radar chain network**. Similar plans are in the pipeline with Maldives and Myanmar and discussions are ongoing with Bangladesh and Thailand.
- The Indian Navy’s **Information Management and Analysis Centre (IMAC)** located in Gurugram, which was set up after the 26/11 Mumbai terror attacks, is the **nodal agency for maritime data fusion**.
- As part of information exchange regarding traffic on the high seas, the Navy has been authorised by the government to conclude **white shipping agreements with 36 countries** and three multilateral constructs. So far agreements have been concluded with 22 countries and one multilateral construct. Of these, 17 agreements and the one multilateral construct have been operationalised.
- At the Navy’s **Information Fusion Centre for the Indian Ocean Region (IFCIOR)** which is meant to promote Maritime Domain Awareness, three more **International Liaison Officers (ILO)** are expected to join soon. The ILOs from France, Japan and the U.S. have joined the centre.
- Under **Phase-I of the coastal radar chain network**, 46 coastal radar stations have been set up across the country’s coastline. Under **Phase-II of the project**, which is currently underway, 38 static radar stations and four mobile radar stations are being set up by the Coast Guard and is in an advanced stage of completion.

16. **Ministry to discuss virus alert in U.K**

- The Health Ministry has called a meeting of its joint monitoring group on COVID-19 on Monday to discuss the emergence of a mutant variant of the coronavirus in the U.K., which has reportedly led to a surge in infections there. The group, chaired by the Director General of Health Services, is also likely to speak with **WHO’s India representative, Roderico H. Ofrin**, also a member of the group.

17. **India, U.S. mull over unfinished work**

- With exactly a month left in the U.S. **President Donald Trump's** tenure, **U.S. Ambassador to India Kenneth Juster** has begun a series of calls on **Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, Petroleum and Natural Gas Minister Dharmendra Pradhan** and **NITI Aayog chief Amitabh Kant**, as well as "farewell discussions" with the U.S.India business chambers, USIBC and USISPF.
- **CAATSA on S-400 deal with Russia ?** Given that the Democrats had pushed for the CAATSA, the government will have to take its chances with President-elect Joe Biden in office providing the waiver once India takes delivery of the S400 systems in 2021.
- **Trade negotiations:** This is another area where New Delhi hopes the Biden administration will pick up where it believes the Trump administration failed to deliver, particularly its **failure to reverse the decision to revoke India's Generalised System of Preferences (GSP)** since June 2019 due to differences in the areas of medical devices, dairy and IT products.
- Meanwhile, officials hopeful of a commercial contract finally being finalised for the decade old **MoU between U.S.-based Westinghouse Electric Company and Nuclear Power Corporation of India Ltd. (NPCIL)** to build six reactors in Andhra Pradesh.
- The growing defence partnership, enhanced military exchanges bolstered by the signing of four foundational agreements: **GSOMIA, LEMOA, COMCASA and BECA**, U.S. grant of the STA1 Strategic Trade Authorisation to India, capped by intelligence sharing and quick procurements during the ongoing standoff between Indian and Chinese troops at the Line of Actual Control (LAC), is clearly at the top of the list of achievements. Added to this is the crystallisation of the "Quad" arrangement.

18. [5 states can borrow extra of 16728 crores](#)

- The Finance Ministry on Sunday said five States, including Tamil Nadu and Telangana, had been permitted to borrow an **additional ₹16,728 crore** following completion of **stipulated reforms to facilitate ease of doing business**. Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Madhya Pradesh are the other States.
- The reforms include completion of the first assessment of '**District Level Business Reform Action Plan**'. Besides, elimination of **requirements of renewal of registration certificates/approvals/licences** obtained by businesses for various activities, at least under certain Acts specified by the Centre, was also part of the reforms. The Centre in May decided to raise the borrowing limit if certain reforms are implemented.

19. [Grand plans for Bose's 125th birth anniversary](#)

- The Centre on Monday decided to set up a high level committee to plan the commemoration of **Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose's 125th birth anniversary in 2022**. In a statement, the Culture Ministry said the committee, headed by Home Minister Amit Shah, would decide on the activities in Delhi, Kolkata and abroad for a **year long commemoration starting January 23, 2021**.
- The panel would include experts, historians, Bose's family members, and eminent persons associated with the **Azad Hind Fauj**, the statement said. **The Indian National Army (Azad Hind Fauj)** was an armed force formed by Indian nationalists and Imperial Japan in 1942 in Southeast Asia during World War II. Its aim was to secure Indian independence from British rule.

20. [Ex-Officials urge PM to review Central Vista plan](#)

- A **group of 69 retired All-India and Central services officers**, under the banner of the **Constitutional Conduct Group**, wrote in an **open letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi** that they were **dismayed at the way the Central Vista project was going ahead** and urged the government to review it in its entirety. They said various aspects of the project, from the inviting of designs and selecting a consultant to obtaining approvals, had been done in a highhanded manner. Mr. Modi had laid the foundation stone for the project on December 10.

21. [Modi awarded 'Legion of Merit' by Donald Trump](#)

- **Prime Minister Narendra Modi was awarded the 'Legion of Merit' by the U.S. President Donald Trump on Monday for his role in advancing the India-U.S. relationship. The award was also presented to former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison.**
- India, the U.S, Japan and Australia constitute **the 'Quad' group of countries** - seen as an alternative to Chinese dominance in the Indo-Pacific region.
- **The Legion of Merit:** Instituted in 1942 by former U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, is awarded to members of the U.S. Armed Forces and also members of foreign (i.e., nonU.S.) Armed Forces and sometimes heads of state or government. The award is presented to foreign recipients in four categories: Chief Commander, Commander, Officer and Legionnaire. Other Indians who have won the award include **Field Marshal K.M. Cariappa**, who received the Legion of Merit (Degree: Chief Commander) in 1949 from then U.S. President Harry S.Truman

22. [Japan, India concur on defence issues](#)

- Exchanging views on regional situations, including the East China Sea and the South China Sea, in light of the current events, Defence Ministers of India and Japan "*concurred*" in sending a clear message that they "*strongly oppose any attempts to unilaterally change the status quo by coercion or any activities that escalate tension*", Japanese Ministry of Defence said in a statement. The views were exchanged during a telephonic conversation between **Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and his Japanese counterpart Kishi Nobuo.**

23. [Yamuna monitoring panel raises several issues on river pollution](#)

- The **Yamuna Monitoring Committee**, in its fifth report submitted to the National Green Tribunal (NGT), has raised multiple issues due to which the river is still polluted, including several agencies missing deadlines related to cleaning the river and internal problems of the organisations. The YMC noted that "*the work to clean the river was nowhere near the achievement of the milestones and timeline laid out by NGT*". The YMC has noted about the Delhi Jal Board which is supposed to handle sewage generated in the city, "*YMC has found the system of monitoring ineffective. There is no evidence that bottlenecks had been brought to the notice of the Board and of the government or the intervention of higher authorities sought.*"

24. [States advised to update Census register](#)

- **The Registrar General of India (RGI)**, which conducts the decennial Census exercise, has written to all State coordinators to update names of an area, locality, colony or a building in the "charge register", an important census document that will help enumerators to collect details during the first phase of Census House Listing and Housing Census and the **National Population Register (NPR)**.
- The **charge register** shows the distribution of work among enumerators and marks the House Listing Blocks (HLB) to be visited by each official. The register will also be used for the field work relating to the updating of NPR. Around **30 lakh enumerators** - government officials and government school teachers - will each be assigned the responsibility to collect the details of 650 to 800 people through **both online and offline mode**. On January 9, the RGI notified the 31 columns for which the enumerators will seek response for the House Listing and Housing Census .
- The questions include - whether the respondent has access to LPG/PNG connection, if the person owns a radio, transistor, television, access to Internet, whether they own a laptop, computer, telephone, mobile phone or a smartphone among other things.
- NPR's link with the **proposed National Register of Citizens** and the yet to be implemented Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019 has been opposed by as many as 13 States and Union Territories. According to the **Citizenship Rules framed in the year 2003**, NPR is the first step towards compilation of the National Register of Indian Citizens or NRC. NPR was first collected in 2010 and then updated in 2015.

25. [Tamil Nadu govt. gives go ahead for jallikattu](#)

- The **Tamil Nadu government has permitted jallikattu** to be held across the State during the coming Pongal season. But the bull taming sport would be subject to fresh restrictions in view of the COVID-19 pandemic. Members of the audience would have to wear masks and adhere to distancing norms.
- **What is jallikattu?** It is a disputed traditional event in which a bull is released into a crowd of people, and multiple human participants attempt to grab the large hump on the bull's back with both arms and hang on to it while the bull attempts to escape. **Jallikattu is typically practised in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu as a part of Pongal celebrations** on Mattu Pongal day, which occurs annually in January.
- As there were incidents of injury and death associated with the sport, both to the participants and to the animals forced into it, **animal rights organizations have called for a ban to the sport**, resulting in the court banning it several times over the past years. However, with protest from the people against the ban, a new ordinance was made in 2017 to continue the sport.

26. **NSCN(K) faction 'revives' ceasefire**

- The newest splinter group of the **Khaplang faction of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland, or NSCN(K)**, has "revived" the ceasefire agreement the outfit had walked out of in March 2015. The development is believed to have virtually completed the alleged **Indian strategy to isolate the Myanmar based Nagas from those on the Indian side of the border** towards settling the elusive **Naga peace process**.
- More than 50 Naga tribes inhabit areas on either side of the India-Myanmar border. **NSCN(K) was formed by Myanmar based S.S. Khaplang in 1988** and had Nagas from both countries in almost equal measure. The NSCN(K), which had declared a ceasefire with the Indian armed forces in 2001, split into several factions since. The core group remained united until Khaplang's death in June 2017 triggered a power struggle within the outfit in Myanmar.

27. **Malayalam poet-activist Sugathakumari no more**

- Eminent **Malayalam poet, conservationist and women's activist, Sugathakumari**, 86, who tested positive for COVID-19, died. Fondly called '*Sugatha teacher*', she was known for her poems filled with empathy, sensitivity and philosophical quest. She led the fiercest environmental campaign seen by Kerala - against a proposal to set up a hydel project in the Silent valley in the Western Ghats three decades ago.

28. **Aero India to be held for three days only**

- In view of COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions, the **13th edition of Aero India scheduled to be held in Bengaluru** in February next year will be held only on three business days and the **public will be able to witness the air display only in virtual mode**, the Defence Ministry said on Wednesday.

29. **Maiden test of MRSAM for Army successful**

- The maiden test of the **Medium Range Surface to Air Missile (MRSAM)** for the Indian Army, being jointly developed by the **Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO)** and **Israel Aircraft Industries (IAI)**, was successfully conducted on Wednesday. The launch was from the test range at Chandipur in Odisha.

30. **Cairn energy wins arbitration award**

- India has been ordered to return up to **\$1.4 billion to Cairn Energy PLC of the U.K.** after an international arbitration overturned tax demanded retrospectively - an award the government indicated it may challenge.
- The three member tribunal unanimously ruled that India's claim of ₹10,247 crore in past taxes over a 2006-07 **internal reorganisation of Cairn's India business** was not a valid demand. India "failed to accord Cairn Energy's investments **fair and equitable treatment**" under the bilateral investment protection pact it had with the U.K., the order stated.

- The government was asked to compensate Cairn “for the total harm suffered,” together with interest and cost of arbitration, according to the order. The total amount payable by the Indian government, including \$200 million of interest and \$22 million of arbitration cost, is **\$1.4 billion (about ₹10,500 crore)**.
 - This is the second loss the government has suffered in three months over the retrospective levy of taxes. In September, the **U.K.’s Vodafone Group** won an international arbitration against the demand of ₹22,100 crore. The present government and its Ministers have, in the past, denounced the **introduction of a retrospective tax** amendment in 2012 by the previous Congress government as **tax terrorism**.
 - **Case Background** : Cairn Energy, which gave the country its biggest oil discovery, was in March 2015 slapped with a tax demand of ₹10,247 crore over alleged **capital gains it made by reorganising its India unit** into a separate subsidiary for listing on local stock exchanges.
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International NEWS/Events/ Personalities

Daily snippets

1. WHO to probe virus origins in China

- A team of international investigators led by the **World Health Organization (WHO)** is likely to go to China in early January to **study the origins of the COVID-19 outbreak**, which first began in Wuhan, in southwestern Hubei province, late last year.
- China has resisted calls for an **independent international inquiry** into the origins but has said it would be open to a WHO-led investigation even as the organisation has come under fire, particularly from the U.S., over its handling of the outbreak in the initial stages.
- Initial attention into the origins of COVID-19 had focused on the **Huanan seafood market in Wuhan**, where an outbreak was first reported in December, although some Chinese health officials have since said the market may have not been the origin, but where the virus first spread.
- Most scientists believe the SARS-CoV2 virus, similar to the first SARS outbreak, likely came from a bat and was passed to humans via an intermediary host. Whether that was one of the live animals sold at the market is among the issues the investigation will look into.
- The mission to China followed a visit by the **WHO Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus** to Beijing, who in a January 28 meeting with **President Xi Jinping** "*praised the seriousness with which China is taking this outbreak, especially the commitment from top leadership, and the transparency they have demonstrated*". Neither mentioned the initial cover up by Wuhan authorities until mid-January, which resulted in the Communist Party leadership in February sacking the party chiefs of both Hubei and Wuhan, as well as two senior provincial health officials

2. Alibaba tech can recognise Uighurs: report

- **China tech giant Alibaba** offered face recognition **software that could enable users to identify Uighurs**, a report said. The references, later removed by Alibaba, appeared on web pages seen by U.S.-based surveillance research firm IPVM. Last week, IPVM said **Chinese company Huawei was involved in testing facial recognition software** that could send alerts to police when it recognised Uighur faces. Huawei has denied the claims.

3. Hope to improve ties under Biden govt.: Putin

- **Russian President Vladimir Putin** said that he hopes the administration of the incoming U.S. President Joe Biden will work with Russia to resolve disagreements between their countries. The Russian leader said he believes Mr. Trump is unlikely to leave U.S. political life after his term in office ends, saying the outgoing President has "a large base" of support. Mr. Putin has already won four presidential elections and recently changed the constitution to allow him to remain President until 2036.

4. Boko Haram kidnapped over 300 students in Nigeria

- **Boko Haram** kidnapped the schoolboys because it believes Western education is unIslamic, the rebels' leader, Abubakar Shekau, said in a video claiming responsibility for the attack, according to SITE Intelligence Group.
- Residents of Katsina State plan to protest on Thursday, saying the government is not doing enough to protect its youth. Armed bandits have killed more than 1,100 people since the beginning of the year in Nigeria's northwest, according to Amnesty International. For over 10 years, **Boko Haram has engaged in a bloody campaign to introduce strict Islamic rule** in northern Nigeria.
- **What is Boko Haram ?** : The Islamic State in West Africa, commonly known as Boko Haram, is a jihadist terrorist organization based in northeastern Nigeria, also active in Chad, Niger and northern Cameroon.

5. [Cyberattack on govt. still going on: U.S. agencies](#)

- U.S. intelligence agencies have warned that a "significant" cyberattack on several federal departments uncovered over the weekend remains ongoing as the government rushes to assess the extent of the breach.
- The March attack on software created by Texas Based **IT company SolarWinds** - in which hackers installed malware - continued for months until it was discovered by **cybersecurity company FireEye**. Both companies pointed fingers at hackers linked to the Russian government. Hackers reportedly breached software used by the **U.S. Treasury Department and the Commerce Department**, allowing them to view internal email traffic.
- SolarWinds said up to 18,000 customers, which included government agencies and Fortune 500 companies, had downloaded the compromised software updates, allowing hackers to spy on email exchanges. The content the hackers sought to steal, and how successful they were, remains unknown at this time. **U.S. National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien** cut short a trip to the Middle East and Europe this week to deal with the fallout from the hack.

6. [344 abducted Nigerian boys freed](#)

- More than 300 Nigerian schoolboys who were seized in a **mass abduction claimed by Boko Haram** experienced their first full day of freedom on Friday after a six day ordeal. The assault last Friday on a rural school in Kankara was initially blamed on criminal gangs who have terrorised the region for years. But on Tuesday, **Boko Haram, the brutal jihadist group behind the abduction of 276 schoolgirls in Chibok in 2014**, claimed responsibility for the raid.
- It remained unclear, however, if all the abducted schoolboys had been released, amid ongoing uncertainty over the number taken in the first place.
- **What is Boko Haram ?** The Islamic State in West Africa, commonly known as Boko Haram, is a jihadist terrorist organization based in northeastern Nigeria, also active in Chad, Niger and northern Cameroon. For over 10 years, **Boko Haram has engaged in a bloody campaign to introduce strict Islamic rule** in northern Nigeria

7. [Alibaba 'dismayed' by facial-recognition tech](#)

- **Tech giant Alibaba** said in a statement it was "dismayed" that **Alibaba Cloud had developed software that could recognise Uighurs**. "*We do not and will not permit our technology to be used to target or identify specific ethnic groups,*" it said.

8. [Iran starts nuclear facility work amid U.S. tensions](#)

- Iran has begun **construction on a site at its underground nuclear facility at Fordow** amid tensions with the U.S. over its atomic programme, satellite photos obtained by the Associated Press show. Iran has not publicly acknowledged any new construction at Fordow, whose discovery by the West in 2009 came in an earlier round of brinkmanship before **world powers struck the 2015 nuclear deal with Tehran**.

- While the purpose of the building remains unclear, any work at Fordow will likely trigger new concern in the waning days of the Trump administration before the inauguration of U.S. President-elect Joe Biden. Already, **Iran is building at its Natanz nuclear facility** after a mysterious explosion in July there that Tehran described as a sabotage attack.

9. [U.S. cyberattack is widening: Microsoft](#)

- A devastating **cyberattack on U.S. government agencies** has also hit targets worldwide, with the list of victims still growing, according to researchers, heightening fears over computer security and espionage. Microsoft said on Thursday it had notified over 40 customers hit by the malware, which experts say came from **hackers linked to the Russian government** and which could **allow attackers unfettered network access**.

10. [U.S. planning to close its last two consulates in Russia](#)

- Donald Trump's outgoing administration is planning to **close the two remaining U.S. consulates in Russia**, as President-elect Joe Biden prepares to take office amid high tensions with Moscow. The U.S. will close its consulate in the far eastern city of Vladivostok and suspend operations at its post in Yekaterinburg.
- CNN reported that a State Department letter to Congress this month said the move was a response to *"ongoing staffing challenges for the U.S. Mission in Russia in the wake of the 2017 Russian imposed personnel cap on the U.S. Mission"*. The closures would leave the Embassy as the last U.S. diplomatic mission in Russia. Moscow ordered the closure of the U.S. consulate in St. Petersburg in March 2018 during a diplomatic spat sparked by the **poisoning of Sergei Skripal** on British soil.

11. [U.S. approves Moderna as second vaccine](#)

- The **U.S. on Friday authorised Moderna's COVID-19 vaccine** for emergency use, as the country grapples with a brutal winter surge that is killing over 2,500 people a day. It is the second vaccine to be deployed by the country after the one developed by **Pfizer and BioNTech**.

12. [New virus strain out of control: U.K](#)

- **British Health Secretary Matt Hancock** said that the government has imposed a **strict Christmas lockdown** in London and southeast England because a **new strain of the coronavirus was "out of control"**. The World Health Organization is calling on its members in Europe to step up measures against COVID-19.
- **Prime Minister Boris Johnson** announced on Saturday that **millions must cancel Christmas plans and stay home** because the new strain was spreading far more quickly.

13. [Over 340 students in Nigeria back with parents after ordeal](#)

- Nigeria's freed schoolboys have reunited with their parents after being held captive for nearly a week by gunmen allied with jihadist rebels in the country's northwest. Many of the schoolboys expressed **worry about returning to school**, saying their **captors threatened them with death** if they went back to classes.
- **Nigeria's Boko Haram jihadist rebels** claimed responsibility for the abductions, saying they attacked the school because **they believe Western education is unIslamic**. Another abduction of more than 80 students happened on Saturday night in an area nearby, but the pupils were quickly rescued by security forces after a fierce gun battle

14. [PM Oli's move to call for snap polls](#)

- Nepal expected to capitalise on the tourism sector and planned to declare itself as a Himalayan power with a brand new global think tank meeting called *'Sagarmatha Samvaad'*. At the end, however, COVID-19 and a

political crisis within the ruling Nepal Communist Party prompted **Nepal PM Mr. KP sharma Oli** to take an unscripted path.

- Mr. Oli on Sunday sprang a surprise on his rivals and got the President to dissolve Parliament, a controversial move amidst a prolonged **tussle for power between him and former premier Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda'** within the ruling dispensation.
- **Why did Prime Minister Oli dissolve Parliament when the House had two more years to serve?**
- One of the main issues was the **growing dissatisfaction over Mr. Oli's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic**. Nepal is yet to zero in on a viable vaccine as a result of the disorder in this crucial matter. The breakdown in the political dialogue within the Nepal Communist Party is largely because of **Mr. Oli's hunger for power**. He **acted to avert a no-confidence-motion** that was being mooted by some of his colleagues. But for the success of his "coup", he also **requires support from the judiciary** and parts of the NCP. The coming days will determine if Mr. Oli will pass the biggest test of his career.

15. Pakistan signs \$1.7 bn debt relief deal

- Pakistan has secured a **\$1.7 billion debt relief agreement to help offset the financial headwinds sparked by the COVID-19 pandemic**. The deal, following months of negotiations with creditors, will provide a moratorium on debt payments for large swathes of the current fiscal year and help ease the cash strapped country's massive financial obligations.

16. U.S. Congress agrees on \$900 bn stimulus

- U.S. lawmakers agreed on a nearly **\$900 billion COVID-19 relief package** for millions of Americans on Sunday, in a deal that follows months of wrangling and which comes as the nation battles the world's largest COVID-19 outbreak. The package includes aid for vaccine distribution and logistics, extra jobless benefits of \$300 per week, and a new round of \$600 stimulus checks - half the amount provided in checks distributed in March under the CARES Act. The agreement also contains **\$25 billion in housing aid** to prevent evictions and nearly \$100 billion to help schools and childcare facilities re-open.

17. U.K. cut off as new virus strain sparks fear

- **The United Kingdom was on Monday shut off from much of Europe** after its closest allies cut transport ties due to **fears about a new strain of the novel coronavirus**, sparking chaos for families and companies just days before the country exits the European Union's orbit.
- France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Austria, Switzerland, Ireland, Belgium, Israel and Canada shut off travel ties after **Prime Minister Boris Johnson warned that a highly infectious new strain of the virus was a danger to the country**. Mr. Johnson will chair an emergency response meeting on Monday to discuss international travel, in particular the flow of freight in and out of Britain.

18. Military drills by China-Pakistan

- Amid increasing tensions with India, China on Monday asked India to view "objectively" the ongoing **month long military exercises being conducted by the Chinese and Pakistani air forces**. Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, visited an air force base in the southeast of the country, in Sindh, to view the "**ShaheenIX**" or **EagleIX** exercise, the **ninth such exercise held between the Pakistan Air Force and the People's Liberation Army Air Force since 2011**.

19. 'Let-up unlikely in Xinjiang crackdown, but focus shifting'

- A **Chinese Communist Party (CCP)** official signalled that there would likely be **no letup in its crackdown in the remote Xinjiang region**, but said the **government's focus is shifting more to addressing the roots of extremism**. China's policies in **Xinjiang - home to the Uighurs and other predominantly Muslim ethnic groups** - have become a major point of division with the U.S. and other Western nations over alleged **human rights violations**.
- Analysts say **China has detained more than a million people in Xinjiang**, forcing many to give up at least elements of their faith and traditions. Chinese officials tout the success of their effort to **deradicalise the population and provide job training**, saying the region has not had a terrorist attack in four years.

20. [Mayhem in Nigeria](#)

- The childrens' return to freedom is but a temporary reprieve for the government of **President Muhammadu Buhari**, whose response to the decade-old **Boko Haram jihadist insurgency** has come under increasing scrutiny.
- **Failure to combat insurgency:** The gruesome **abduction of over 600 boys on December 11** night, reportedly carried out by proxies of Boko Haram, in Katsina in the country's northwestern region shows how the organisation has expanded into new territory. The ghastly incident was a chilling reminder of the **2014 kidnapping of 276 girls in the town of Chibok** in the northeastern Ekiti province. Many of them are still missing. The **massacre of at least 110 rice farmers and fishermen** in November, coinciding with local elections in the northeastern State of Borno, is the **most brutal incident this year**, according to Nigeria's UN humanitarian coordinator.
- **Crackdown on protests:** The official stance of denial stretches beyond tackling insurgency. This was evident in the crackdown on countrywide protests in October demanding the **disbanding of the infamous federal Special AntiRobbery Squad (SARS)**. The unrest, which was triggered by visuals going viral of one of the SARS officers shooting down a man in Lagos city, left at least 15 people dead, according to Amnesty International. The **Special Weapons and Tactics Team** that has replaced SARS is seen as a cure worse than the ailment.

21. [WHO calls meeting on new virus variant](#)

- The **World Health Organization (WHO)** will convene a meeting of members to discuss **strategies to counter a new, more infectious coronavirus strain** that emerged in Britain. The WHO cautioned against major alarm over the variant, saying it was **a normal part of a pandemic's evolution**. It also praised Britain for detecting it.
- Meanwhile, **Pfizer Inc.** and **Moderna Inc.** said they are **testing their COVID-19 vaccines against the new, fast spreading version of the virus**. The main worry is that the **new variant is 40%-70% more transmissible**.

22. [Israel on the brink of fourth poll in two years](#)

- Israel was headed for its fourth election in less than two years, with its **Parliament set to dissolve** at midnight after lawmakers rejected a lastditch effort to salvage the fractured ruling coalition. The government headed by **Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu** had been inching towards collapse for weeks and now the rightwing incumbent looks set to face a re-election battle as his longawaited trial on corruption charges gets under way next year.
- The coalition, led by Mr. Netanyahu's **Likud** and his rival Benny Gantz's centrist **Blue and White party**, has until the start of Wednesday to pass a 2020 budget or Parliament will automatically dissolve. Mr. Gantz demanded the government pass a budget covering both 2020 and 2021, arguing Israel needs stability. But Mr. Netanyahu has refused to endorse a 2021 budget.

23. [China slams U.S. over Tibet Bill, S. China Sea 'trespass'](#)

- The United States and China **sparred over Tibet and the South China Sea**, with new moves from Washington marking the start of the last month of President Donald Trump in office fuelling fresh tensions in an already fraught relationship.
- On Tuesday, China hit out at the U.S. for passing the **Tibetan Policy and Support Act (TPSA)**, a landmark legislation that calls for the **opening of a U.S. consulate in Lhasa** and also underlines **U.S. backing for the Dalai Lama** to determine his successor.
- China also slammed new moves by the Trump administration to add 58 Chinese companies to a list of firms that it says have links to the Chinese military and to restrict visas for Chinese officials linked with human rights abuses. Both sides also clashed over the South China Sea, with the Chinese military saying it had “warned” a **U.S. destroyer sailing in waters off the disputed Spratly islands** (called Nansha by China). This was the ninth freedom of navigation operation conducted this year by the U.S., the most in the past five years.

24. [Nepal’s ruling party appears headed for split](#)

- The ruling **Nepal Communist Party** appeared to be headed for a split after the warring factions held separate Central Committee meetings, with **Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli** announcing a new 1,199 member committee to organise the party’s general convention in an effort to strengthen his hold on it. The **rival faction led by Mr. Prachanda** also held a separate Central Committee meeting in Kathmandu
- Nepal on Sunday plunged into a **political crisis after Mr. Oli got the President to dissolve Parliament**, a controversial move amidst a prolonged **tussle for power between him and former premier Pushpa Kamal Dahal ‘Prachanda’** within the ruling dispensation.

25. [UN rights expert urges Trump to pardon Assange](#)

- A UN rights expert **urged outgoing U.S. President Donald Trump to pardon Julian Assange**, saying the **WikiLeaks founder** is not “*an enemy of the American people*”.
- Mr. Assange, 49, is currently being held in the top security Belmarsh jail in London awaiting a January 4 decision by a British judge on a U.S. extradition request, in a case seen by his supporters as a cause celebre for media freedom. The Australian publisher faces 18 charges in the U.S. relating to the **2010 release by WikiLeaks of 500,000 secret files detailing aspects of military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq**.

26. [Putin expects ties with U.S. to remain same under Biden](#)

- **Russian President Vladimir Putin** told senior Russian officials he was not expecting any change in relations with the U.S. after Mr. Biden takes office, speaking after the **President-elect Joe Biden promised to punish Russia for a major cyberattack**.

27. [‘U.K. strain unlikely to affect efficacy of vaccines’](#)

- According to Jeremy Farrar, director of the London Based research charity Wellcome Trust UK, there is no indication at the moment that **the new strain, VUI202012/0**, which was detected on September 21, would evade treatments and vaccines.
- Preliminary modelling results suggest that **the variant is significantly more transmissible than previously circulating variants**, with an estimated increase in **reproductive number (R) by 0.4** or greater with an estimated increased **transmissibility of up to 70%**.
- “The new strain of the virus is known to have **13 mutations in the spike protein of which the N501Y mutation is responsible for it spreading 70% faster** than earlier versions of the virus. The **new variant has mutations to the spike protein** that the three leading vaccines are targeting. The vaccines are **Moderna, Pfizer and Oxford-AstraZeneca**.

28. Britain, France reopen cross-Channel travel

- **France and Britain reopened cross-Channel travel** after a 48 hour ban to curb the spread of a new coronavirus variant but London has warned it could take days for thousands of trucks blocked around the port of Dover to get moving.
- The major transit hub reopened following an agreement between London and Paris to allow hauliers stranded in the U.K. to leave the country if they could produce a negative coronavirus test that was less than 72 hours old. Much of Europe had swiftly banned British travellers following the emergence of a more transmissible variant of COVID19 in Britain, and France's decision to block freight movements sparked fears of food shortages.

29. Situation in seized C. African town under control, says UN

- The **Central African Republic's** fourth largest town, which was seized by rebels on Tuesday ahead of elections this weekend, is back in the hands of United Nations peacekeepers and national security forces, the UN said.
- The conflict followed a Dec. 3 court decision to bar **former President Francois Bozize** from participating presidential and legislative elections on Sunday. At the request of the CAR, **Russia and Rwanda have sent military personnel to support** the troubled country.
- The **Central African Republic is a resource-rich country**. Timber, gold and diamonds dominate its exports. The country has seen deadly **inter-religious and inter-communal fighting since 2013**, when predominantly Muslim Seleka rebels seized power in Bangui.

Opinion/Explainer : The long Russian arms in the skies

1. **Sanctions on Turkey:** On December 14, the **U.S. imposed sanctions on Turkey**, a NATO ally, **over its procurement of the S400 Triumf long range air defence system from Russia**. Announcing a series of measures under the **Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA)**, USA also cautioned other countries: "*We hope that other countries around the world will also take note that the U.S. will fully implement CAATSA Section 231 sanctions and that they should avoid further acquisitions of Russian equipment.*" In addition to Turkey, in July 2018, **China became the first export customer to receive the S400 and got sanctioned by the U.S.** under CAATSA
2. **Specifications of S-400:** S400 (NATO name SA21 Growler) is considered one of the **world's most advanced air defence** systems that can simultaneously track and neutralise a range of incoming objects spanning aircraft, missiles and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) over very long ranges. The **S400 is fully mobile** and each system has a 3D phased array acquisition radar, which can **track around 300 targets up to 600 km**, a command and control centre, automatic tracking and targeting systems, launchers and support vehicles. The different ranges and varying altitudes create a layered air defence net.
3. **Sanctions on India over deal with Russia ?:**
 - In October 2018, **India had signed a \$5.43 billion deal with Russia for five S400 regiments**. Russian officials have stated that **deliveries would begin by 2021**. The system would complement India's indigenous Ballistic Missile Defence system developed by the Defence Research and Development Organisation and create a multi-tier air defence over the country. Indian Air Force (IAF) officials have stated that the S400 would be seamlessly integrated into the country's existing air defence network.
 - **India is also acquiring several high end military platforms from the U.S.**, which includes P81 maritime reconnaissance aircraft, AH64E Apache attack helicopters and CH47(I) Chinook heavy lift helicopters, and

recently leased two MQ9B Predator high altitude long endurance drones. The **issue of imposing CAATSA sanctions would come up before the incoming Joe Biden administration** most likely when India starts taking the deliveries next year.

Opinion/Explainer : The Islamic State in Africa : Boko Haram

1. **Background** : Abduction of hundreds of school boys in Katsina State in the northwest on December 11. Boko Haram released a video showing the boys in distress, before most of them were released on Friday after talks between the authorities and the kidnappers. The jihadists said they carried out the operation as the school was providing “unIslamic teachings”.
2. The attack on schools and children is nothing new for the group. **Boko Haram’s founder Mohammed Yusuf**, a popular cleric based in Maiduguri in Borno, was a vocal opponent of Nigeria’s school system, which he called the “western education” system. Boko Haram, whose official Arabic name was ‘**Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad**’, the locals called them Boko Haram (which in the Hausa language means ‘Western education is forbidden’) because of their hard-line opposition to the school system.
3. Yusuf wanted to “purify” the practice of Islam and create an Islamic State. In 2009, he started an insurgency from Maiduguri. The Nigerian troops responded with heavy force. They captured the group’s headquarters, killed hundreds of its supporters and militants, including Yusuf and claimed that Boko Haram was finished. The group regrouped under **Abubakar Shekau**. Even after the Islamic State core was defeated in Iraq and Syria and its leader, **Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi**, was killed, Boko Haram continued to remain a potent terrorist machinery.
4. The last two years have been deadlier for Nigeria’s security forces, according to the U.S. Council on Foreign relations, Between June and November, more than 200 people have been murdered or kidnapped in and around Maiduguri. Boko Haram is still standing strong, expanding its reach from **Nigeria to Niger and Cameroon**.





Science & Technology and Environment

[Daily snippets](#)

1. [First potential radio signal from exoplanet](#)

- An international team of scientists has collected the **first possible radio signal from a planet beyond our solar system**, emanating from an exoplanet system about 51 lightyears away. Using the **Low Frequency Array (LOFAR)**, a radio telescope in the Netherlands, the researchers uncovered emission bursts from the Tau Bootes star system hosting a so-called hot Jupiter, a gaseous giant planet that is very close to its own sun.
- If confirmed through followup observations, the researchers said, this radio detection opens up a new window on exoplanets and **provides a novel way to examine alien worlds that are tens of lightyears away.**
- **What is exoplanet?:** All of the planets in our solar system orbit around the Sun. Planets that orbit around other stars are called exoplanets. Exoplanets are very hard to see directly with telescopes. They are hidden by the bright glare of the stars they orbit. So astronomers search for exoplanets by looking at the effects these planets have on the stars they orbit.

2. [The 'Great Conjunction'](#)

- A vibrant spectacle when two gas giants, Jupiter and Saturn travelled together across the sky. Such an event, also called the 'Christmas Star', is projected to happen again after 60 years. They came in close conjunction after 367 years.
- Though the conjunctions happen every 20 years, the great conjunction on December 21 was the closest observable since 1226. The planets were separated by just one-tenth of a degree. December 21 also happened to be the Winter Solstice in the northern hemisphere.
- In 1610, Italian astronomer Galileo Galilei discovered the four moons of Jupiter - **Io, Europa, Ganymede and Callisto**. In the same year, he also discovered the rings surrounding Saturn. In 1623, the '**Great Conjunction**' was observed.

3. [New irrigation model to help desert villagers](#)

- A new model of minor irrigation through **subsurface porous vessels (SSPV)** is being developed which is set to benefit the farmers with small land holdings in the **villages of the Thar desert**. Experiments have indicated a higher yield of farm produce and improvement in the nutrient value of soil after the installation of frustum shaped vessels at the mounds formed on land.
- The initiative was undertaken after the COVID lockdown to address the issues of non availability of food material, malnutrition among children and the villagers' inability to earn livelihood in the cities.
- A SSPV is made of location specific clay and sawdust, mixed in a proportion to suit the desert sand, press formed to the frustum shape and baked at a temperature of 750-800 degree Celsius with the addition of a carbon layer in its structure. The SSPVs, with the storage of 8 to 9 litres of water, supplies it to a radius of land measuring 1.25 metres.

4. [CMI to set up Dr. F.C. Kohli centre for Excellence](#)

- The **Chennai Mathematical Institute (CMI)** will establish the **Dr. F.C. Kohli Centre of Excellence** for Advanced Research in Mathematical and Computing Sciences “in honour of the visionary who created and shaped the **IT industry in India** and made it synonymous with excellence, globally”. Besides establishing a Centre of Excellence and Endowed Chairs, it would provide grants for advanced research in areas such as data science, quantum computing and complexity theory.

5. [Western Ghats home to 3,387 leopards](#)

- The **Western Ghats region is home to 3,387 leopards** stealthily roaming around its forests. Karnataka tops the list with 1,783 leopards, followed by Tamil Nadu with 868, according to the **Status of Leopards in India 2018 report**. With 650 leopards, Kerala has the third highest number of big cats in the Western Ghats region. Goa has 86.
- “The Western Ghats is home to 3,387 leopards, against India’s population of 12,852,” says the report released recently by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change. The leopard population was counted during the **tiger population assessment undertaken in 2018**.
- A total of 6,758 leopard photographs were obtained from Western Ghats from **camera traps**. While noting that the leopard population had increased in most of the tiger reserves in the Western Ghats landscape, the report cautioned that the growing human population and increasing fragmentation of landscape led to **increased human-wildlife interactions in the region**.

6. [Great Indian Bustards conservation](#)

- The Ministry of Environment Forest and Climate Change, along with the **Wildlife Conservation Society, India**, has come up with a unique initiative — a “**firefly bird diverter**” for overhead power lines in areas where **Great Indian Bustard (GIB)** populations are found in the wild. The GIB is one of the **most critically threatened species in India**, with fewer than 150 birds left in the wild. The power lines, especially high voltage transmission lines with multiple overhead wires, are the most important current threat for GIBs in the **Thar region**, and are causing unsustainably high mortality in about 15% of their population.
- “Firefly bird diverters are flaps installed on power lines. They work as reflectors for bird species like the GIB. Birds can spot them from a distance of about 50 metres and change their path of flight to avoid collision with power lines. Smaller birds can change their direction [swiftly] but for larger bird species, it is difficult because of their body weight and other factors,” said Anil Kumar, team leader of the GIB project undertaken by WCS India. This model has been endorsed by experts from the **International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Species Survival Commission’s (SSC) Bustard Specialist Group**. GIBs are found in the Desert National Park Sanctuary in Jaisalmer. GIBs are one of the heaviest flying birds in India.

[Opinion/Explainer : Ethical challenges of vaccinating people with comorbidities](#)

1. **Background:** The **operational guidelines for COVID-19 vaccination** issued recently by the **union health ministry** has identified the four high-risk groups - **health care workers, frontline workers, persons over 50 years of age, and persons younger than 50 years with comorbidities** - that would receive COVID vaccine on priority.
2. **Problems of Identification**
 - There are no national databases of people with comorbidities. Identification, thus, will be an issue. However, though not comprehensive, since 2010, State governments have been conducting population based district level screening to detect noncommunicable diseases under the **National Program for the Prevention and Control of**

Cancer, Diabetes, Cardiovascular Diseases and Stroke (NPCDCS) guidelines. Also, as part of the **Ayushman Bharat initiative**, States have been carrying out universal screening of people aged over 30 years.

- As per the **National Centre for Disease Control, New Delhi**, hypertension, diabetes, liver disease, heart disease, asthma, chronic renal failure, **chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)**, cancer and bronchitis have been associated with hospitalisation and disease severity.

3. Comorbidities to target

- The evidence available is sufficient to indicate the degree of severity amongst the comorbidities. As per the evidence elsewhere, diabetes, hypertension, coronary artery disease and chronic kidney disease increase the risk of COVID-19. Thus, should people with two or more comorbidities be prioritised over those with just one. Specialists are of the opinion that people with multiple comorbidities are at greater risk and hence should be prioritised over those with a single comorbidity.
- In general, elderly people with multimorbidity, elderly with any comorbidity, elderly, young with multi-morbidity, and young with any comorbidity seems to be a sensible order of priority. Duration of chronic disease would have an impact on physiology, and therefore those with longer duration of the conditions would be more at risk.

4. Health inequality in India

- Poor people and those living in rural areas very often are unaware of their disease status. Any policy that excludes people with newly diagnosed disease will inevitably affect the poor. This will unduly favour the rich and educated who keep documentation and thereby further exacerbate health inequality. A comprehensive effort thus should be done to test the blood glucose levels and blood pressure to make a new diagnosis and vaccinate them.
- In addition to using the NCD database, States should allow people with comorbidities to self report and also conduct a quick survey to screen, enrol and schedule the vulnerable for vaccination in the entire country.

5. The Gender issue

- Another ethical challenge revolves around gender. Males have been found to be at a greater risk of progressing to severe disease and even dying compared with females. Should males with comorbidities then be prioritised over females with comorbidities.





Economics and Finance

Daily snippets

1. Apple puts Wistron on notice after factory riots

- Apple Inc. has placed **Wistron Corp.** on probation, saying it would not award the Taiwanese contract manufacturer new business until it addressed the way workers were treated at its plant in Karnataka. Apple's early findings showed violations of its '**Supplier Code of Conduct**'. Contract workers, angry over unpaid wages, destroyed property, gear and iPhones on Dec. 12, causing millions of dollars in losses to Wistron and forcing it to shut the plant. Apple said Wistron had failed to implement proper working hour management processes.
- Wistron in a statement acknowledged mistakes at the new facility, expressing regret and apologising to all its workers, it removed the Vice President who oversaw the India business. It also said that the company has set up a 24-hour **multilingual grievance hotline** to ensure all workers would voice concerns anonymously. Apple said it will continue to monitor Wistron's progress on corrective action.
- The Apple probation will hurt Wistron's manufacturing push in India where it had committed to **invest some ₹13 billion** over the next five years as part of India's production linked incentive plan for smartphone manufacturing. The Wistron probation will likely also dent Apple's plans to scale up in India. Apple began the assembly of its first iPhone model in India via Wistron in 2017.

2. Budget to prioritise investments in healthcare : Finance Minister

- With the revival of the Indian economy being the primary focus, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Friday hinted that the Union Budget for 2021-22 would assign top billing to health sector concerns, while addressing the implications of the post-pandemic world for industry and the workforce.
- *"Considering the size of our population, and the potential India holds for good growth-related building of our economy, I wouldn't hesitate to say that we shall be the engine of global growth, along with a few other countries, of course,"* she said.
- She further added that, *"Health and investment in health takes top notch priority, not just to keep us safer, but also to make health and health related expenditure more predictable; for people not to do it out-of-pocket, some kind of provisions to be made for that."* The Budget will also try to leverage India's strengths in areas such as vaccine production to encourage investment in research and development in biotech and pharmaceuticals, she said.

3. US blacklists dozens of Chinese companies

- The U.S. added dozens of Chinese firms, including the **country's top chipmaker SMIC** and Chinese drone manufacturer SZ DJI Technology Co. Ltd., to a trade blacklist on Friday. The U.S. Commerce Department said the action against SMIC stems from Beijing's efforts to harness civilian technologies for military purposes and evidence of activities between SMIC and Chinese military industrial firms.

4. India plans adoption of E20 fuel to cut vehicular emissions

- The government proposed the adoption of E20fuel - a blend of 20% of ethanol and gasoline - as an automobile fuel in order to reduce vehicular emissions as well as the country's oil import bill. The current permissible level of blending is **10% of ethanol** though India reached only 5.6% of blending in 2019.
- The notification adds that *"It will also help in reducing emissions of carbon dioxide, hydrocarbons, etc. It will help reduce the oil import bill, thereby saving foreign exchange and boosting energy security"*. Ethanol is a biofuel and a common by-product of biomass left by agricultural feedstock such as corn, sugarcane, hemp, potato, etc.

5. [Reliance, BP start gas output from ultra-deepwater R-Cluster](#)

- Reliance Industries Ltd. (RIL) and BP plc have announced the start of production from R-Cluster, the **ultra-deep-water gas field in the KG basin's D6 block**. The two partners are developing three deep-water gas projects in KGD6 — R Cluster, Satellites Cluster and MJ — which together are expected to meet 15% of India's gas demand by 2023, RIL said in a statement.
- R-Cluster is the first of the three projects to come on stream. *"Located at a water depth of greater than 2,000 m, it is the deepest off-shore gas field in Asia. The field is expected to reach plateau gas production of about 12.9 million standard cubic meters per day (mmscmd) in 2021,"* RIL said. Peak gas production from the fields is expected to be around 30 mmscmd.

6. [Users want mobiles to be 5G ready : CMR study](#)

- 5G readiness is one of the top three considerations amongst premium smartphone users (83%) in India, just behind battery life (84%) and smartphone brand imagery (84%), as per a study titled **'The 5G Future Now.'**
- 5G has enabled explosive growth in **video content creation**, especially short form videos, amongst consumers in **China and Western Europe**, according to the study from CMR. Similar trends are expected in India, the study further showed.
- *"I believe that when 5G becomes available in India within the next two years, it will give a considerable thrust to the increasing trend of short form video creation and sharing, amongst millennials,"* said Prabhu Ram, head industry intelligence group, CMR.

7. [NIIF master fund gets \\$107 million investment](#)

- **The National Investment and Infrastructure Fund (NIIF)** announced a \$107 million investment into its 'master fund' from Canada's PSP Investments, US International Development Finance Corporation and Axis Bank. After the new commitment, the overall size of the 'master fund' has touched \$2.34 billion and NIIF announced the final close of the master fund.
- What is NIIF ? It is India's first **infrastructure specific investment fund** or a sovereign wealth fund that was set up by the Government of India in 2015. The objective behind creating this fund was to maximize economic impact **mainly through infrastructure investment** in commercially viable projects, both Greenfield and Brownfield.

8. [GDP growth likely to turn positive in Q3 : NCAER](#)

- Having witnessed a contraction in the first half of the current financial year, India's GDP growth is likely to turn positive at 0.1% in the October December quarter, **economic think tank NCAER** said. It, in its mid year review of the Indian economy, also forecast 2% growth in the fourth quarter (January March 2021). The overall contraction in the current fiscal is likely to be contained at 7.3%.
- India's economy **contracted by 23.9% in the first quarter** of the current fiscal on the account of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The contraction **narrowed to 7.5% in the second quarter**.

9. [Raw jute shortage may hit Rabi crop packaging](#)

- With continuous disruptions in raw jute supplies to mills, manufacturing of gunny bags has been severely hit, which may adversely impact packaging of Rabi crops. Estimates suggest that the quantity of raw jute being hoarded could be about 20 lakh bales, and supplies to mills are at about 50% as against their requirements.

10. [Central government to set up development finance entity in 3-4 months](#)

- The government plans to set up a **Development Finance Institution (DFI)** in the next three to four months with a view to mobilise the ₹111 lakh crore required for funding of the ambitious **national infrastructure pipeline**. "We need a development financial institution as infra financing needs patient capital, and banks are currently not suited for lending for long-term projects which do not generate any cash for years," said Financial Services Secretary Debasish Panda.
- The proposed DFI would also provide funding to enhance credit rating of projects and will help fund projects where others are not willing to enter because of the risks involved. In her last Budget speech, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman had proposed to set up DFIs for promoting infrastructure funding. About **7,000 projects have been identified under the National Infrastructure Pipeline** with projected investment of ₹111 lakh crore during 2020-25.

11. [Government approves 100% FDI in DTH service](#)

- The Union Cabinet approved **100% Foreign Direct Investment (FDI)** in direct to home (DTH) services, extension of the licence period from 10 years to 20 and a reduced licence fee. The licence fee had been reduced in keeping with the rates in the telecom sector. Currently, India has **18 crore television sets**.

12. [Bharti Airtel beats Jio in customer addition race](#)

- India's telecom subscriber base **grew to more than 1.17 billion** in October with Bharti Airtel maintaining its leadership in mobile subscriber addition, according to the monthly report released by sector regulator TRAI. This is the second consecutive month in which Airtel added the highest number of subscribers. In September, it had regained the leadership position in subscriber addition after a gap of four years.
- Airtel has a subscriber base of 330.28 million, Jio has a subscriber base of 406.35 million. The other four mobile service providers - Vodafone Idea Ltd. (VIL), BSNL, MTNL and Reliance Communications, reported loss of subscriber base. India's overall telecom subscriber base, rose to **1,171.8 million from 1,168.66 million** in September.

13. [GST registration procedure and physical verification](#)

- The government has introduced mandatory physical verification of business premises for the purposes of obtaining GST registration. The GST Council Secretariat said that the move, **aimed at controlling the menace of GST fake invoice frauds**, was recommended by the Council's law committee.
- Another rule has been introduced by the Central board of indirect Taxes and Customs that mandates businesses with monthly turnover of over ₹50 lakh to pay at least 1% of their GST liability in cash instead of using input tax credits to discharge their entire liability. The validity of e-way bills has also been tweaked, doubling the distance to be covered for each day of validity

14. [RBI warns customers of illegal digital lending apps](#)

- The Reserve Bank of India has advised the public to be wary of unauthorised digital lending platforms and mobile apps. It urged them to verify antecedents of the company/ firm offering loans online or through mobile apps. The RBI said the reports cited the excessive rates of interest and additional hidden charges demanded

from borrowers; adoption of unacceptable and highhanded recovery methods; and misuse of agreements to access data on the mobile phones of the borrowers.

- Cautioning people against falling prey to “such unscrupulous activities,” the RBI said “*legitimate public lending activities can be undertaken by banks, **non banking financial companies** (NBFCs) registered with RBI and other entities who are regulated by the State governments under statutory provisions, such as the money lending acts of the States concerned.*” The RBI said it had mandated digital lending platforms used on behalf of banks and NBFCs to disclose the name of the bank(s) or NBFC (s) upfront to the customers. Coordinates of NBFCs registered can be accessed on RBI website.





Sports

Daily snippets

1. Russia banned from Olympics, FIFA WC

- The **Court of Arbitration for Sport** upheld doping sanctions that will prevent Russian athletes from competing at major international events under the country's flag, but halved the period of the ban to two from four years. The ruling will leave Russian athletes without their flag and national anthem at next year's **Tokyo Olympics and at the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar**, a severe blow to Russian sport which has been tarnished in recent years by a **string of doping scandals**.
- Russian government officials or representatives will be banned from attending events such as the Olympics and World championships in major sports for a two-year period. Russians will also not be able to be appointed to or sit on committees or serve as board members at organisations that must abide by the **World Anti Doping Agency's (WADA) code**.

2. Messi equals Pele's record

- Lionel Messi scored his **643rd goal for Barcelona** to equal Pele's record of most goals for a single club (Santos) as the Catalans were held to a 2-2 draw at Camp Nou in La Liga on Saturday.

3. Gold for Amit Panghal

- **Amit Panghal (52kg)** claimed gold without having to fight his final bout, while Satish Kumar (+91kg) ended with silver after injury prevented him from competing in his final at the **boxing World Cup in Cologne**. Also making the final were **Sakshi and Manisha** in the **women's 57kg category**. The two boxers will take on each other in the title clash.

4. Government to give fillip to indigenous sports

- The Sports Ministry has approved the inclusion of four indigenous sports, including **Gatka and Kalaripayattu**, in the **Khelo India Youth Games (KIYG) 2021**, scheduled to take place in Haryana. The other two games included are **ThangTa and Mallakhamba**. Yogasana is also among the prospective sports.
- The four selected games represent different parts of the country. Kalaripayattu has its origin in Kerala and has practitioners all over the world. Mallakhamba, has been well-known across India. **Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra** have been the hotspots of this sport. Gatka originates from the state of Punjab and this traditional fighting style of the Nihang Sikh warriors is used both as self-defence as well as a sport. Thang-Ta is a Manipuri martial art form.

5. Djokovic wins top ATP award

- Novak Djokovic, Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal and Frances Tiafoe were among the winners of the ATP's top awards for 2020. Djokovic was the year-end No. 1. Federer was the singles fans' favourite for a record-

extending 18th straight year, and Nadal received the Stefan Edberg Sportsmanship Award. Tiafoe was given the Arthur Ashe Humanitarian Award for his social activity.

6. [Nihal, Gukesh and Rakshitta reach finals](#)

- **Nihal Sarin**, playing in the under-18 section came up with a win over Italy's Sonis Francesco to become the third Indian, along with D. Gukesh and Rakshitta Ravi, to reach the gold medal matches of the **FIDE Online World Cadet and Youth chess championship**. Gukesh reached the under14 final after beating Dennis Lazavik 2-1. In the girls' under16 semi finals, **sixth seed Rakshitta** stunned second seeded Russian Leya Garifullina 1.50.5 after winning the first game in 45 moves.



Suggested Readings

1. Putting food at the center of India's nutrition agenda, [Link to article](#)
2. Nigeria, the world's second biggest bitcoin market, [Link to article](#)
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