

SC grants bail to former T.N. Minister Senthilbalaji

POLITY & GOVERNANCE

CONTEXT: The Supreme Court on Thursday granted bail to DMK leader and former Tamil Nadu Minister V. Senthilbalaji incarcerated for over 15 months in a money laundering case linked to the cash-for-jobs 'scam'. Following the Supreme Court order, Mr. Senthilbalaji was released from the Puzhal Central Prison in Chennai around 7 p.m. on Thursday.

Cash-for-jobs 'scam'

Mr. Senthilbalaji is accused of playing a "central and pivotal role" in the "job racket scam" during his tenure as Minister. The case involves kickbacks for jobs in the Metropolitan Transport Corporation of Chennai and the Tamil Nadu State Corporation when he was the Transport Minister.



Observations of the Supreme Court Bench

The SC Bench observed no possibility of the trial commencing in the near future with the trial in the scheduled offences not even reaching the stage of framing of charges. The existence of proceeds of crime at the time of the PMLA trial can be proved only if the scheduled offence is established. The possibility of the trial of scheduled offences is set to conclude within a reasonable time of three or four years. Mr. Senthilbalaji had already undergone substantial part of the prescribed sentence under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA). Liberty cannot be withheld as a form of punishment. The Bench observed stringent conditions enumerated in bail provisions such as Section 43 D(5) of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act and Section 45 of the PMLA must not be used as the "sole metric for denial of bail or for wholesale breach of constitutional right to speedy trial".

Arguments of ED in the Supreme Court

The Enforcement Directorate presented documents showing cash deposits worth approximately ₹ 17.5 Cr. belonging to Mr. Senthilbalaji and immediate family members. The ED had argued the "huge cash deposits" detected to Mr. Senthilbalaji were "nothing but part of proceeds of crime brought into the financial system for the purpose of laundering. The proceeds of crime identified in his bank accounts were utilised and layered".



Central govt. advises Indian nationals to leave Lebanon

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS



Reduced to rubble: The destruction in Saksakiyeh, a town in Lebanon, after the Israeli air strikes on Wednesday night.

India has “strongly advised” its nationals to leave Lebanon. Lebanon hosts around 3,000 Indians at present. The Embassy of India in Beirut issued an advisory to Indian citizens not to travel to Lebanon. The Union government is contemplating naval evacuation of Indian nationals from Lebanon in view of the deteriorating security situation there. Air service with Beirut has been repeatedly disrupted over the past weeks as several leading airlines have cancelled flights to and from Beirut.

Last week, Israel has carried out a pager attacks targeted Hezbollah, the armed Lebanese group. Israel has launched the heaviest air strikes against Lebanon since a 2006 war over the past week, killing

more than 600 people. Israel carried out bombing raids in southern Lebanon and capital Beirut. In retaliation, Hezbollah launched rockets and missiles that have hit northern Israeli cities like Safed, and the second largest city and the port of Haifa. On Wednesday, a ballistic missile fired by Hezbollah was intercepted above Israeli capital Tel Aviv.

India's previous missions

India launched Operation Sukoon, deploying four ships to evacuate around 12,000 nationals from Lebanon in 2006 when Israel bombed Lebanon. Operation Sukoon also rescued nationals from other countries such as Sri Lanka. A similar naval and air evacuation was also carried out from Libya in February 2011.

Israel rejected ceasefire proposals with Hezbollah, defying allies, including the U.S., which had called for an immediate three-week halt in fighting to allow for diplomacy to avert a wider war. The U.S., France and several other allies called for an immediate 21-day ceasefire across the Israel-Lebanon border. They also expressed support for a ceasefire in Gaza following intense discussions at the UN.

L69, G4 countries seek urgent reform of UNSC

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar with German, Brazilian and Japanese counterparts during the G4 Foreign Ministers Meeting.

The Group of Four (G4) countries — India, Brazil, Germany and Japan — seeking permanent membership and reform of the UN Security Council (UNSC) on Thursday called for urgent reform of the United Nations Security Council. The G4 meeting, held on the fringes of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) at the Foreign Minister level on September 23, reviewed progress made on these reforms. The G4 Ministers reiterated the need for an increase in both permanent and non-permanent categories of UNSC membership, to enhance the participation of developing countries, as well as “those significantly contributing to international peace and security” at the UNSC.

The G4 countries held Joint Ministerial Meeting of L69 and C-10 groupings of nations. The L 69 Group is a group of 32 developing countries from Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia and the Pacific (Small Island Developing States) united by the common cause of achieving the lasting and comprehensive reform of the United Nations Security Council. The C-10 group is a group of 10 African countries, who calls for reforming the United Nations Security Council. The group highlighted the need for better representation for regions such as Africa, Asia-Pacific and Latin America and the Caribbean in permanent and non-permanent categories.



Govt. extends AFSPA by six more months in two States

POLITY & GOVERNANCE

The Union Home Ministry on Thursday extended the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) in parts of Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh for another six months. The areas under the purview of the Act remain unchanged since the last notification issued in March.

The Parliament enacted the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958 in Assam, later extended to the whole of Disturbed Areas in Northeast India and later introduced to Jammu & Kashmir in 1990. In simple terms, AFSPA gives armed forces the power to maintain public order in "Disturbed Areas".

- **Concurrent powers to declare 'Disturbed Area' - Section 3 of AFSPA, 1958:** Both the Centre and the State Governments (Governor of the State / UT) enjoy concurrent powers to issue notification in 'The Gazette of India' to declare a site of frequent occurrence of Low Intensity Conflict (LIC) among racial, religious, linguistic, castes or communities over minor differences or disputes as 'DISTURBED AREA'.
- **Territorial extent of 'Disturbed Areas':** The Centre and the State Governments (Governor of the State or administrator of the Union Territory) can declare the whole or part of the State or Union Territory as 'DISTURBED AREA'.
- **Discretionary powers of the Governor:** The Governor of the State or the Centre can overrule the suggestion of the State Government regarding the geographical limits of enforcement of Armed Forces Special Powers (Amendment) Act, 1990 to issue an official notification under the Section (3) of the AFSPA, 1990 for assistance of Army / CAPF to aid civilian administration to restore and maintain peace and order.)

POWERS OF THE ARMED FORCES

Empowers the armed forces to maintain public order in "Disturbed Areas"

- Prohibit a gathering of 5 or more persons in an area declared as Disturbed Area;
- Allowed to use force or even open fire even if it causes death, against the person who is acting against law or order in the disturbed area for the maintenance of public order, after giving such due warning.
- Provides immunity for security personnel from prosecutions for acts done under official capacity, including shootings to kill; arrest, search and seizure without warrants to deal a committed crime or to prevent potential cognizable offence even on "reasonable suspicion".
- Arrest a person without a warrant and may use force if needed for the arrest upon existence of a reasonable suspicion for committing cognizable offences or is reasonably suspected of having done so.
- Enter and search any premise in order to make such arrests, or to recover any person wrongfully restrained or any arms, ammunition or explosive substances and seize it.

Will prepare Assam Accord road map by Oct. 25: Himanta

POLITY & GOVERNANCE



All Assam Students' Union members recently marked the beginning of the 40th year of the Assam Accord in Guwahati.

The Assam Government will prepare a road map to implement the recommendations of the Justice Biplab Kumar Sharma (retd.) Committee on Clause 6 of the Assam Accord by October 25. The committee, set up by the Union Home Ministry, had submitted its report in February 2020, suggesting measures to implement Clause 6 that pertains to protecting and preserving the cultural, social, linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people through Constitutional, legislative, and administrative safeguards.

Areas excluded

The recommendations will apply only to the districts of the Brahmaputra Valley and not in the three districts of the Barak Valley and the Sixth Schedule areas of Dima Hasao, Karbi Anglong, and Bodoland Territorial Region.

The report divided into three parts – 40 recommendations that the State government can exclusively implement, 12 to be jointly implemented by the Centre and the State, and 15 exclusively by the Centre.

The State government will prepare an action plan within a month regarding the implementation of the 40 recommendations and hand it over to the AASU by October 25. The suggestions within the ambit of the State government will be implemented by April 15, 2025, upon AASU and State Government reaching a consensus.

Centre likely to increase prices of ethanol and sugar, says Pralhad Joshi

ECONOMICS & DEVELOPMENT

The Food Minister says the sugar industry is the driving force of India's renewable energy landscape.

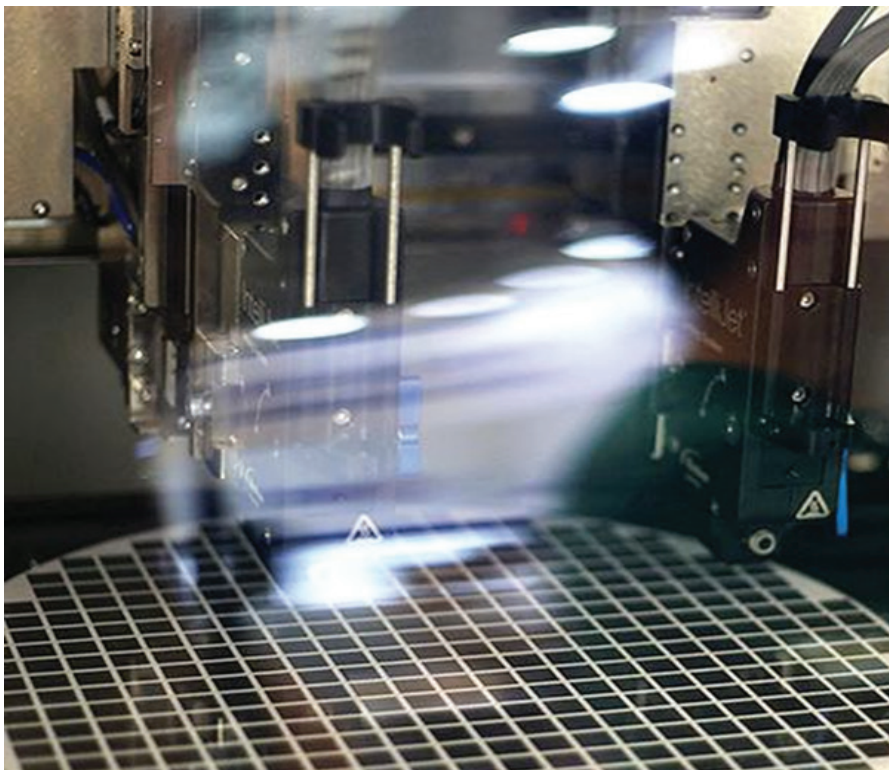
The Centre may increase the price of ethanol for the 2024-25 season and the minimum selling price of sugar. The price of ethanol, produced from sugar cane juice, had been unchanged at ₹ 65.61 a litre since 2022-23. The minimum selling price of sugar had been ₹31 a kg since February 2019.

The Government had asked the NITI Aayog to prepare a road map for 25 % blending of ethanol in petrol over the next few years as the present target of 20 % blend is likely to be achieved soon. In the past 10 years, from ethanol sale, sugar mills had earned higher revenue, use of ethanol- blended petrol reduced emission of greenhouse gases, greater investment opportunities emerged, leading to the establishment of new distilleries in rural areas and contributing direct and indirect employment generation as well.



Tata Electronics, PSMC sign pact for Gujarat chip facility

ECONOMICS & DEVELOPMENT



Tata Electronics, a wholly owned subsidiary of Tata Sons completed the definitive agreement with Taiwan's Powerchip Semiconductor Manufacturing Corporation (PSMC) to establish semiconductor manufacturing facilities in India. It will create more than 20,000 direct and indirect skilled jobs.

As per the pact, PSMC will provide design and construction support to build India's first AI-enabled greenfield fab in Gujarat, license a broad portfolio of technologies and provide engineering support to successfully transfer licensed technologies to the Gujarat fab. This fab will have a capacity to manufacture 50,000 wafers per month and will include factory automation capabilities deploying machine learning to achieve industry best efficiency.

Storms brewing in East, South China seas

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS



Tensions rise: Members of the Philippine Coast Guard on alert as a Chinese Coast Guard vessel blocks their way to a resupply mission at Second Thomas Shoal in the South China Sea, on March 5, 2024.

In the last few years, maritime East Asia has become an arena for intensified power politics. The East China Sea borders China, Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea. China asserts that the Senkaku / Diaoyu islands, located in the East China Sea and under Japanese control, belong to Beijing. There have been multiple crises over these islands in the past. The South China Sea lies between China, Taiwan and five Southeast Asian countries — Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, the Philippines, and Indonesia — and has emerged as one of the most important flashpoints in the Indo-Pacific. China has been aggressively pushing its claims in the South China Sea.

Why are the seas important to China?

China views the East and South China Seas through the prism of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and national security. South China Sea islands and Diaoyu Islands are inalienable parts of the Chinese territory. China exercises its national sovereignty to build infrastructure and deploy necessary defensive capabilities on the islands and reefs in the South China Sea, and to conduct patrols in the waters of Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea.” What China perceives as its defensive actions are considered offensive and provocative by the regional countries surrounding the East and South China Seas.

What is the significance of the seas?

The key maritime trade routes in East Asia pass through these two seas. Taiwan Strait is a critical maritime choke point. The region is home to undersea cables that are important for the global digital economy. As per the U.S. Energy Information Administration, in 2023, 10 billion barrels of petroleum and petroleum products and 6.7 trillion cubic feet of liquefied natural gas passed through the South China Sea. It is also home to vast reserves of untapped oil and natural gas.

What is China doing in the region?

China has been aggressively pushing its territorial claims in both seas in two ways: by building defence-related infrastructure such as ports, military installations, airstrips, and artificial islands and by pushing back against the claims of regional countries. In the East China Sea, China vehemently contested Japanese claims and, both countries found themselves embroiled in multiple crises, the most notable being the arrest of a Chinese captain of a fishing boat in 2010 and Japan’s nationalisation of the Senkaku islands in 2012. These crises saw both countries taking maximalist positions. China had imposed a ban on the export of rare earth minerals to Japan. In the last few years, there has been a slight easing of

tensions over the issue regarding the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. As per the Japan Coast Guard data, 2023 saw the highest level of activity by the Chinese Coast Guard in the contiguous zone of the Senkakus. Owing to China's assertive foreign policy, its relationship with South Korea, Taiwan and Japan has deteriorated rapidly.

Meanwhile, the South China Sea has become a major theatre of Chinese belligerence. The power asymmetry between China and the South China Sea claimant countries is large and is growing continuously. China's navy is also the largest naval force in the world by numbers. Therefore, the South China Sea is seeing the ever-growing projection of Chinese power. For asserting its claims, China has deployed a Coast Guard and maritime militia. The tactics include dangerous and aggressive manoeuvres at sea, harassing resupply missions, ramming vessels, collisions, and using water cannons and military-grade lasers, etc. These tactics are known as 'grey zone' operations, which fall short of war but are designed to alter the status quo.

China has been actively pushing its claims in the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of the Philippines. Since 2022, tensions between China and the Philippines have been rising due to a significant increase in the frequency of such incidents. In June-July 2024, multiple incidents of clashes occurred. The Second Thomas Shoal and Sabina Shoal have been the focus of China's recent assertiveness. The Philippines' resupply missions to the grounded ship, BRP Sierra Madre, have been repeatedly disrupted by China and have become a point of contention. China aims to drive a wedge between the U.S. and its treaty partners in East Asia. Chinese Coast Guard ships are considerably heavier and larger in terms of tonnage compared with Coast Guard vessels of other countries. For example, the Chinese vessel CCG 5901 (541 feet long and displaces 12,000 tons) is three times larger than the main ships of the U.S. Coast Guard. Hence, China's frequent ramming of the Philippines' vessels is dangerous and risky. There is a chance of miscalculation.

In July, China conducted naval exercises with Russia in the South China Sea to demonstrate the support that it enjoys over it while projecting its claims. China's claims in the South China Sea lack a legal basis, according to a permanent court of arbitration ruling in 2016. However, China has rejected that ruling.

What has been the response from regional countries?

The regional countries have responded in three ways: First, they are building their defence capabilities. Defence spending has increased across the Indo-Pacific with regional countries trying to catch up with China. For example, by 2027, Japan wants to double its defence expenditure. The Philippines too is ramping up its defence capabilities and, among others, has acquired the anti-ship, BrahMos missiles from India.

Second, regional countries are responding to China's activities at sea. From 2016 to 2022, Under President Rodrigo Duterte, the Philippines sought to minimise the friction between Manila and Beijing. Since 2022, the Philippines has been pushing back and publicising these incidents. The change in policy was crafted by the new President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. As a result, the frequency of incidents has gone up. Regional countries are engaged in a battle of narratives as well. They are deploying tools such as public diplomacy. The Philippines has been filming the behaviour of Chinese vessels and is releasing it through social media. The Philippines has also taken international journalists along with its resupply missions in the West Philippine Sea. The shaping of perceptions has become a key battleground.

Third, the Philippines, Japan and South Korea are treaty allies of the U.S. and are strengthening their defence relationship with it. The U.S. and the Philippines have enhanced their cooperation in the South China Sea to "historic levels" and expanded cooperation in domains such as base access, training and joint exercises. They are working with Australia and Japan in "a complex multilateral maritime cooperative activity." It is dubbed as the 'Squad'. According to U.S. Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin, the U.S.' commitment to the security of Japan is "ironclad" and includes the Senkaku islands as well. The U.S., Japan, and South Korea are deepening their trilateral cooperation. For the first time in history, the Defence Ministers of the three countries met in Japan in July 2024. In view of aggressive Chinese maritime activities, the press statement noted that these three countries "strongly oppose any unilateral attempts to change the status quo in the waters of the Indo-Pacific." They also "stressed the importance of fully respecting international law including the freedom of navigation and overflight."

Despite the efforts at bolstering the U.S.' alliances in the Indo-Pacific, concerns remain about American credibility and the impact of the U.S.' domestic politics on its external security commitments. There is also a debate about whether the U.S. engagement in East Asia balances the Chinese power or fuels conflict.

"Doing nothing is very hard to do. You never know when you're finished."—Leslie Nielsen



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