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NIRMALA SITHARAMAN IN WASHINGTON TO ATTEND IMF, WORLD BANK MEETINGS



India's Ambassador to U.S. Taranjit Singh Sandhu with Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman in Washington. PTI

Minister will hold talks with U.S. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen today; high on her agenda is the second G-20 Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors meeting, which India is hosting as part of its year-long presidency of the grouping

Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Sunday began a week-long visit to Washington DC for the World Bank-IMF spring meetings, as well as for other bilateral and multilateral interactions.

High on the Minister's agenda is the second G-20 Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors (FMCBG) meeting, which India is hosting as part of its year-long presidency of the group. Ms. Sitharaman will also hold high-level talks with her American counterpart, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen, on Tuesday.

The Minister and RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das will co-chair the FMCBG meet on Wednesday and Thursday, and host some 350 G-20 delegates plus representatives of 13 invitee countries as well as regional and international organisations, according to a government press release.

This week's G-20 meeting will have three sessions: Global Economy and International Financial Architecture; Sustainable Finance, Financial Sector and Financial Inclusion; and International Taxation.

The last FMCBG meeting was held in Bangalore in February, and was witness to tensions around discussions and communication about the Russia-Ukraine conflict. It ended without consensus on the language about the war (Russia and China had objections). India then issued a Chair's summary and outcome document, rather than a joint communique.

Core interests

This week's sessions will seek to cover core interests of the government: food and energy security, managing global debt vulnerabilities, strengthening Multilateral Development Banks (MDBs), mobilising finance for climate action, financial inclusion, etc. However, the Russia-Ukraine war continues to remain a pressing issue and it is likely to cast its shadow on many of this week's meetings in Washington.

The G-20 meetings will also lay the groundwork for the next FMCBG meeting, which will be held in Gandhinagar in July.

Ms. Sitharaman was received by India's U.S. Ambassador Taranjit Sandhu at Union Station, Washington DC, on Sunday. She also met Param Iyer, the new India-nominated Executive Director at the World Bank, and his IMF counterpart, Krishnamurthy Subramanian.

As part of the spring meetings, Ms. Sitharaman will attend the IMF's Finance Committee meeting and the World Bank's Development Committee meeting; these are the highest-decision making bodies of both organisations.

EFFORTS ON TO OPEN ZOJILA TUNNEL AHEAD OF DEADLINE: GADKARI

Union Minister for Transport and Roadways Minister Nitin Gadkari, who inspected the strategically important Zojila Tunnel that connects the Kashmir Valley with the Union Territory of Ladakh on Monday, said it will realise the dream to have an all-weather road from Kashmir to Kanyakumari.

Mr. Gadkari said efforts are being made to open the tunnel for traffic ahead of its deadline set for 2026. "We are planning to open part of the project earlier than 2026," he said.

He said the importance of connecting Kashmir and Ladakh was strongly felt by former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee during the Kargil war between India and Pakistan.

The decision to speed up work comes at a time when troops of India and China are eyeball to eyeball in parts of Ladakh since the Galwan incident in 2020.

India has matched its build-up to the Chinese along the Line of Actual Control in Ladakh.

Sonamarg is a key route for troops to reach Ladakh. However, the Zojila Pass becomes inaccessible for more than three months in winter and is prone to accidents due to shooting stones and landslides.

The 13.14-km tunnel will facilitate round-the-year transportation of goods to Ladakh and better movement of the armed forces in case of emergency.



All-weather link: Union Minister Nitin Gadkari, along with J&K Lt. Governor Manoj Sinha, inspecting the tunnel work in Ganderbal. PTI

T.N. HOUSE RESOLUTION ASKS CENTRE TO SET TIME LIMIT FOR GOVERNOR FOR CLEARING BILLS

The Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly on Monday adopted a resolution moved by Chief Minister M.K. Stalin urging the Union government and the President to immediately issue appropriate instructions to Governor R.N. Ravi to give assent to Bills passed by the Assembly "within a specific period".

Mr. Stalin said he was under compulsion to move a resolution against the Governor for the second time. He reiterated that "unwarranted circumstances" were not created by the government.

Accusing the Governor of functioning with political motives and converting the "Raj Bhavan into a Political Bhavan", he recalled the observation of the Justice Rajamannar Committee that "it is an appropriate time to abolish the post of Governor and the Governor should be a detached figure".

In January, the Assembly had moved a resolution disapproving of the Governor's selective deviation from the prepared text of his customary address to the House.

On April 7, Mr. Ravi, at an interaction with civil services aspirants in the Raj Bhavan, had said, if a Governor withholds assent to a Bill passed by the

Assembly, it means the "Bill is dead".

Before Mr. Stalin moved the resolution, Water Resources Minister Duraimurugan moved a resolution to suspend certain rules of the Assembly so that the resolution against the Governor could be taken up for discussion.

Legislators of the AIADMK staged a walkout even before the resolution was moved, alleging that Speaker M. Appavu had not accepted their demand to recognise the Deputy leader of the Opposition. Leader of the Opposition Edappadi K. Palaniswami alleged that live telecast of the Assembly proceedings had been denied to Opposition leaders. Mr. Appavu ordered voting on the resolution of Mr. Duraimurugan to suspend the provision in Rule 92(vii) that barred any debate on the Governor's conduct and the use of his name to influence any debate. The Speaker ordered voting since three-fourth of the members of the House need to support it as per Rule 287 of the Rules.

Mr. Stalin also urged the Union government and the President to prescribe a specific time limit to Governors to give their assent to Bills passed by the legislators.

INDIA'S BORDERS ARE SAFE, CAN'T BE VIOLATED: SHAH

No country can take even an inch of Indian territory, Home Minister Amit Shah said on Monday during a visit to Arunachal Pradesh, as he launched a village development programme right at the country's easternmost border village.

Taking aim at China just days after Beijing attempted to rename a number of places in the State, Mr. Shah said India's borders were secure and could not be violated, even if the land measured only "the tip of a needle".

The Chinese Foreign Ministry responded sharply to the visit, claiming it violated Chinese territory.

"Today, the entire country can sleep peacefully because of the bravery and sacrifices of our ITBP [Indo-Tibetan Border Police] and Army jawans. As ITBP and Army personnel are deployed, nobody can encroach upon our land covered even by the tip of a needle," Mr. Shah said, adding "there can be no compromise with the respect of our Army and borders."

Mr. Shah was addressing a public gathering after unveiling the ₹4,800-crore Vibrant Villages Programme (VVP) to be executed in 2,967 villages across 19 districts in four border States, including Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh, and the union territory of Ladakh.

The project cost includes ₹2,500 crore for road connectivity from 2022-23 fiscal to 2025-26. The event was held at Kibithoo in Arunachal Pradesh's Anjaw district, which shares borders with China and Myanmar.

The Home Minister's visit came one week after Beijing said it would "rename" 11 places in the northeastern State, in an attempt to lay claim to the entire State. On Monday, a spokesperson of Beijing's Ministry of Foreign Affairs claimed that the visit "violated China's sovereignty".

"Zangnan is China's territory. Indian officials' activities in this area violate China's sovereignty and territorial sovereignty and not conducive to peace and tranquillity in the border regions. We firmly oppose it," said spokesperson of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Wang Wenbin. The Ministry of External Affairs is yet to respond to the comment from the Chinese MFA. China has objected in the past as well to visits by Indian Ministers, which the government has rejected.

The Home Minister said people living near the Line of Actual Control are considered the first line of defence. He said they need to be incentivised to stay in these areas, and development under the VVP was essential for this.



Ground zero: Amit Shah inspecting a border outpost of the ITBP and taking stock of its preparedness on Monday. ANI

No one can take even an inch of Indian territory, Home Minister says in Arunachal, days after Beijing's renaming provocation; Chinese Foreign Ministry claims his visit violated its sovereignty VV

'City-like' infrastructure

"The Arunachal Pradesh government and the Centre will take care of the well-being of the villagers. We will fulfil all basic needs. We will take the banks there, help the people open bank accounts, provide electricity, LPG, drinking water, employment, and build toilets. These villages will be connected digitally and physically with the rest of the State and the country," he said, promising "city-like" infrastructure and services to villagers within the next three years. He said the government would ensure environmental and energy security and promoting tourism in the border villages.

FINLAND'S JOURNEY, FROM NEUTRAL TO NATO

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On April 4, 2023, Finland joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), becoming its 31st member. Undoubtedly, this is a significant event, given that NATO security guarantees will extend to this country which shares a 1,340 kilometre border with Russia. This historical moment in NATO's history was full of symbolism, since NATO had clearly scored an additional point against Russia. During the flag-raising ceremony in Brussels, the NATO Secretary-General, Jens Stoltenberg, said, "Finland is safer, and NATO is stronger with Finland as an ally."

As predicted, Russian authorities have signalled possible 'countermeasures' to the alleged 'assault on its security and national interests'. Though they have blamed NATO for aggravating the tensions, this development must be seen as an independent decision of both Finland and Sweden, triggered largely by the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Finland is certainly not the first and will not be the last neighbour of Russia to join the alliance. Before Finland's accession, countries such as Norway (1949, and a founding member), Latvia (2004), Estonia (2004),

Poland (1999) and Lithuania (2004) were already a part of NATO. In this scenario, Russia needs to learn how to navigate through these growing complexities, which it is partly responsible for.

Complicated past

For nearly 200 years, the 'relationship between Finland and Russia has been a combination of struggle and compromise. In 1809, the Russian Tsar Alexander I defeated Sweden, acquired Finland, and made it an autonomous Grand Duchy of the Russian empire. In 1917, the collapse of the Tsarist regime and the Bolshevik Revolution paved the way for the full independence of Finland'.

Between the two world wars, the Finns felt 'less threatened by Germany than by Russia, even during the era of the Third Reich. In October 1939, Stalin proposed a revision of the Finnish-Russian border — where Peter the Great's frontier had been laid out in 1721. A month later, the Soviet Union attacked Finland, employing fraudulent pretexts and justifications. The Winter War of 1939-1940 lasted three and a half months; the Finns lost important portions of their territory but retained their independence'.

The war between the (erstwhile) Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and Finland resumed in 1941, supported by the Finnish alliance with the Third Reich. Finland had been defeated but was able to avert enemy occupation.

Due to the skilful diplomacy and pragmatism of Juho Kusti Paasikivi, Finnish President in 1946-1956, Finland saved itself from the spread of communist ideology. In 1948, the Agreement of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance was signed between the USSR and Finland, outlining 'Finland's desire to stay outside the conflicts of interests between the great powers'. This came to be known as Finland's 'neutrality'.

What would change

Given the circumstances, the decision made by Finland can be viewed as a rational choice, but its consequences should not be exaggerated unnecessarily. After all, cooperation between Finland and NATO began as early as in 1994 with the Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme. Finland had the status of an 'Enhanced Opportunity Partner' and contributed in a significant manner to the NATO-led operations in the Balkans, Afghanistan and Iraq.

Notably, the Finnish system of conscription has generated 'sufficient resources for the army, navy and air force to act effectively in a war situation'. According to the Constitution of Finland, every Finnish citizen is obligated to participate in national defence. In other words, even prior to its NATO's membership, Finland had already been preparing to defend itself against possible aggression.

The main rationale behind Finland's decision has been to receive additional security guarantees from NATO, which are specified in Article 5 of NATO's founding treaty. It 'binds the members together, committing them to protect each other and setting a spirit of solidarity within the alliance'. On April 4, Mr. Stoltenberg once again reiterated that 'we stand together, we protect and defend each other; all for one, and one for all'.

In this sense, Finland's NATO membership can be viewed through the lens of 'conventional deterrence'. Back in 1983, Professor John Mearsheimer described this concept as 'an attempt to persuade an adversary not to initiate a war because the expected costs and risks outweigh the anticipated benefits'.

A cautious way forward

NATO and Russia should search for ways out of the constant cycle of implementing 'measures' and imposing 'countermeasures'. During the last decade, a classic example of 'security dilemma' has been unfolding, whereby Russia and the West have been enhancing their security and creating a more precarious environment altogether.

Given the rising tensions, both Russia and NATO should exercise cautious behaviour vis-à-vis the other. Shortly after the alliance welcomed its new member, the Russian government expressed its concerns over 'potential weapons systems and infrastructure, which could be deployed right next to its borders'.

It would be safe to assume that neither Finland nor Russia would wish to see an escalation in their relations. The newly elected centre-right government in Finland should not exaggerate the potential threats from Russia but engage in bilateral dialogue, trying to understand the other's security concerns. There should be at least some NATO members who would be willing to rely more on diplomatic tools and 'lower the temperatures'.

STATES' SUBSIDY ACCOUNTING MUST BE TRANSPARENT: CAG

Word of caution

States should meet their capital expenditure, including loans and advances, from their own sources of revenue

- Or, they must at least confine their net debt to capital expenditure
- Continuing to notice fiscal sustainability risks, financial indiscipline in many States, says CAG
- This stems from off-budget borrowings and misclassification of revenue expenditure as capex



'We wish to distinguish justifiable subsidies from freebies, which are not fiscally responsible; States must earn adequate returns on investments, recover the cost of borrowing sans implicit subsidies'

The Comptroller & Auditor General (CAG) of India, G.C. Murmu, on Monday said States must take measures to maintain proper accounting of subsidies, reduce fiscal deficits, remove revenue deficits and keep outstanding debts at an acceptable level.

At the Annual Accountant General's Conclave, Mr. Murmu said States should meet their capital expenditure, including loans and advances, from their own sources of revenue, or at least confine net debt to capital expenditure. "While we understand the importance of subsidies to help the underprivileged, it is essential to transparently account for such subsidies... we require to distinguish between justifiable subsidies from freebies, which are not fiscally responsible," he said. States must earn returns on their investments and "recover their cost of borrowed funds without resorting to implicit subsidies."

"We... continue to notice fiscal sustainability risks and financial indiscipline in many States due to off-budget borrowings, misclassification of revenue expenditure as capital expenditure and because State guarantees are not... captured in finance accounting," he said.

ON FINLAND'S JOURNEY TO JOIN NATO

The story so far:

On April 4, 2023, Finland finally became the 31st country to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) after applying last May. The Finnish president, Sauli Niinistö, marked the event by stating that "the era of military non-alignment in our history has come to an end". The move to join the security alliance was precipitated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine last year, Finland's historical experience with Moscow, and the changing nature of international geopolitics with a declining Russian influence.

What has been Russia's response?

The Kremlin spokesperson, Dmitry Peskov, responded to Finland joining NATO with "naturally, this forces us to take countermeasures to ensure our own tactical and strategic security". The Russian Foreign Ministry said that

while it will respond with "military-technical measures", the specifics of its actions will depend on the terms under which Finland joins NATO. The Ministry deemed the now-defunct policy of non-alignment as a "wise decision" and said that Finland has now "lost its independence". It made clear, in no ambiguous terms, that this decision "will have a negative effect on the bilateral relations between Russia and Finland".

How has Finland's security policy evolved via its neighbour?

Before the First Soviet-Finnish War, Russia sought to establish a buffer zone along its western border as a means of protecting itself because of its history of being invaded by foreign powers through Finland. Lingering tensions from the Russian Revolution and the Finnish Civil War between 1917 and 1918 as well as unresolved issues from the Treaty of Dorpat in 1920 were responsible

for the First Soviet-Finnish War.

The Second Soviet-Finnish War, which took place between 1941 and 1944 ended with the defeat of Finland. Finland lost territories to the Soviet Union and had to pay war reparations. This, coupled with the independence process in 1917, the civil war between 1918 and 1919, and the Lapland War in 1944 impacted the collective psyche of the Finns. This made Finland pursue a pragmatic security policy which was flexible enough to balance its autonomy with the need for military cooperation with the West. It was careful of not taking overt actions which could be seen as a security threat by Moscow. Finland made concessions to the Soviet Union, one of which was the Finno-Soviet Treaty of 1948. This treaty ensured that Finland would remain neutral and would not allow any foreign troops on its soil without permission from Moscow. While this helped Finland boost trade with the Soviet Union, it became heavily dependent on Moscow thereby making it vulnerable to economic and political overtures from the Soviets.

After the Second World War, Paasikivi's line emerged and began to morph into what would eventually become Finland's foreign policy strategy. Named after Juho Kusti Paasikivi, the president of Finland between 1946 and 1956, Paasikivi's line was based on the idea of peaceful coexistence with the Soviet Union with neutrality being its cornerstone. It helped Finland navigate complex international relations after the turbulent time of the Second World War.

Why did the security policy change?

Finland's experience during the Cold War shaped its approach to security policy. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, it sought to build closer ties with Russia while also pursuing greater integration with Europe. The country has been an active participant in European security initiatives such as the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEF). At the same time, it has been able to maintain close economic ties with Russia. However, there were tensions between Finland and Russia as a result of the flux in domestic politics in both countries. For instance, Nikita Khrushchev was willing to negotiate with Finland and allowed for increased trade and cultural exchange between the two countries, despite the 1950s seeing Finland side with the West when the Soviet Union called for a boycott of the 1956 Summer Olympics in Australia.

Could there have been an alternative to joining NATO?

For Finland, an alternative to joining NATO could have been to develop its own military capabilities and pursue a deeper level of cooperation with other European countries, through arrangements like the CSDP and the NORDEF. However, the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and a declining Russian influence made the decision for the risk-averse Finns easy.

What lies ahead?

The continuation of the Ukraine invasion, a declining Russian might, and now a confirmed security umbrella by NATO gives the impression that Finland's security concerns are mostly assuaged. The extent to which this new cooperation between the Finns and the NATO countries pan out will dictate Russia's actions, but it seems that Moscow, under the leadership of President Vladimir Putin, might wish to further escalate by increasing troop presence along the Russo-Finnish border.

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'Shared heritage'

"Considering our cultural imprints in these countries, India cannot afford to ignore these countries," ICCR President Vinay Sahasrabudde told The Hindu.

In India, the focus till now has been on learning European languages such as Spanish, French and German, along with the languages of major Asian economies such as China and Japan. Though a number of universities and institutes offer courses in these languages, only a handful teach any of the 10 languages on the ICCR list. Sinhala, for example, is taught at Banaras Hindu University and the School of Foreign Languages (SFL) under the Ministry of Defence. The SFL also has courses in Bahasa, Burmese and Tibetan.

"India requires translators, interpreters and teachers in the languages of these countries with which it shares a cultural history," Dr. Sahasrabudde said. The idea is to enable India to translate its epics and classics, as well as contemporary literature, into these languages so that people can read them.



Choosing sides: Military personnel raise Finland's flag at NATO headquarters in Brussels on April 4. AP

Why has Finland joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization? What led to Finland's decision of staying neutral during and since the Cold War? What is the Paasikivi line? How has Russia responded to this move by its neighbour? Did the Russia-Ukraine war influence Finland's decision?

Varsity consultations

The ICCR is in discussion with universities and institutes as well as experts offering foreign language courses in the country on the modalities of implementing the project. Among those being consulted are the foreign language departments at Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi University, Hyderabad's English and Foreign Languages University, Banaras Hindu University, and Mahatma Gandhi Antarrashtriya Hindi Vishwa Vidyalaya at Wardha.

The discussions, sources said, have thrown up two possibilities. One is to start tie-ups wherein teachers from these countries come and teach courses in India. The second approach is the ICCR offering scholarships to Indian students to go and study these languages in the countries where they are spoken.

Language experts feel that the second option is the better one as a proper cultural environment is needed to learn a language in its entirety. "To learn any language, a person has to be in that country. There are many aspects which one needs to learn, like expressions and proper pronunciation, which happen only in the correct environment," said Soma Ray, a former senior faculty member at the SFL who now teaches at St. Stephen's College in Delhi University.

She also emphasised the need for proper utilisation of trained language experts.

Growing demand

Experts also feel that the ICCR's list of languages needs to be expanded, with India seeing a boom in cultural and economic ties with other neighbouring countries as well.

Meeta Narain, a professor at the Centre for Russian Studies in Jawaharlal Nehru University, offered the example of medical tourism. "A large number of people are visiting India for treatment from countries like Turkey, Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Maldives and there is an urgent need for a pool of translators and interpreters for facilitating their visits as well," she said. Possibly recognising this, JNU will soon be starting a course in Pashto.

The ICCR said that after the rollout of the project this year, the possibility of expanding the current list of languages would be discussed.

BURNING BRIGHT

India must balance conservation efforts with the rights of forest dwellers

India's tiger population in 2022 was at least 3,167 cats, according to the results of the quadrennial census of the tiger population. The previous such exercise, in 2018, estimated the number to be 2,967. There is a fair chance that the 2022 numbers may be revised upwards as a full analysis of the census numbers remains to be done. Being the 50th year of Project Tiger, it is notable that governments, since 1973, have consistently devoted attention to ensuring that tigers — generally vulnerable to environmental degradation and extinct in several countries — continue to populate India's forests. Being able to ensure an increase in tiger numbers without relying on fenced reserves and by engaging the participation of forest-dwelling communities in conservation are distinct traits of India's big cat conservation approach. However, this does not mean that tiger numbers are ordained to grow in perpetuity. The 'Status of Tiger' report warns that all of India's five main tiger zones, while largely stable, face challenges of deforestation and loss of tiger habitat. The Western Ghats, while one of the most biodiverse spots globally, also hosts some of India's most populous tiger reserves. In 2018, 871 unique tigers were photographed, but this time, only 824 were captured. Over the years, there is an increasing presence of tigers outside protected reserves. In

the case of the Western Ghats, however, these numbers are on the decline, with only populations within protected forests stable, the report says.

From nine tiger reserves in 1973 to 53 today, the increase in numbers has not translated to all of these reserves becoming suitable habitats for tigers. Serious conservation efforts are needed to help, for instance, tiger population recovery in Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Telangana, and Andhra Pradesh. Wildlife habitats here face various threats that include habitat encroachment, hunting, conflicts with humans, unregulated cattle grazing, excessive harvesting of non-timber forest products, fires, mining, and expanding infrastructure. Experts have said India's reserves, in their present state, ought to be able to sustain populations of up to 4,000, and with expanded efforts at improving fledgling reserves, these numbers can increase. But, care has to be taken to maintain the delicate balance between making the ground fertile for conservation and keeping the rights of forest-dwelling communities intact. Showcasing conservation efforts ought not to come at the expense of ensuring the right to livelihood and dignified living of communities, who often live the closest to these majestic wild creatures. The cheetah, the leopard, the lion and the tiger can co-exist in India only with the right incentives in place for all stakeholders.

HOW HAVE RECENT WEATHER EVENTS AFFECTED WHEAT CROP?

Why is the Union govt. insisting that the wheat output would not be affected by the recent rains?

The story so far:

The unusual rise in mercury in February this year, followed by an untimely spell of widespread rain accompanied by gusty winds and hails during the month of March in parts of the country's key grain-producing States — Punjab, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Bihar and Gujarat — have left wheat-growing farmers worried as they anticipate a drop in yield (productivity), output (production) and quality.

How will the rains affect wheat crop?

According to the India Meteorological Department (IMD), fairly widespread rains along with stormy winds between 40-50 kilometers per hour lashed several parts of the major wheat-growing States in the country during March, under the influence of consecutive western disturbances. Rain spells accompanied by winds are not considered to be a good sign for the crop's health if they are close to the ripening and harvesting stage, especially if there are instances of water logging in the fields. Unfortunately, there have been instances of crop flattening in fields, besides water logging, which could be detrimental for the ready-to-harvest wheat crop. Wheat, a key rabi (winter) crop is sown between late October till December; it nears the ripening stage in the month of mid-March, and harvesting of the early sown varieties usually commences by the end of March itself. The IMD data suggests that between March 1 and April 9, large excess rains (40% more rain than normal) were received in several States.

How much output would be affected?

Agriwatch, an agri-commodity research firm, in its latest report has stated that owing to the recent untimely rains, the country's wheat production in the agriculture year 2022-23 is likely to be 102.9 MT which is less than the Union government's estimate of 112 MT. The Centre, however, is optimistic that wheat production would be close to 112 MT on account of an increased acreage (area) of wheat and better yield this season, despite a slight

production loss due to recent adverse weather conditions. As per the government, the average wheat acreage this year (2022-23) has been 14,86,240 hectares more in comparison to the last five years (2017-2021) which stood at 30,382,010 hectares.

What are agri-experts saying?

A sizable section of farmers assert that the inclement weather has adversely damaged the standing wheat crop.

Indu Sharma, former director of the Indian Institute of Wheat and Barley Research (IIWBR), based in Haryana's Karnal, says, "It's not just the untimely rains in March, but the unusually higher temperature in February this year that has also been detrimental for the wheat. Now, after the rains and winds, wherever the crop has flattened, it will be difficult to recover it, eventually hurting the crop's yield."

Moreover, if the country's wheat production drops below the government estimate it could lead to a hike in prices of wheat and wheat-based products in the domestic market, says Rajesh Paharia Jain, a New Delhi-based trader and wheat exporter. He adds that any decline in wheat production can also lead to a potential foodgrain security issue.

An agriculture domain expert and a former member of the Uttar Pradesh Planning Commission, Sudhir Panwar says if the government asserts that wheat production is not going to be severely impacted due to inclement weather then it means that the policy of wheat purchase would remain the same as that of the last year. "In such a scenario, the private player will purchase wheat on Minimum Support Price (MSP) or with some incentive. The wheat price for the consumer in the domestic market should hardly be impacted as the government's first priority would be to replenish its foodgrain stock. If the production is less, then the possibility of market intervention by the government is also quite bleak as its priority would be to maintain the buffer stock," he says.

INDIA SAID TO DENY U.K. TRADE TALKS HALTED OVER KHALISTAN STIR

Government sources in New Delhi on Monday said reports of India halting talks for a free trade agreement (FTA) with the United Kingdom over the recent pro-Khalistan protests in London, are "baseless".

The U.K. media had earlier reported that the Indian Government had "disengaged" from the trade talks, indicating that dialogue on the FTA could not proceed further "without a public condemnation of the Khalistan movement".

A government source however "denied" the report and termed it "baseless", informing that the next round of trade talks would take place in London on April 24.

The problem started on March 19 when a pro-Khalistan protest outside the Indian High Commission attempted to vandalise the Indian mission and took down the national tricolour. The agitators were demanding an end to the crackdown against extremist preacher Amritpal Singh and his followers from the separatist group — Waris Punjab De (WPD).

The India-U.K. FTA talks were launched on June 17, 2022, amid expectations of its conclusion by Diwali in October. The last round of India-U.K. dialogue over the FTA concluded on February 10 and the next round was expected to be held in March when the pro-Khalistan protests broke out over police action against Amritpal Singh in Punjab.

MUCH TO WRITE HOME ABOUT THIS POST OFFICE: IN 3D PRINTED GLORY, DELIVERED ON TIME WITH BIG SAVINGS



Next big thing: 3D concrete printing equipment on the construction site of the new Halasuru post office. K. MURALI KUMAR

The Postal Department has set social media abuzz after a picture of a building being 3D printed in Cambridge Layout of Bengaluru went viral.

In what is reportedly the country's first-of-its-kind post office building, to accommodate the Ulsoor Bazaar post office, 3D printing technology is being

employed to construct the building. While houses and other buildings were previously built before with this technology, it is a first when it comes to post offices.

When one thinks of a construction site, what usually comes to mind is heaps of sand and cement, jelly stones, bricks and concrete mixers and a huge group of people working. However, 3D printers and a handful of skilled technicians dominate this particular construction site, which roughly spans over 1,000 sq.ft. The building design eschews the usual straight lines and boxed structure for a more fluid frame.

"The cement, sand, and a waterproof chemical is added into a churner with measured amounts of water. The mixture then comes out in blocks, which will be laid on top of each other along with iron pillars in between for support," a worker explained.

Depending on the success of this pilot project, the department might plan a few more in the future.

"We have over 400 vacant sites where we want to build post offices. After the construction of this building, we will prepare a report and submit it to the department. Then if they accept this report, more such post offices are to be expected," said S. Rajendra Kumar, Chief Post Master General, Karnataka Circle.

Speaking about the salient features of the 3D printing technology, Mr. Kumar said it saves time and money. "The cost of this building will be 30-40% less than regular low-cost buildings. The building can also be of any shape and not just a square or a rectangle. The building will be completed in almost a month," he said.

The new-tech post office, which is being constructed at a cost of around ₹23 lakh, has garnered a wide range of reactions on social media.

"I have seen this happening while passing through the road. Very good initiative," said Roshan Raikar, a twitter user.

"Wow, what can be a better place to start this with other than Bengaluru?" another user asked.

HOW CAN L-G ACT WITHOUT THE AID AND ADVICE OF THE COUNCIL OF MINISTERS: SC

How can the Lieutenant-Governor act without the "aid and advice" of the Council of Ministers in nominating members to the Municipal Corporation of Delhi, the Supreme Court observed orally on Monday.

The apex court made the observation while hearing a plea by senior advocate A.M. Singhvi, appearing for the Delhi government, to quash the nomination of the 10 aldermen.

"What is there by electoral majority is nullified by the aldermen. The whole object is patently illegal," Mr. Singhvi said.

"How can the L-G take the decision without the aid and advice of the Council of Ministers? This has to be exercised on the aid and advice...", a Bench comprising Chief Justice D.Y. Chandrachud and Justices P.S. Narasimha and J.B. Pardiwala said.

The court granted 10 days to Raj Niwas, represented by Additional Solicitor General (ASG) Sanjay Jain, to file a response.

On February 17, after the city's mayoral polls were deferred thrice amid chaos in the MCD, the Supreme Court, while hearing a plea by AAP's then Mayor candidate Shelly Oberoi, ordered the L-G to notify the MCD's first meeting to elect a Mayor within 24 hours. In the same order, the court also overturned a decision by the L-G-appointed presiding officer and ruled that aldermen cannot vote in the elections.

Act amended

The ASG argued that the GNCTD Act (the Government of National Capital Territory Act) had been amended after the 2018 judgment by a Constitution Bench, which held that the L-G should act as per the aid and advice of the Council of Ministers.

The law officer added that "in view of the amendment, a notification, which is under challenge in a separate petition, was issued", referring to the battle between the Centre and the Delhi government over the control of Capital's services, also being heard in the Supreme Court.

Mr. Singhvi opposed the submissions, saying they were "patently wrong" and that the constitutional interpretation of Article 239AA (which deals with Delhi) by the Supreme Court cannot be negated by amending a statute.

He alleged the Delhi government officers were "emboldened" as they were sending the files directly to Raj Niwas without first sharing them with the Delhi government, and demanded that strictures be passed against the Delhi government officers.



The apex court had earlier ruled that aldermen cannot vote in the internal elections of MCD. file Photo

Apex court Bench headed by CJI made the oral observation while hearing Delhi govt.'s plea against L-G's decision to nominate 10 aldermen to the MCD; Raj Niwas given 10 days to respond

RIGHT LESSONS

Wider, transparent consultations are needed in shaping the curriculum

The arbitrary and surreptitious deletion of several portions from various textbooks by the NCERT betrays bad faith and lack of professionalism but, in the prevailing political climate, it is not entirely surprising. The ruling BJP has made the creation of a new knowledge ecosystem across all fields central to its politics. Among the key deletions, which the NCERT describes as rationalisation of syllabus, are references to the dislike of Hindutva extremists for Gandhi, a ban on the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh after his assassination, entire chapters on the history of the Mughals, references to the 2002 communal riots in Gujarat, the Naxalite movement, the Emergency and discussions on social movements. History texts have been targeted in particular, and 250 historians from leading Indian and foreign universities have pointed out that those who prepared them through a process of consultation and wide-ranging discussions were all kept in the dark. These changes are not limited to school textbooks. The UGC draft syllabus for bachelor-level history has also been altered, "leading to a plainly prejudiced and irrational perception of our past", according to the Indian History Congress. The NCERT has sought to characterise its failure to be transparent as an "oversight", but remains firm on the revision.

Knowledge expands continuously, and syllabus revision is essential for a robust education system. What is taught to the younger generation is a collective decision of a society in which formal education is a critical part. The values and ethics of the collective are reflected in education, which evolve over time. In India, education has evolved with an aim to promote national integration, critical thinking, and scientific temper. As any society matures, it might be able to process darker episodes of the past with more equanimity. There is also the question of deciding the appropriate levels at which learners are introduced to various levels of knowledge. For all these reasons, textbooks and pedagogy need to be revised periodically. The trouble is when this exercise is carried out in a politically partisan manner, and in disregard of expertise. It turns out to be toxic when strife, not harmony, is promoted through formal education. India's growth and development depends almost entirely on educating its bursting young population with vocational and social skills and shaping youngsters into caring citizens of a pluralistic nation. They should learn history with the aim of not repeating its tragedies in order to build a harmonious future. There should be wider, more transparent consultations in shaping the curriculum at all levels.



The advertisement features a smartphone on the left side, displaying a red book cover with the text "BOOK ONLINE" and a white logo. Above the phone is a white Wi-Fi symbol. To the right of the phone is the Vedhik IAS Academy logo, which consists of a red circular emblem with a white flame-like shape inside, followed by the text "VEDHIK IAS ACADEMY" and the tagline "The New Learning Mantra". The background is a gradient of yellow and orange. On the right side, the text "MASTER THE NEW LEARNING MANTRA" is written in large, bold, red letters. Below this text is the website address "www.vedhikiasacademy.org". At the bottom right, there is a stack of three books.



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