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'OPERATION AJAY' SET TO EVACUATE INDIAN NATIONALS FROM ISRAEL

CONTEXT: India organising evacuation from conflict-hit Israel; special chartered flights for citizens, announced by Foreign Minister.

BACKGROUND: India is initiating Operation Ajay to evacuate its citizens from conflict-ridden Israel. This marks the second major evacuation in 2023, following Operation Kaveri, which brought Indian nationals back from Sudan. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar announced the use of special chartered flights and emphasized the government's commitment to the safety of its citizens abroad.

NEWS HIGHLIGHTS

- **Special Flight for Indian Citizens:** The Indian Embassy in Tel Aviv has initiated the process of evacuating Indian citizens amid escalating hostilities. The first flight is expected on Thursday.
- **Cancellation of Air India Service:** Air India suspended its Delhi-Tel Aviv route after recent attacks, including a Hamas attack on Israel and the subsequent military strikes.
- **Operation Ajay Prepared:** India is preparing for a large-scale evacuation operation called "Operation Ajay." The scale of this operation will depend on demand, with capacities adjusted accordingly.
- **Establishment of Control Room:** India's Ministry of External Affairs established a 24-hour control room to manage the evolving situation in coordination with Tel Aviv and Ramallah.
- **Concern for Indian Citizens:** Indian students, traders, IT professionals, and domestic workers in Israel, along with Indian-origin Jews residing there, highlight the need for evacuations and assistance amid the conflict.

POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

CONCERNS ABOUT GOVT.'S FACT CHECK UNIT

CONTEXT: The Bombay High Court reserved its verdict in a batch of petitions challenging the constitutionality of the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Amendment Rules, 2023 (IT Rules).

The Rules permit a Fact Check Unit (FCU) of the Union Government to identify "fake or false or misleading" online content "related to the business of the Central Government" and

ECONOMICS AND DEVELOPMENT

SPRING CLEANING

CONTEXT: The Goods and Services Tax (GST) Council clarified a dozen tax treatment ambiguities, some of which have lingered since the indirect tax regime's launch in July 2017, such as the tax on corporate and personal guarantees for bank loans.

1. Slashed the GST rates on molasses from 28 % to 5 % to lower cattle feed costs and ease up cash flows for sugar mills so they may pay farmers' dues faster.
2. Decided not to exercise the Council's power to tax Extra Neutral Alcohol (ENA) used for alcoholic liquor. Alcohol for human consumption has been kept outside the scope of GST net. The indirect tax levy on Extra Neutral Alcohol (ENA) or high strength potable alcohol — a key ingredient — could not be set off against State levies on the final product.
3. Harmonised the age norms for the president and members of the long-awaited GST Appellate Tribunals now harmonised with other tribunals.

Frequent tweaks of irritants aside, the GST regime needs a holistic reform plan, including a road map to bring in excluded items such as electricity, petroleum and alcohol.

demand its removal. In April 2023, the Ministry of Electronics and IT (MeitY) promulgated the 2023 IT Rules, which amended the Information Technology Rules, 2021, and allowed the Ministry to appoint a fact checking unit.

Kunal Kamra, a political satirist, the Editors Guild of India, and the Association of Indian Magazines filed writ petitions before the Bombay High Court challenging Rule 3(1)(b)(v) of the IT Rules that permit the constitution of a FCU. The petitioners contend that the provision would enable government-led censorship online and empower the government to be the "prosecutor, the judge, and the executioner" of what constitutes the 'truth' online. The government has argued that the FCU will only notify intermediaries or online platforms that the content they are hosting is fake, false, or misleading, and that intermediaries can choose to take it down or leave it up with a disclaimer.

The amendment to Rule 3(1)(b)(v) of the IT Rules, 2021, oblige an intermediary to make "reasonable efforts" to ensure that users do not "host, display, upload, modify, publish, transmit, store, update, or share any information" which is "identified as fake or false or misleading by a fact check unit of the Central government" in respect of "any business of the Central government." Failure to comply with these puts intermediaries at risk of losing the safe harbour protection provided under Section 79 of the IT Act, 2000. The safe harbour safeguard exempts intermediaries from liability for any third-party information made available or hosted by them.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

AT COLOMBO MEET, JAISHANKAR FLAGS DANGERS OF UNVIABLE DEBT

CONTEXT: Indian Foreign Minister at IORA meeting in Sri Lanka: India aims to be a global friend, warns of debt, signs cooperation agreements.

BACKGROUND: Indian Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar visited Sri Lanka and oversaw the signing of three bilateral agreements, focusing on housing and school modernization, along with a project to boost milk production. His visit precedes the Sri Lankan President's trip to Beijing, where discussions on the country's debt crisis and Chinese infrastructure projects are expected. Jaishankar's comments suggested concerns about hidden agendas, unviable projects, and unsustainable debt related to China's regional initiatives.

NEWS HIGHLIGHTS

- **Sri Lanka's IMF Negotiations:** Sri Lanka is in ongoing talks with the IMF for a \$2.9-billion bailout to prevent a debt crisis, with the second tranche of \$330 million still pending.
- **Indian Support:** Sri Lanka has received support from India, with lines of credit, debt payment moratoriums, and currency swap arrangements totaling nearly \$4 billion.
- **China Debt Restructuring:** Sri Lanka is working to finalize a debt restructuring package with China, one of its significant creditors.
- **Sri Lanka Assumes IORA Chair:** Sri Lanka assumed the chair of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) forum, marking its second time chairing the organization after 2003-04.
- **Indian Ocean Region's "Zone of Peace":** Sri Lanka introduced a UN resolution in 1971 to declare the Indian Ocean region and airspace a "Zone of Peace."
- **Maintaining a Rules-Based Ocean:** During the IORA meeting, Indian External Affairs Minister Jaishankar emphasized the need for a rules-based, inclusive Indian Ocean region and the importance of adhering to the UN Convention on the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS).
- **IORA's Global Significance:** The Indian Ocean, which accounts for 86% of global trade, is considered the most important ocean globally. The IORA has 23 member countries and 11 major powers as dialogue partners.

The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA)

- **Establishment of IORA:** The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) is an inter-governmental organization established on March 7, 1997.
- **Significance of the Indian Ocean:** The Indian Ocean is a critical global trade route, handling a substantial portion of container ships, bulk cargo traffic, and oil shipments.
- **Cultural and Regional Diversity:** With a population of nearly 2.7 billion people, IORA member states along the Indian Ocean are diverse in culture, language, religion, and traditions, despite varying in areas, populations, and economic development levels.
- **Regional Divisions:** IORA member states are divided into sub-regions, including Australasia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, West Asia, and Eastern & Southern Africa, each with its own regional groupings like ASEAN, SAARC, GCC, and SADC.
- **Council of Foreign Ministers:** IORA's highest body, the Council of Foreign Ministers (COM), meets annually to guide the organization's activities.
- **Chair Rotation:** The United Arab Emirates (UAE) served as the Chair from November 2019 to November 2021, followed by the People's Republic of Bangladesh from November 2021 to November 2023.
- **IORA Structure:** IORA operates with a committee of Senior Officials (CSO) that meets twice a year to advance its agenda and implement policies and projects benefiting Indian Ocean member states.



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INTERNAL SECURITY

INDIA, CHINA AGREE TO CONTINUE 'DIALOGUE AND NEGOTIATIONS'

CONTEXT: India and China held the 20th round of corps commander-level talks at the Chushul-Moldo border meeting point on the Indian side over the past two days, but failed to make any headway to end the stand-off along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in eastern Ladakh.

India and China agreed to maintain the momentum of "dialogue and negotiations" while also committing to "maintain" peace and tranquillity on the ground. India and China exchanged views in a frank, open and constructive manner for an early and mutually acceptable resolution of the remaining issues along the LAC in the western sector, in accordance with the guidance provided by the national leadership of the two countries, and building on the progress made in the last round of corps commanders' meeting held on August 13-14, 2023.

The two sides also committed to maintain peace and tranquillity on the ground in the border areas in the interim. At the 19th round of talks, which came before the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation virtual summit and ahead of the G-20 Summit hosted by New Delhi, there were high expectations of a breakthrough on the stalemate at Depsang Plains and Demchok in eastern Ladakh. Following the talks between the Corps Commanders, several rounds of Major General-level talks were held.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

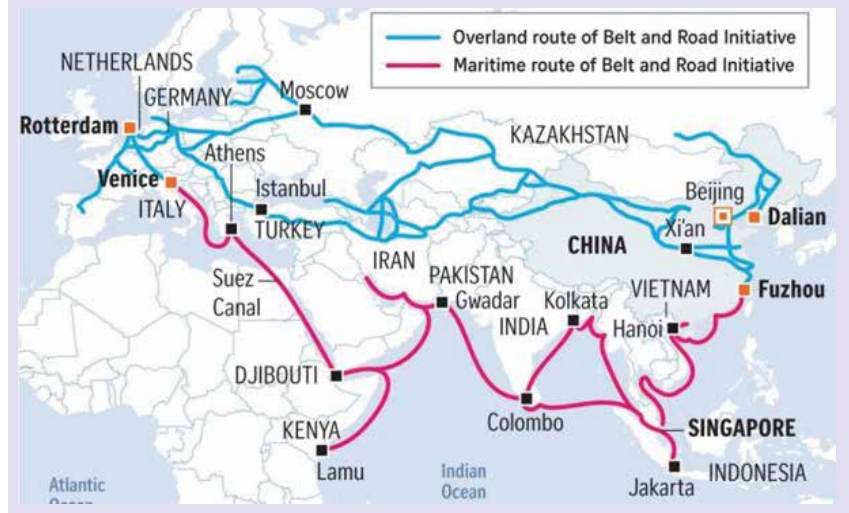
INDIA LIKELY TO SKIP CHINA'S BRI SUMMIT

CONTEXT: India is likely to skip China's third summit marking President Xi Jinping's signature Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to be held on October 17 in Beijing.

Russian President Vladimir Putin, Indonesian President Joko Widodo and Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe, among several leaders from countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Indonesian President Joko Widodo is also expected, according to reports is expected to attend the Belt and Road Forum (BRF) in Beijing. Russian leader was also present at the previous two summits in 2017 and 2019.

India did not attend the summits in 2017 and 2019, having raised concerns about the BRI, particularly over the flagship China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project which runs through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir.

As the BRI marks 10 years, the total investment in the plan had reached \$380 billion between 2013 and 2022. Sri Lankan media reported further investments into the Colombo Port City project may be announced next week. Last month, Nepal agreed to take forward cross-border connectivity projects with China during the visit of Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda' to Beijing. Both sides "agreed to strengthen connectivity in such areas as ports, roads, railways, airways and grids in an orderly manner" and "jointly build the Trans-Himalayan Multi-Dimensional Connectivity Network".



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INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

ISRAEL FORMS EMERGENCY GOVT. FOR DURATION OF WAR

CONTEXT: Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and a political rival announced an War Cabinet for the duration of the conflict.



Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was joined by the centrist Benny Gantz, a former Defence Minister, in the government and war Cabinet as both put aside bitter political

divisions. The joint announcement came after Israeli soldiers sweeping battle-torn southern towns said they had found 1,200 victims five days after the Islamist militants' onslaught, the worst attack in Israel's 75-year history. Mr. Netanyahu's extreme-right and ultra-Orthodox Jewish allies will remain in government, however Opposition leader Yair Lapid has not joined the temporary alliance, although the joint statement said a seat would be "reserved" for him in the war Cabinet.

As the war has raged, fears have been intense in Israel for the fate of at least 150 hostages — mostly Israelis but also including foreign and dual nationals — being held in Gaza by Hamas. Concern has mounted over the worsening humanitarian crisis in war-torn Gaza, where Israel had levelled over 1,000 buildings and imposed a total siege, cutting off water, food and energy supplies for 2.3 million people. Gaza officials reported more than 1,000 people killed in Israel's withering campaign of air and artillery strikes on the crowded Palestinian enclave. More than 2,60,000 Gaza residents have been forced from their homes, while the EU called for a "humanitarian corridor" to allow civilians to flee the enclave's fifth war in 15 years.



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