



VEDHIK

DAILY NEWS ANALYSIS

02 - APRIL 2022

FOREWORD

We, at Team Vedhik is happy to introduce a new initiative - "Daily Current Affairs_The Hindu" compilations to help you with UPSC Civil Services Examination preparation. We believe this initiative - "Daily Current Affairs_The Hindu" would help students, especially beginners save time and streamline their preparations with regard to Current Affairs. A content page and an Appendix has been added segregating and mapping the content to the syllabus.

It is an appreciable efforts by Vedhik IAS Academy helping aspirants of UPSC Civil Services Examinations. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Babu Sebastian, former VC - MG University in extending all support to this endeavour. Finally I also extend my thanks to thank Ms. Shilpa Sasidharan and Mr. Shahul Hameed for their assistance in the preparing the compilations.

We welcome your valuable comments so that further improvement may be made in the forthcoming material. We look forward to feedback, comments and suggestions on how to improve and add value for students. Every care has been taken to avoid typing errors and if any reader comes across any such error, the authors shall feel obliged if they are informed at their Email ID.

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In Sri Lanka, an economic crisis foretold

The island's economy, which was already reeling from the shock of the Easter Sunday bombings, was brought to its knees by COVID-19, an ill-advised agricultural policy and misguided economic decisions. **Meera Srinivasan** reports on how the government's lack of a plan to deal with an impending disaster has caused untold misery

Ajith Kumara has lived every day of the last two years with the same soundtrack – a deafening snatch of Beethoven's Für Elise blaring through his speakers. When the pandemic spelled gloom for many, he left his job as a truck driver to become a mobile vendor. Sri Lanka's famous *choon paan* (tune bread) vans, with the 1810 classic as their signature tune, have been taking bread and other bakery products to people's doorsteps for decades. They were especially valuable during the stringent lockdowns, when stepping out meant risking police arrest. Driving around Colombo's suburbs with a curfew pass from his employer, Kumara landed on his feet during tough times, but the current economic crisis may pull the rug from under him.

"Business has fallen by more than half. If there is fuel for the van, there is no gas at the bakery. If there is gas, there is no electricity. If there is electricity, we can't find baking ingredients, or there is not enough water," he says, parked at Dematagoda, a Colombo working-class suburb where many low-income families displaced by development at the city centre have been housed. "When we somehow find everything, and bring bread and buns for sale, people say they can't afford to buy them anymore. This is the situation."

It is dire by all accounts. Hospitals are putting off surgeries without enough medical supplies, ink and newsprint shortages have forced newspapers to suspend editions, and schools have postponed term exams because there is no paper to print the questions.

For a daily-wage worker like Kumara, if earnings are slashed by half, it means one meal less a day. The 48-year-old vendor works for a small bakery, spending part of his daily earnings on hiring his vehicle and premium diesel. He saves the rest to support his family of four in Minuwangoda, in the neighbouring Gampaha district. "People are starving today. That is what they [those in power] have done to us," he says. Kumara was among the 6.9 million people who voted for President Gotabaya Rajapaksa in November 2019, propelling the former soldier to the country's most powerful seat. That, followed by a thumping triumph in parliament in 2020, made the Rajapakses nearly as formidable as they were in 2010, just after the "victory" in the war. But their renewed popularity after five years in opposition, and even withstood the early blows of the pandemic, is now crumbling. The scale of this economic crisis is unprecedented, making it arguably the worst in the island's history.

The Sri Lankan rupee has plummeted in value against the US dollar with importers now needing LKR 300 (and much more on the black market) to buy one dollar. The country's foreign exchange reserves were already under strain after the Easter Sunday terror attacks of 2019 halted tourist arrivals and foreign investment inflows slowed down. Reserves are now barely enough to pay for a month's imports. The dollar crunch and severe shortages of essentials are grabbing global headlines, often accompanied by pat explanations of a "Chinese debt trap" or "Ukraine war impact", with much less airtime for Sri Lanka's own story.

Families are skipping tea and foregoing meals, queuing up for hours to buy cooking gas or kerosene, and coping with day-long electricity cuts in this season of sweltering heat. They see "failed leadership" as the reason for their plight, not some complex macroeconomic puzzle.

"No different"

"I thought Gotabaya would be different from the others. He helped us win the war [against the LTTE]. As Secretary to the Defence Ministry under which the Urban Development Authority functions, he developed and beautified Colombo. But as President he is unable to do even what he did as Secretary," Kumara says, echoing the growing disenchantment among supporters. Gotabaya's once appealing and powerful image as a leader who promised "vistas of splendour and prosperity" has fallen. The hashtag #GotaGoHome was trending last month among Sri Lankans on Twitter, later overtaken by #RajapaksaGoHome. Middle-class citizens and the political opposition are on the streets every day, protesting against the government's failings and indifference to the misery of the people. On Thursday night, hundreds of people took their rage right to the doorstep of Gotabaya's Colombo residence, chanting slogans asking him to quit.

Sri Lanka's ruling administration has four Rajapaksa brothers and one son in the Cabinet, in addition to other family members in prominent positions. Months into the economic meltdown, none of them has shown signs of recognising the suffering of the people, let alone take responsibility for it.

"This crisis was not created by me," Gotabaya said in a televised address on



(Clockwise): People stand in queue to buy LPG cylinders in Rathgama, Galle District, in the Southern Province of Sri Lanka on March 27, 2022; Sri Lankan Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa at Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's residence the night after protesters gathered outside demanding that the government step down, the protest which turned violent the previous night. AFP, AP, AFP



March 16. He was not entirely wrong. The COVID-19 pandemic's impact on key foreign exchange earners – tourism, garment and tea exports, and migrant workers' remittances – dealt a deadly blow to an economy already reeling from the shock of the Easter Sunday bombings.

In fact, the crisis announced its arrival in stages, since the outbreak of COVID-19 – in the mass sacking and deportation of Sri Lankan workers in West Asian countries, raging infections that stalled production factories catering to the export market, the closure of commercial establishments during lockdowns, and the consequent losses of jobs and incomes. In 2020 alone, real GDP contracted by 3.6%. At the macro level, a significant drop in export revenue, a high import bill (over \$20 billion in 2021) and impending foreign debt obligations totalling nearly \$7 billion this year were obvious warning signs.

"This government knew for the last two years that our economy was going to crash. Even then it was in denial. It had no plan, no strategy," says S. Kalidasan, who works at a neighbourhood eatery in Colombo to support his wife and three children living in Hattton, in the Central Province. "A worker who earns about 1,200 rupees for a day's labour can barely buy a packet of milk powder with it today," he says, referring to an essential item in Sri Lanka, whose dairy sector relies heavily on imported milk powder. Food inflation hit a record high of over 25% in February, with the prices



of rice, pulses, fish, chicken, vegetables, and coconut skyrocketing.

When policy backfired

The President's decision from 2020 to restrict imports, including of food items and inputs into agriculture, was aimed at conserving foreign exchange. Driven by that logic, he banned chemical fertilizer imports in May 2021, forcing the country to switch abruptly to organic farming. The move is now posing a serious threat to Sri Lanka's food security.

The import restrictions were neither based on a considered strategy (imported luxury foods can still be found in supermarkets) nor were they accompanied by a corresponding boost in domestic production that could have stabilised consumer prices. After mass protests by farmer groups, many from among the regime's core constituencies, the government in November 2021 rolled back on its evidently ill-advised policy on agrochemicals. But the damage had been done. Crop scientists have predicted a dramatic reduction in annual harvests – a 40-45% drop in paddy yield alone. Less than a year after its ban on chemical fertilizers, the government is now forced to import more food staples including rice. The outcome is the opposite of what it had intended.

As fears of hunger and starvation grow, the government is seeking help from near and far. In February, the Ministry of Trade said it was importing 3,000,000 tonnes of rice from India and 1,000,000 tonnes from Myanmar to control rice prices locally. Last week, the Chinese government announced a gift of 2,000 tonnes of rice to Sri Lanka.

Apart from food grains, cash-strapped Sri Lanka is also frantically seeking financial help from different sources. India has extended \$2.4 billion emergency support this year. China is "studying" a fresh request from Colombo for assistance of \$2.5 billion, in addition to the \$2.8 billion that Beijing has extended since the outbreak of the pandemic. Significantly, India and China are yet to respond to Colombo's requests to freeze repayments or restructure its outstanding debt to them. After initial reluctance, Colombo is now turning to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) – a popular policy prescription from the political opposition, think-tanks, and diplomatic missions. The move, they say, will boost Sri Lanka's

global credit rating, which fell sharply last year, and enable new borrowings internationally.

Even if IMF support, possibly amounting to a few billion dollars, comes through in some time, Sri Lanka is far from recovery, analysts caution. "IMF support is critical at this time for some relief, but they will ask the government to cut expenditure and increase tax revenue," contends K. Amirthalingam, Professor of Economics at the University of Colombo. "I am not sure this is the right time for raising taxes when people's purchasing power is so low and they are already suffering."

There are at least 5 lakh "new poor" people in Sri Lanka after the pandemic, the World Bank stated in a recent report, warning that Sri Lanka's "relatively high levels of inequality" pre-pandemic are likely to grow. As will poverty, especially with no universal social security or public distribution system, which was systematically dismantled after Sri Lanka liberalised its economy in 1977. Successive governments saw these as redundant in the "growth story" that they were optimistically scripting through those decades. Today, all that remains is free public education until university, and the enviable public health system that proved vital during the pandemic.

The monthly allowance – revised recently up to LKR 4,500 (roughly ₹ 1,160) – under the government's targeted cash assistance programme, Samurdhi, is "barely enough to buy a gas cylinder," says Professor Amirthalingam. The LKR 5,000 (about ₹ 1,290), from a "relief package" announced by the government for the months of April and May, is a pittance when prices soar on a daily basis. In his view, despite Sri Lanka's open economy policy since the 1970s, no government focused enough on diversifying exports or reducing the country's import-reliance. "We are an island, and we import tinned fish," he scoffs, pointing to an "abject policy failure".

Back to the past?

The promise of a liberalised economy in Sri Lanka began half a century ago. It emerged as a compelling counter to then Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike's import restrictions, also in response to a foreign exchange crisis, resulting in an acute shortage of food and essentials. "Produce or perish" she told

the country at the time.

In their current predicament of waiting in long lines, many see a playback of the early 1970s. The public disaffection over Bandaranaike's economic policy led to the emphatic 1977 poll victory of J.R. Jayewardene as President. He opened the Sri Lankan economy to the private sector, foreign trade, and capital movements, setting a regional precedent. In doing so, he irreversibly altered the island nation's economic path. No successor government would choose to change this even if it spoke the language of welfareism from the electoral podium, like the Rajapakses.

The Rajapaksa brand, built mostly by the eldest of the brothers, former two-term President and current Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa, defies a neat ideological label in its economic policy. The Rajapakses' social welfareism as patronage politics and resistance to privatisation has coexisted with a steadfastness to Sri Lanka's traditional export basket and ready embrace of big capital, even if it state-led projects.

During Mahinda Rajapaksa's first term, the government shunned multilateral loans that came with conditions. It instead opted for high-interest loans from bilateral partners or through sovereign bonds, to fund mega infrastructure projects in a country that was still at war. Just after the war ended in 2009, Sri Lanka saw a mini economic boom, buoyed by the construction of expressways and other road projects, a mega port, and an airport, most of which are yet to generate revenue to even meet the operating costs.

When Gotabaya Rajapaksa ran for Presidency a decade later, he promised to resurrect the country's "neglected" villages and to pursue "people-centric" economic development. But his rash ban on chemical imports for agriculture crushed any hope that farmers had of sustaining production and income during the pandemic. People's distress has only grown in the past two years.

The overnight switch to organic farming was not the only injudicious move of the government. In late 2019, it substantially cut indirect taxes, while shrinking the income tax net, and caused a drastic cut in government revenue. It took hardly any time for the pandemic, arriving months later, to accelerate the downturn. Self-assured of its political might, the ruling administration ap-

peared unperturbed by the fast-unfolding economic calamity. Even staunch supporters now see the Rajapakses' disastrous misgovernance as a reflection of the leaders' overconfidence and disconnect with the public that once adored them.

Political cost

Meanwhile, the poorest are bearing the heaviest burden of the crisis that will likely deepen in the coming weeks. Last Sunday, domestic worker M.Y.N. Zuhira stood in a queue for four hours in the sun for a gas cylinder. "At least I got it," she says, from her home in Dematagoda. With a daily wage of LKR 800 (roughly ₹ 205), she cannot eat three meals a day unless she pools her earnings with a relative next door. "That way, there is a little more rice for all of us," she says.

The economic crisis has hit the urban poor the hardest, but it has not spared most others. Many from Colombo's English-speaking elite, who otherwise scorn protests as a "nuisance to the public", are now regulars at daily and weekly protests on the crisis, demanding better leadership and solutions. In mid-March, 16 Tamils from the war-affected north fled to Tamil Nadu claiming destitution.

Immigration authorities have noted the sharp increase in applications for new passports – some 1,61,394 since January this year – as scores of young men and women from working families try going abroad for domestic or construction work. "So many people I know in our village are preparing to leave the country. Two of my relatives are going to Saudi [Arabia] and Qatar. They see no future here," says Kalidasan. "The government might keep a lid on essential food prices until Sinhala Tamil New Year in April. After that, it might just go out of control."

Asking not to be named fearing "repercussions", his boss says, "The coronavirus hit all countries in the world. But the crisis is affecting only us. Then whose fault is it really? The leadership only."

If the public resentment is any indication, the Rajapakses will have to pay a price. But in the absence of an impending election, it remains to be seen if the popular anger now transforms into a real political challenge. The fragmented and reactive political opposition seems to be gaining strength and momentum in recent weeks, seen in the large rallies of the main opposition party, the Samagi Jana Balawegaya, which occupies less than a fourth of the 225 seats in the legislature, and the leftist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna.

Two critical factors over the next few months will determine Sri Lanka's economic revival and the regime's political fortunes: President Gotabaya's ability to arrest the devastating impact of the crisis, and the opposition's chances at winning the people's confidence as a credible political alternative.

Even now, there is nothing to suggest that the government has a strategy going beyond the next few days or weeks. Its response to the enormous challenge so far is, at best, piecemeal. The political costs of this crisis will affect just the Rajapakses, but the economic aftermath will be the country's to bear.



Sri Lanka's rage

President Rajapaksa must acknowledge popular anger and formulate a recovery plan

As irate protesters gathered near the house of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa in a desperate bid to highlight their suffering, the worsening economic crisis in Sri Lanka has possibly reached its crescendo. The Rajapaksas, who have dominated the political and electoral scene, face an unprecedented decline in their popularity, as the people struggle for want of adequate money, fuel and food. The roots of the crisis may not lie wholly in the policies of Mr. Gotabaya, who was swept to power in 2019 as President on a platform of strong leadership and decisive action, while his party, the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna, won a landslide in parliamentary elections a year later. The Rajapaksas did inherit some economic problems, while the pandemic cast a greater burden. However, the current administration is indeed responsible for some ill-advised populist measures such as a huge raise in the threshold for income taxes and VAT registration, leading to revenue loss. And there was a questionable order to move to fertilizer-free farming overnight, which led to loss of yield and drew sharp criticism. The chemical fertilizer ban has been rolled back, but its impact on food security remains. Yet, more than anything, what appears to infuriate the people is the perception of governmental apathy towards their plight, of denial of the existence of a crisis and the absence of a road map for economic recovery.

It may be simplistic to summarise the causative factors behind the crisis as excessive borrowings at high interest rates and a putative 'Chinese debt trap'. However, there is behind it a tale of economic mismanagement, profligate use of public resources, and possible mishandling of monetary policy. Sri Lanka, an island nation heavily dependent on imports, gains its foreign exchange through tourism, the export of garments and tea, besides external remittances. If the Easter Sunday blasts of 2019 set back its tourism sector, the novel coronavirus pandemic almost finished it off. The heavy-handed lockdown, overseen by a military-led task force, had severe economic consequences too, as livelihoods were lost, while earnings suffered. The country needs measures to shore up its foreign exchange reserves and the balance of payment position. India has extended assistance amounting to \$2.40 billion, and China is also looking at further loans. The country's past resistance to borrowing from the IMF may not last, and it may have to accept significant conditionalities for a bailout package. However, advocating that the people tighten their belts and suffer a little more may not work. The President should acknowledge both the depth of the crisis and the rising public disenchantment. What his country needs is empathetic leadership and decisive measures to halt the downward spiral.

Visit will boost ties with India: Deuba

Nepal is keen on completing long-pending works, including Pancheshwar multipurpose project

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI

Beginning his three-day visit to India, Nepal Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba on Friday met with External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar and BJP President J.P. Nadda. In a public reception hosted by the Embassy of Nepal, Mr. Deuba referred to the ancient cultural relationship between the two countries and said Nepal had re-emerged to engage its important neighbours following the COVID-19 pandemic.

“This is my fifth visit as the Prime Minister of Nepal and my interactions will strengthen our relations with India which is rooted in ancient culture and people-to-people contacts,” said Mr. Deuba in a brief statement



Friendly visit: J.P. Nadda with Sher Bahadur Deuba at BJP headquarters in New Delhi, on Friday. ■PTI

delivered at the public reception held in the Embassy of Nepal. Mr. Deuba is accompanied by his spouse Arzu Rana Deuba, who said the delegation was hopeful of concluding a few agreements, especially in the power sector.

The Deuba administration which came to power in July 2021 has been eager to complete the long-pending Pancheshwar multipurpose project, which was initiated by the Mahakali treaty of 1996 signed between Mr. Deuba and the late Prime Minister

P.V. Narasimha Rao. “Not just the Pancheshwar project, there are several other power projects that are also under consideration. We need these agreements to be concluded as we need power,” said Dr. Arzu Rana Deuba. The public reception was attended by several high-level Ministers of Nepal, including Agriculture Minister Mahendra Rai Yadav, who is a prominent leader from the Madhes region which witnessed a major movement over the last several years demanding greater representation within the Nepalese government and the administration.

Mr. Yadav reminded that Nepal was yet to carry out constitutional amendments to increase representation of

the Madhesi population in the government and said, “We have succeeded in placing the issues related to the Madhesi movement on the agenda of our government led by honourable Mr. Deuba but there are several issues like the Madhesi prisoners that are yet to be addressed.”

Mr. Deuba will hold official dialogue with Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday. Soon after his arrival, he was met by Mr. Jaishankar. He also visited the BJP headquarters where Mr. Nadda met him.

Mr. Deuba will also visit the prominent pilgrimage sites in Varanasi. The Embassy of Nepal gifted a replica of the planned Ram temple in Ayodhya to the visiting Prime Minister.

BIMSTEC after the Colombo summit

The question to address now is whether the multilateral grouping is capable of tackling the challenges facing the region



RAJIV BHATIA

The fifth summit of the regional grouping, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), held virtually in Colombo on March 30, has undoubtedly advanced the cause of regional cooperation and integration. But a dispassionate look at the grouping, composed of five South Asian countries and two Southeast Asian countries, is needed, especially as it celebrates its 25th anniversary in June this year. The member-states are: Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar and Thailand.

BIMSTEC is no longer a mere initiative or programme. The question to address is whether it is now capable of tackling the challenges facing the region. Representing a fifth of the world's population that contributes only 4% of the global GDP, can this multilateral grouping trigger accelerated economic development?

Colombo package

It was clear that BIMSTEC first needed to strengthen itself – by re-defining its purpose and rejuvenating its organs and institutions. The much-needed process was launched at the Leaders' Retreat convened by India in 2016. It gathered momentum, thanks to the outcome of a forward-looking summit held in Kathmandu in

2018. The eventual result is now seen in the package of decisions and agreements announced at the latest summit.

The package comprises, first of all, the grouping's charter. Adopted formally, it presents BIMSTEC as "an inter-governmental organization" with "legal personality." Defining BIMSTEC's purposes, it lists 11 items in the first article. Among them is acceleration of "the economic growth and social progress in the Bay of Bengal region", and promotion of "multidimensional connectivity". The grouping now views itself not as a sub-regional organisation but as a regional organisation whose destiny is linked with the area around the Bay of Bengal.

The second element is the decision to re-constitute and reduce the number of sectors of cooperation from the unwieldy 14 to a more manageable seven. Each member-state will serve as a lead for a sector: trade, investment and development (Bangladesh); environment and climate change (Bhutan); security, including energy (India); agriculture and food security (Myanmar); people-to-people contacts (Nepal); science, technology and innovation (Sri Lanka), and connectivity (Thailand).

Third, the summit participants adopted the Master Plan for Transport Connectivity applicable for 2018-2028. This approval was delayed, but its importance lies in the highest-level political support accorded to this ambitious plan. It was devised and backed by the Asian Development Bank (ADB). It lists 264 projects entailing a total investment of \$126 billion. Projects worth \$55 billion are under implementation. BIMSTEC needs to gen-



erate additional funding and push for timely implementation of the projects. Finally, the package also includes three new agreements signed by member states, relating to mutual legal assistance in criminal matters, cooperation between diplomatic academies, and the establishment of a technology transfer facility in Colombo.

Trade pillar needs support

Post Colombo, a quick look at the unfinished tasks and new challenges gives an idea of the burden of responsibilities on the grouping. The pillar of trade, economic and investment cooperation needs greater strengthening and at a faster pace.

Despite signing a framework agreement for a comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in 2004, BIMSTEC stands far away from this goal. Of the seven constituent agreements needed for the FTA, only two are in place as of now. The general formulations of the Colombo Declaration instil little confidence about prospects of early progress. The need for expansion of connectivity was stressed by one and all, but when it comes to finalising legal instruments for coastal shipping, road transport and intra-regional ener-

gy grid connection, much work remains unfinished. On the positive side, however, there needs to be mention of the speedy success achieved in deepening cooperation in security matters and management of Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR). As security and economic development are interrelated, it is essential to ensure an equitable balance between the two pillars.

Statements by leaders at the summit gave important clues about the thinking on how to tackle the challenges. The Nepalese Prime Minister, Sher Bahadur Deuba, in a most candid speech emphasised the point that "with less than a decade left, our region is not on track to achieve any of the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030". He added that the COVID-19 pandemic "has further strained our development effort". The Thailand Prime Minister (and Defence Minister) Gen. Prayut Chan-o-cha, as the new Chair, expressed his resolve to work for 'a Prosperous, Resilient and Robust, and Open (PRO) BIMSTEC' during his tenure. As a co-founder and key driver, Thailand can contribute much, provided it marshals sufficient institutional and political resources.

It was left to Prime Minister Narendra Modi to offer an array of practical suggestions to strengthen the grouping. India was the only country to offer additional funding to the Secretariat and also to support the Secretary General's proposal to establish an Eminent Persons Group (EPG) for producing a vision document. Other countries need to emulate this sincere matching of words with action.

Governments showed considerable creativity by agreeing to restrict Myanmar's participation in the summit to the Foreign Minister's level. This obviated diplomatic controversy. Thailand and India will need to be astute in managing Myanmar's engagement until the political situation there becomes normal. BIMSTEC should focus more in the future on new areas such as the blue economy, the digital economy, and promotion of exchanges and links among start-ups and Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs). Besides, three more suggestions deserve consideration.

The personal touch

First, the personal engagement of the political leadership should be stepped up. The decision taken in Colombo to host a summit every two years is welcome if implemented. But in the medium term, an annual summit should be the goal, with an informal retreat built into its programme.

Second, BIMSTEC needs greater visibility. India's turn to host the G20 leaders' summit in 2023 presents a golden opportunity, which can be leveraged optimally. Perhaps all its members should be invited to the G20 summit as the chair's special guests.

Finally, the suggestion to simplify the grouping's name needs urgent attention. The present name running into 12 words should be changed to four words only – the Bay of Bengal Community (BOBC). It will help the institution immensely. Brevity reflects gravitas.

Rajiv Bhatia is Distinguished Fellow, Gateway House, and former Ambassador to Myanmar

‘India, Russia trying to bypass sanctions’

Sergey Lavrov holds discussions with Modi, Jaishankar

SUHASINI HAIDAR

NEW DELHI

Russia and India are looking at ways to “bypass” the sanctions imposed by the United States, European Union and partners, visiting Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Friday after talks with External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar.

Mr. Lavrov, who flew into Delhi from Beijing a week after Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited, met Prime Minister Narendra Modi before his departure.

“Prime Minister reiterated his call for an early cessation of violence, and conveyed India’s readiness to contribute in any way to the peace efforts,” Mr. Modi’s office said.

The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said Mr. Jaishankar and Mr. Lavrov specifically discussed India’s concerns over the impact of the Ukraine crisis on its economy, noting that it was “important” to ensure that their economic and technological contacts remain “stable and predictable”.

Mr. Lavrov arrived on



Hearing out: Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in New Delhi on Friday. ■PTI

Thursday after visits by senior officials of the U.S., EU and the U.K. this week, who cautioned India against trying to circumvent the financial sanctions put in place by them, by using a non-dollar

“rupee-rouble” payment mechanism. They also expressed the hope that India would not further increase its oil intake from Russia.

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‘India and Russia trying to bypass sanctions’

While the MEA made no response to the comments, including a direct warning from the U.S. Deputy National Security Advisor that there would be “consequences” to such actions, Mr. Lavrov lashed out at the “West” for attempting to “blackmail” India and other countries that are not part of the sanctions, like China.

“The reason for moving to national currencies is the absolutely unreliable nature of our western counterparts. We don’t want to depend on the system which could be closed anytime, whose masters can steal your money overnight,” Mr. Lavrov remarked, referring to the decision to eject Russian banks from the global SWIFT payment system, and to freeze Russia’s foreign reserves. Defending Russia’s actions in Ukraine, Mr. Lavrov claimed there was no “war”, only a “special operation” conducted on military infrastructure, with an attempt to avoid civilian casualties.

In his opening remarks at the bilateral talks held at Hyderabad House, Mr. Jaishankar said the meeting took place “in a difficult international environment”.

“India, as you are aware, has always been in favour of resolving differences and disputes through dialogue and diplomacy,” he said.

The MEA statement said that Mr. Jaishankar also stressed the principles of “respect for international law, U.N. Charter, sovereignty and territorial integrity of states.”

In response, Mr. Lavrov praised the Indian government for not paying heed to “western attempts” to link all international issues to the Ukraine situation, and for seeing the crisis in the “entirety” of the situation.

Mr. Lavrov said that countries like Russia, India and China would not bow to pressure from the West, and that the India-Russia partnership would not change in the face of any pressure.

Quota and data

No group should get exclusive reservation without data on backwardness

The Supreme Court has rightly quashed the Tamil Nadu Special Reservation Act of 2021, or the Vanniyar quota law, on the ground that it was not based on updated quantifiable data. The Act had envisaged the distribution of the 20% quota for Most Backward Classes (MBC) and De-notified Communities (DNCs) in education and public employment by assigning 10.5% to Vanniyars or the Vanniyakula Kshatriya community, 7% for 25 MBCs and 68 DNCs, and 2.5% for the remaining 22 MBCs. Even though a superficial look at the law would give an impression that not just the Vanniyars but also 115 other communities have been covered, the aspect of internal reservation for one community – Vanniyars – had created the impression of special treatment. Such treatment per se is not bad in law, as caste, the Court said, can be the starting point for the identification of backward classes or providing internal reservation, though it cannot be the sole basis. Also, there must be pertinent, contemporaneous data. The Court also pointed out that no analysis had been made of the relative backwardness and representation of other communities in the MBCs and DNCs.

The Court's decision has provided relief to many by holding that the State is competent to design sub-classification among backward classes; prescribe the quantum of reservation based on such sub-classification, and formulate an ancillary law, even with the assent of the Governor, to one included in the Ninth Schedule. Regardless of further moves by the DMK government that had defended the law in the Supreme Court, this episode has important lessons. No community should be allowed internal or exclusive reservation without making a case for it on the basis of quantifiable data. A caste-based census can help in determining the representation of various communities in public employment and in education. After all, it is adequate representation that holds the key for the special treatment of reservation. But whether caste, narrowly defined, and not the socio-economic indicators of the applicants, should be the basis for reservation is another issue. Tamil Nadu's parties must take a relook at their position against the implementation of creamy layer rule in reservation, as otherwise there will always be demand for internal reservation from communities that feel left out. If the parties believe genuinely in the principle of equity in reservation, they should not have any problem in agreeing to the concept of creamy layer. Also, the demand for reservation for the economically weaker sections among the caste groups not covered by reservation will carry on if those seen as economically advanced continue to obtain a larger share of the reservation pie. Other than for the SCs and STs, the creamy layer must be excluded in providing for reservation for castes that qualify as backward classes.

Centre introduces Antarctica Bill

It envisages regulating visits and activities to the continent without a permit

JACOB KOSHY
NEW DELHI

The government on Friday introduced the 'Antarctica Bill' in the Lok Sabha that envisages regulating visits and activities to Antarctica as well potential disputes that may arise among those present on the continent. The Bill also prescribes penal provisions for certain serious violations.

The text of the Bill, which was introduced by Science Minister, Jitendra Singh, on Friday says that it seeks to "... prohibit Indian expedition to Antarctica or carrying of certain activities in Antarctica without a permit or the written authorisation of another party to the protocol...provide for inspection in India by an officer designated by the Central government as an Inspector and to constitute an inspection team to carry out inspections in Antarctica."

Mr. Singh remarked in



Expanse of white: The base established by the first Indian expedition in Antarctica, in 1982. ■ FILE PHOTO

Parliament that India had been a signatory to the Antarctica Treaty since 1983 and that encumbered India to specify a set of laws governing portions of the continent where it had its research bases.

"Antarctica is a no man's land... It isn't that India is making a law for a territory that doesn't belong to it... the question is if in the territory involving India's research stations, some unlaw-

ful activity happens, how to check it? The Treaty made it mandatory for the 54 signatory countries to specify laws governing territories on which their stations are located," said Mr. Singh.

India is also signatory to treaties such as the Convention on the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources and the Commission for Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources, both of which enjoin India to

help preserve the pristine nature of the continent. Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury of the Congress demanded to know how India had the right to make laws with penal provisions in territory that didn't belong to it and Saugata Roy of the Trinamool Congress also wanted to know whether there would be a bureaucratic set up in place to govern matters concerning Antarctica. They both demanded that the Bill be passed to a Select or Standing Committee of Parliament for a deeper analysis.

M. Ravichandran, Secretary, Ministry of Earth Sciences told *The Hindu* that not only was India obliged to have such under obligations but it would also clearly establish that any illegal act or "crime" in Indian territory at Antarctica would mean that a person – even if they were a foreigner – would be subject to Indian laws.

Over 1,600 complaints against judiciary: Rijiju

Grievances forwarded to CJI, HCs, govt. tells LS

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI

There have been as many as 1,631 complaints about the functioning of the judiciary, including judicial corrup-

tion, and such complaints have been forwarded to the Chief Justice of India (CJI) and Chief Justices of the High Courts concerned following an “in-house” mechanism, Law Minister Kiren Rijiju told the Lok Sabha.

Answering separate queries on Friday, Mr. Rijiju also informed the House that the

government had appointed 27 women judges out of the 39 recommended by the Supreme Court collegium and that there is no proposal to increase the number of judges of the top court from its current strength of 34.

Responding to a written question from DMK’s S. Gnathiraviam and BSP’s Ma-

look Nagar on whether there had been an increase in instances of judicial corruption, Mr. Rijiju said: “During the last five years 1,631 complaints were received in the Centralised Public Grievance Redress and Monitoring System (CPGRAMS).”

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Over 1,600 complaints filed against judiciary: Rijiju

“These complaints on the functioning of the judiciary including judicial corruption [were] forwarded to the CJI/Chief Justice of High Courts, respectively, as per the procedure established under “in-house mechanism”.

Asked if there was any proposal to increase the bench strength of India’s top court, Mr. Rijiju’s written response said, “The sanctioned strength of Supreme Court of India has been increased from 30 to 33 (excluding the Chief Justice of India) with effect from August 9, 2019.

“Thereafter, the Government has not received any further proposal for in-

crease in the strength of Supreme Court judges”.

Fewer women

In response to a separate question on women’s representation, the Law Minister said under the present system the onus to provide social diversity and representation to all sections of the society, including Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Women and Minorities, primarily falls on the judiciary.

“Government cannot appoint any person as a High Court Judge who is not recommended by the High Court Collegium/ Supreme Court Collegium,” Mr Rijiju said in his written reply.

CJI flags 'falling credibility' of CBI

Justice Ramana calls for umbrella probe body to avoid multiple proceedings

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI

Chief Justice of India N.V. Ramana on Friday said that with the passage of time, like every other institution of repute, the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) had also come under deep public scrutiny. Its actions and inactions had raised questions regarding its credibility, in some cases.

Delivering the 19th D.P. Kohli Memorial Lecture, organised by the CBI, he said there was an immediate need for the creation of an independent umbrella institution, so as to bring various central agencies like the CBI, Enforcement Directorate and the Serious Fraud Inves-



We Indians love our freedom. When any attempt has been made to snatch our freedom, our alert citizenry did not hesitate to seize the power back from autocrats. So, it is essential that all the institutions, including the police and the investigative bodies, uphold democratic values

N.V. RAMANA, Chief Justice of India

tigation Office under one roof.

“We have a vested interest in strengthening democracy, because we essentially believe in democratic way of living. We Indians love our freedom. When any attempt has been made to snatch our freedom, our alert citizenry did not hesitate to seize the

power back from autocrats. So, it is essential that, all the institutions including the police and the investigative bodies uphold and strengthen the democratic values,” he said.

Chief Justice Ramana said the police and the probe agencies should not allow any authoritarian tenden-

cies to creep in. “They need to function within democratic framework as prescribed under the Constitution. Any deviation will hurt the institutions and will weaken our democracy. The police and the investigative agencies may have de-facto legitimacy, but yet, as institutions, they still have to gain social legitimacy,” he said.

Recommending an independent umbrella institution, the CJI said: “This body is required to be created under a statute, clearly defining its powers, functions and jurisdictions... This organisation will end multiplicity of proceedings.”

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CJI Ramana flags ‘falling credibility’ of CBI

He said the organisation should be headed by an independent and impartial authority, appointed by a committee akin to the one which appointed the CBI Director. Its head could be assisted by deputies having specialisation in different domains.

“This umbrella organisation will end multiplicity of proceedings. A single incident these days gets investigated by multiple agencies, often leading to dilution of evidence, contradiction in depositions, prolonged incarceration of innocents. It will also save the institu-

tion from being blamed as a tool of harassment. Once an incident is reported, the organisation should decide as to which specialised wing should take up investigation,” he said.

The CJI said one additional in-built safeguard was to have separate and autonomous wings for prosecution and investigation, to ensure total independence. A reasonable check and balance would be a provision in the proposed law for annual audit of the institution’s performance by the appointing committee, he said.

GST collections hit new high in March

Finance Ministry terms record ₹1.42 lakh crore of receipts an indicator of a 'faster recovery'

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI

India's gross Goods and Services Tax (GST) collections hit a record ₹1,42,095 crore in March, surpassing the January high of ₹1,40,986 crore and lifting the Centre's projected gross tax revenues for 2021-22 significantly above the government's revised estimates.

The March GST revenues, for transactions undertaken in February, were 15% higher than a year earlier and 46% higher than in March 2020. Revenues from import of goods were 25% higher and the revenues from domestic transactions, including import of services, were 11% higher than a year earlier.

The Finance Ministry said the record monthly receipts indicated that a faster recovery was underway in busi-



Up and away: 'Collections were aided by strong March sales of corporates aiming to boost annual growth'. ■ NAGARA GOPAL

ness activity, citing the fact that the number of e-way bills generated in February exceeded January's 6.88 crore figure by three lakh despite a 'shorter month'.

Monthly collections averaged ₹1.38 lakh crore in the last quarter of 2021-22, compared with ₹1.3 lakh crore in

the preceding period. The average was significantly lower in the first and second quarters, at ₹1.1 lakh crore and ₹1.15 lakh crore, respectively. Apart from the economic recovery, the ministry said that 'anti-evasion activities against fake billers' had also helped lift collections.

"The record GST collections have also been aided by the strong sales activity of corporates in March, as they race to close the financial year with high growth," said M.S. Mani, partner at Deloitte India.

ICRA chief economist Aditi Nayar reckoned that GST revenues would rise further in April, on improved economic activity and year-end adjustments, adding that the March figure was in line with the rebound in e-way bill generation.

"Higher GST collections, in addition to customs duty revenues driven by the rebound in gold imports in February, combined with direct taxes, are likely to have pushed up the Government of India's gross tax revenues well above the revised estimates for the year," Ms.

Nayar said, positing that actual collections would have likely 'overshot' the ₹27.6 lakh crore revised estimate by a tidy ₹2.25 lakh crore.

State trends mixed

Though revenues from domestic transactions and import of services grew 11% from March 2021 levels, the trends were mixed among major States. Revenues rose 26% in Odisha, 19% in Maharashtra, 17% in Haryana and 12% in Gujarat. West Bengal's GST collections grew just 2%, while they rose 6% in Uttar Pradesh.

Among the southern States, Andhra Pradesh's GST revenues increased by 18%, followed by 14% growth in Kerala, 11% in Karnataka and just 6% in Tamil Nadu. Telangana's kitty increased by a mere 2%.

General Studies Paper I	
A	History of Indian culture will cover the salient aspects of art forms, literature and architecture from ancient to modern times;
B	Modern Indian history from about the middle of the eighteenth century until the present-significant events, personalities, issues;
C	Freedom struggle-its various stages and important contributors / contributions from different parts of the country;
D	Post-independence consolidation and reorganization within the country;
E	History of the world will include events from 18 th century such as industrial revolution, world wars, re-drawing of national boundaries, colonization, decolonization,
F	Political philosophies like communism, capitalism, socialism etc.-their forms and effect on the society
G	Salient features of Indian Society, Diversity of India;
H	Effects of globalization on Indian society;
I	Role of women and women's organization;
J	Social empowerment, communalism, regionalism & secularism
K	Salient features of world's physical geography;
L	Geographical features and their location- changes in critical geographical features (including water bodies and ice-caps) and in flora and fauna and the effects of such changes;
M	Important Geophysical phenomena such as earthquakes, Tsunami, Volcanic activity, cyclone etc.
N	Distribution of key natural resources across the world (including South Asia and the Indian subcontinent);
O	Factors responsible for the location of primary, secondary, and tertiary sector industries in various parts of the world (including India);
P	Population and associated issues;
Q	Urbanization, their problems and their remedies
General Studies Paper II	
A	India and its neighbourhood- relations;
B	Important International institutions, agencies and fora- their structure, mandate;
C	Effect of policies and politics of developed and developing countries on India's interests;
D	Bilateral, regional and global groupings and agreements involving India and/or affecting India's interests.
E	Indian Constitution, historical underpinnings, evolution, features, amendments, significant provisions and basic structure;
F	Comparison of the Indian Constitutional scheme with other countries;
G	Functions and responsibilities of the Union and the States, issues and challenges pertaining to the federal structure, devolution of powers and finances up to local levels and challenges therein; Inclusive growth and issues arising from it;
H	Parliament and State Legislatures - structure, functioning, conduct of business, powers & privileges and issues arising out of these;
I	Structure, organization and functioning of the executive and the judiciary, Ministries and Departments;

J	Separation of powers between various organs dispute redressal mechanisms and institutions;
K	Appointment to various Constitutional posts, powers, functions and responsibilities of various Constitutional bodies;
L	Statutory, regulatory and various quasi-judicial bodies;
M	Mechanisms, laws, institutions and bodies constituted for the protection and betterment of these vulnerable sections;
N	Salient features of the Representation of People's Act;
O	Important aspects of governance, transparency and accountability, e-governance- applications, models, successes, limitations, and potential;
P	Citizens charters, transparency & accountability and institutional and other measures;
Q	Issues relating to poverty and hunger,
R	Welfare schemes for vulnerable sections of the population by the Centre and States, Performance of these schemes;
S	Issues relating to development and management of social sector / services relating to education and human resources;
T	Issues relating to development and management of social sector / services relating to health
General Studies Paper III	
A	Indian Economy and issues relating to planning, mobilization of resources, growth, development and employment;
B	Effects of liberalization on the economy, changes in industrial policy and their effects on industrial growth;
C	Inclusive growth and issues arising from it;
D	Infrastructure Energy, Ports, Roads, Airports, Railways etc. Government budgeting;
E	Land reforms in India
F	Major crops, cropping patterns in various parts of the country, different types of irrigation and irrigation systems;
G	Storage, transport and marketing of agricultural produce and issues and related constraints;
H	e-technology in the aid of farmers; Technology Missions; Economics of Animal-Rearing.
I	Issues of buffer stocks and food security, Public Distribution System- objectives, functioning, limitations, revamping;
J	Food processing and related industries in India – scope and significance, location, upstream and downstream requirements, supply chain management;
K	Issues related to direct and indirect farm subsidies and minimum support prices
L	Awareness in the fields of IT, Space, Computers, robotics, nano-technology, bio-technology;
M	Indigenization of technology and developing new technology;
N	Developments and their applications and effects in everyday life;
O	Issues relating to intellectual property rights
P	Conservation, environmental pollution and degradation, environmental impact assessment
Q	Disaster and disaster management
R	Challenges to internal security through communication networks, role of media and social networking sites in internal security challenges, basics of cyber security;
S	Money-laundering and its prevention;

T	Various forces and their mandate;
U	Security challenges and their management in border areas;
V	Linkages of organized crime with terrorism;
W	Role of external state and non-state actors in creating challenges to internal security;
X	Linkages between development and spread of extremism.
General Studies Paper IV	
A	Ethics and Human Interface: Essence, determinants and consequences of Ethics in human actions;
B	Dimensions of ethics;
C	Ethics in private and public relationships. Human Values - lessons from the lives and teachings of great leaders, reformers and administrators;
D	Role of family, society and educational institutions in inculcating values.
E	Attitude: Content, structure, function; its influence and relation with thought and behaviour;
F	Moral and political attitudes;
G	Social influence and persuasion.
H	Aptitude and foundational values for Civil Service , integrity, impartiality and non-partisanship, objectivity, dedication to public service, empathy, tolerance and compassion towards the weaker sections.
I	Emotional intelligence-concepts, and their utilities and application in administration and governance.
J	Contributions of moral thinkers and philosophers from India and world.
K	Public/Civil service values and Ethics in Public administration: Status and problems;
L	Ethical concerns and dilemmas in government and private institutions;
M	Laws, rules, regulations and conscience as
N	sources of ethical guidance;
O	Accountability and ethical governance; strengthening of ethical and moral values in governance; ethical issues in international relations and funding;
P	Corporate governance.
Q	Probity in Governance: Concept of public service;
R	Philosophical basis of governance and probity;
S	Information sharing and transparency in government, Right to Information, Codes of Ethics, Codes of Conduct, Citizen's Charters, Work culture, Quality of service delivery, Utilization of public funds, challenges of corruption.
T	Case Studies on above issues.