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ECOLOGY AND ENVIRONMENT

GLOBAL STOCKTAKE DRAFT CALLS FOR PHASING OUT FOSSIL FUELS

CONTEXT: For the first time, a key document in its draft text being negotiated at the UN's annual climate summit has underlined the need to phase away all fossil fuels.



Global Stocktake (GST)

The latest version of the Global Stocktake (GST) includes a clause committing all signatories to "an orderly and just phase out of fossil fuels". In previous years, climate talks have generally focussed around the need to phase out coal, but negotiations have generally

ended in a stalemate. Emissions from fossil fuel, responsible for 80 % of GHG emissions requires significant cut to keep global temperature rise below 1.50 Celsius.

The GST, the first of its kind since 2015, is expected to take stock of the implementation of the Paris Agreement; assess the progress made towards its goals of preventing temperature increases from going beyond 20 Celsius, preferably 1.50 Celsius; and guide countries in updating their stated commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The GST also includes a clause calling for tripling renewable energy capacity globally by 2030 compared to the 2022 level to 11,000 GW and doubling the global average annual rate of energy-efficiency improvement compared to the 2022 level to 4.1 % by 2030.

Apart from the GST, there are separate drafts expected on finance and adaptation. After intensive discussions on each draft – expected to last at least until next Thursday – a final agreed 'declaration' or 'agreement' is expected to take shape.

Energy efficiency pledge

In Dubai, India was not among the 118 signatories to the 'energy efficiency pledge,' which laid down this directive, reportedly on the grounds that it came with a caveat to give up the use of coal. This was first formally articulated during the G-20 leaders summit in Delhi, though at that time, there was no mention of improving energy efficiency. The text also mentions the importance of transitioning to sustainable lifestyles and sustainable patterns of consumption and production in efforts to address climate change and encourages efforts towards transitions to sustainable

lifestyles, sustainable patterns of consumption.

'No clear roadmap'

There are 193 separate points spread out over the 24 pages of the GST draft. Several lay out 'options' that countries can agree to adopt, reject or avoid mention of in the final agreement. The draft in its current format, that mention of phasing out of all fossil fuels, including coal and 'inefficient fossil-fuel subsidies' will be disputed.

DISASTER MANAGEMENT

MICHAUNG MAKES LANDFALL IN ANDHRA PRADESH, WREAKS HAVOC

CONTEXT: The Severe cyclonic storm Michaung made its landfall from half past noon to 2.30 p.m. close to the south of Bapatla with a maximum sustained wind speed of 90-100 kmph, uprooting trees and electric poles.



POLITICS AND GOVERNANCE

CONGRESS ANNOUNCES REVANTH REDDY AS CM OF TELANGANA



CONTEXT: The Congress central leadership named Telangana party chief A. Revanth Reddy as its choice of Chief Minister of the State. He will take the oath of office on Thursday. Mr. Reddy was named the leader of the Congress Legislature Party (CLP), and he will become the first Congress Chief Minister of Telangana, a State formed in 2014.

ECOLOGY AND ENVIRONMENT

GLACIERS SHRANK 1 M A YEAR IN A DECADE: WMO

CONTEXT: The Global Climate 2011-2020: A Decade of Acceleration from the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) noted 2011-2020 decade as the warmest ever recorded in history, while recording the lowest number of deaths from extreme events.

Decade of extremes

The decade from 2011 to 2020 witnessed a rise in economic losses due to extreme weather, but also saw a drop in deaths

■ The drop in deaths was due to advancements in early warning systems and disaster management

■ This was also the first decade that the depleted ozone hole visibly showed recovery

■ Heatwaves caused the highest human casualties and tropical

cyclones inflicted the most economic damage

■ While climate finance nearly doubled, it needs to increase sevenfold by the decade's end



SOURCE: WORLD METEOROLOGICAL ORGANIZATION

The agency attributed the fall in extreme event related casualties to an improvement in the “early warning system” driven by improvements in forecasting and better disaster management. In India, for instance, improvements in forecasting cyclone formation and the time it took to reach land have led to greater preparedness and evacuation of those most at risk.

2011-2020 DECADE

1. First decade since 1950 with not a single short-term event with 10,000 deaths or more.
2. First decade showing visible recovery of the depleted ozone hole.
3. Glaciers thinned by approximately 1 metre per year on an average between 2011 and 2020. Greenland and Antarctica lost 38 % more ice during the period than during the 2001-2010 period.

The report further underlined that human-caused climate change significantly increased the risks from extreme heat events. Heatwaves were responsible for the highest number of human casualties, while tropical cyclones caused the most economic damage.

Public and private climate finance almost doubled during the period. However, it needed to increase at least seven times by the end of this decade to achieve climate objectives, including keeping global temperature from rising by more than 1.5 degrees Celsius by the end of the century.

POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

INCREASE THRESHOLD INCOME FOR EWS ADMISSIONS IN SCHOOLS TO ₹5 LAKH: HC



CONTEXT: The Delhi High Court ordered the Delhi government to increase the threshold income for availing of the reservation under the Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) category in private schools to ₹ 5 lakh from the current ₹ 1 lakh per annum.

The order will remain in force until the Delhi government takes a decision to increase the income slab to a “commensurate amount which corresponds to the living standards of the intended beneficiaries of the scheme in the National Capital Territory (NCT) of Delhi.”

The minimum wage of an unskilled labourer in the city is ₹17,494 per month. A comparative analysis of the threshold income criterion in the NCT of Delhi with the rest of the States and Union Territories would signify that the NCT of Delhi has the “lowest requisite income criteria as compared to the amount of ₹8 lakh per annum followed by most of the States”.

‘False’ self-declarations

The court directed the Delhi government’s Directorate of Education (DoE) to frame a standard operating procedure (SOP) for income verification and regular monitoring of the eligibility criteria to eradicate the mechanism of self-declaration of income by parents immediately.

Under the Right to Education Act, 25% seats in private schools are reserved for candidates from the EWS category. The High Court’s directions came while hearing a case in which the father of a child faked his income certificate to admit him to the prestigious Sanskriti School in Chanakyapuri here in 2013 under the EWS quota.

The child continued to study in the school as an EWS category candidate without any difficulty till January 2018, when a controversy broke out as the father wrote to the principal of the school, seeking alteration in the EWS category to general. The school initiated an inquiry, which revealed that the income certificate was obtained by misrepresenting the actual income by the father. The court, however, allowed the child to continue studying at the school as a general category student. The court said the child was not at fault and could not be made to suffer for his father’s misdeeds. It imposed ₹10 lakh as costs on the boy’s father for securing admission of his son through illegal means.

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HONEST RECKONING

CONTEXT: At the climate summit in Dubai, the negotiations is to cap the half-degree rise to limit increase the temperatures to 1.50 C compared to pre-industrial levels. Global pledges to cut emissions are insufficient to achieve this.

Current estimates require requires at least three times more renewable energy capacity by 2030, or at least 11,000 GW to limit warming to 1.50 C. There is wide global consensus on the need for tripling renewable energy capacity, formally articulated in the New Delhi Leaders' Declaration at the G-20 summit in Delhi in September. The Global Renewables and Energy Efficiency Pledge that calls for phasing down of unabated coal power, in particular ending the continued investment in unabated new coal-fired power plants. However, India and China have so far abstained from signing.

India has positioned itself as a champion for renewable energy, with its Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) talking of tripling renewable energy capacity to 500 GW from the current 170 GW by 2030. Coal-fired plants are responsible for nearly 70 % of India's greenhouse gas emissions.

Developed countries that have made commitments to give up coal often have other large, fossil-fuel resources as back-up. The United States joined 56 other countries at Dubai in a commitment to completely eschew coal for its energy use, by 2035. The U.S. only draws about 20 % of its energy from coal and at least 55 % from oil and gas, with plans to actually produce more of it in 2030 than at present.

POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

IS UNMARRIED WOMEN HAVING CHILDREN BY SURROGACY AN 'ACCEPTED NORM', ASKS SC

CONTEXT: The Supreme Court questioned whether a single, unmarried woman having a child through surrogacy is an "accepted norm" in Indian society.

The Surrogacy (Regulation) Act, 2021 allows a widow, a divorced woman between the ages of 35 and 45, or an infertile couple to get the benefit of surrogacy. The Bench, including Justice Ujjal Bhuyan, was hearing a petition filed by a 38-year-old single woman to become a mother through surrogacy. The petitioner, represented by senior advocate Saurabh Kirpal, said she was "heavily diabetic" and pregnancy would pose a grave risk to her. The purpose of the petitioner was obviously not towards that end. Limiting the right to become a mother and discriminating against a woman on the basis of her status of marriage was discriminatory and violative of her fundamental rights. The petitioner's side argued that it was not their "misfortune" which led Parliament to allow divorcees and widows to have children through surrogacy. They argued that the exclusion of unmarried women boiled down to "patriarchal stigma" against them.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

U.S. OFFICIAL RAISES PANNUN PLOT CASE, ASKS INDIA TO PROBE

CONTEXT: U.S. Principal Deputy National Security Adviser (NSA) Jonathan Finer has raised the U.S. Department of Justice (DoJ) case against an Indian national allegedly working at the behest of a government employee to assassinate Sikhs for Justice leader Gurpatwant Singh Pannun in New York.



White House statement

The Ministry of External Affairs issued a readout, referring to talks on the India-U.S. Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies (iCET), while the White House readout included details of the conversations Mr. Finer had on the Israel-Hamas conflict, the hijacking of a cargo ship in the Red Sea, as well as the Pannun assassination case, where India has instituted a high-level inquiry to investigate the U.S. allegations.

The White House said Mr. Finer had held "in-depth discussions aimed at strengthening coordination and policy alignment across the Indo-Pacific, including the wider Indian Ocean region. They discussed West Asia, including the recent attacks on commercial vessels in the Red Sea and the importance of safeguarding freedom of commercial navigation, as well as plans for a post-conflict Gaza and a pathway toward a two-state solution."



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ECOLOGY AND ENVIRONMENT

THE JOURNEY TOWARDS A PLASTIC-FREE WORLD

CONTEXT: The Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC), under the United Nations Environment Programme, met in Nairobi from November 13 to 19 for its third round of negotiations to develop an international legally binding instrument to end plastic pollution worldwide.

Under the UN Environment Assembly Resolution 5/14, the INC is responsible for delivering a global plastics treaty by 2025. The INC-3 was a make-or-break opportunity as countries came together to negotiate the 'zero draft' text developed by the committee's secretariat, with various options for core obligations and control measures. INC-3 fared relatively better than INC-2, in Paris earlier this year, by being able to discuss the substantive contents of the treaty instead of debating only the rules of procedure.

What does the 'zero draft' say?

The UN Climate secretariat prepared zero draft that contained strong options for an international legally binding treaty to end plastic pollution. But during negotiations, member states managed to water down their core obligations, particularly those pertaining to some high-impact elements such as primary polymer production, chemicals of concern, problematic and short-lived plastics, trade, and financial mechanisms, among others. Some states also disagreed on the objective and scope under UNEA Resolution 5/14.

Most countries agreed that the treaty's objective should be to end plastic pollution and protect human health and the environment. But a group of like-minded countries — including Saudi Arabia, Russia, China, Iran, and some members of the Gulf Cooperation Council — argued to include the clause "while contributing to the achievement of sustainable development", to ensure their economic interests and investments.

The most important provision, that is a reduction in the production of primary polymers, also stirred controversy because of its implications for industry. The industry's influence was apparent by its presence — with 36 % more fossil fuels and chemicals sector lobbyists at INC-3 than in INC-2 — at the negotiations. The UNEA Resolution 5/14 calls to end plastic pollution and not plastic production.

While it is agreed that plastic pollution can be managed only with strong, concrete measures at each stage throughout the lifecycle of plastics, many countries disagreed where the lifecycle begins. While this would ideally mean that it begins at the point of sourcing raw materials for production, some countries argued that the lifecycle starts at product design. Similarly, the same group objected to including provisions pertaining to eliminating compounds and polymers of concern and problematic and avoidable plastics, which are key in ending plastic pollution, and called for a 'null option' despite broad agreement from other countries that were pushing for a binding agreement.

Does the treaty discuss finance?

A financial mechanism is one of the cornerstones of the treaty to determine how it will be implemented, and it was yet another point of divergence. The zero draft contains options such as imposing a plastic-pollution fee to be paid by plastic polymer producers, and another on reducing the financial flow into projects with a high carbon footprint. But the same group of like-minded countries demanded that these provisions be deleted altogether from the draft.

Should these provisions be included, they will have considerable implications; in particular, countries will have to cut, if not eliminate, fossil-fuel subsidies and investments in environmentally unfavourable technologies such as incineration and waste-to-energy plants. This would have been a big victory for the environment and human health if they hadn't been blocked.

Are there limits on plastic trade?

Another crucial provision that the same bloc argued against was the trade in polymers, chemicals, plastic products, and waste. While the plastics treaty is expected to plug the holes left open by the Basel Convention, any restrictions on trade is considered to be impinging on the freedom and sovereignty of nations, the bloc contended.

However, the Centre for International Environmental Law (CIEL), a non-profit in Washington, D.C., has found that the bloc misconstrued the World Trade Organisation (WTO) rules to their advantage. According to CIEL's analysis, the WTO rules provide for sufficient scope for trade restrictions when they are "necessary to protect human, animal or plant life or health" and nothing prohibits states under international law to regulate or restrict the trade of certain products and materials.

The group of like-minded countries rejected every single upstream measure, and diluted midstream measures with the inclusion of voluntary measures and phrases such as "national circumstances", "national priorities", "bottom-up approach" etc. Excluding the provision on waste management, in fact, almost all other provisions were watered down to account for "national circumstances and capabilities". Even under waste management, there is a high risk of these countries insisting on the treaty accommodating unsound solutions. This is because the phrase "environmentally sound management" isn't well-defined even as terms such as "best available science" and "best available technology" continue to be used.

What is the issue with the rules of procedure?

At INC-2, representatives of the member states debated the rules of procedure for two days with no concrete outcome, even as a handful of countries, including India, continued to demand consensus-based decision-making instead of a two-thirds vote majority. The rules of procedure continued to apply provisionally at INC-3, without any final determination, and the meeting passed the buck to INC-4 to deal with them. If a decision had been made on the voting procedure and the rules of procedure were formally adopted, the negotiators could have better staved off the objections of the like-minded countries at INC-3.

In this context, the African group of countries and Small-Island Developing States (SIDS) played an important role. They advocated for strong binding provisions for the high-impact elements in the treaty. Their submissions stood out from the rest as they championed the voices of waste-pickers and indigenous peoples, and approached the treaty from a human-rights and public health perspective. However, the draft text has now tripled in size, with member states adding and deleting the text as befits their interests. The meetings themselves were frequently delayed and stretched into the wee hours due to the stalling and blocking by like-minded countries.

What's the takeaway from INC-3?

One of the closed-door meetings that discussed the synthesis report and possible list of topics for intersessional work was unable to reach a consensus until the very end. As a result, no intersessional work will happen between now and INC-4. This is a big setback: many countries were counting on this to work to make some headway in hammering out the finer points, such as the definitions, targets, and timelines, before INC-4.

ECONOMICS AND DEVELOPMENT

NOV. SERVICES PMI SIGNALS SLOWDOWN

CONTEXT: As per the seasonally adjusted S&P Global India Services Business Activity Index, India's services sector momentum faltered to a one-year low in November with widespread slowdowns in growth rates for new orders and output.

Momentum slackens

S&P Global India Services Business Activity Index slides to 56.9, from 58.4 in Oct., with growth rates for orders, output easing



- While firms remain positive about prospects in the year ahead, there are signs optimism is fading on worries about faster inflation
- Net employment at services firms expand at weakest pace since April
- Strongest upturn in selling prices evident in finance & insurance sector

The S&P Global India Services Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI) slid from 58.4 in October to 56.9 in November. The S&P Global India Composite PMI Output Index eased to 57.4, from 58.4 in October.

New export orders for services firms grew at the slowest pace since June even as input costs and output prices rose at an eight-month low rate. While firms surveyed remained positive about business prospects in the year ahead, there was some evidence of optimism fading due to worries about faster inflation.

Outstanding business volumes were broadly stable among services firms, which triggered a restrained approach to fresh hiring. Though net employment still expanded, it was at a pace that was the weakest since April.

Firms reported a further increase in operating expenses, with labour, food, material and transportation costs rising since October, but the overall uptick was below the long-run average. Consumer services firms recorded the highest rate of input cost inflation.

However, the pace at which prices were raised was above the long-run trend, despite being the slowest in eight months. The strongest upturn in selling prices was evident in finance and insurance.

India's service sector has lost further growth momentum midway through the third fiscal quarter, but we continue to see robust demand for services fuelling new business intakes and output. With some relief on costs, fewer firms raised their own fees in November, an aspect that might provide a further boost to demand as 2023 draws to a close.

"Intelligence plus character-that is the goal of true education. — Martin Luther King Jr.



INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

MYANMAR JUNTA CHIEF SEEKS POLITICAL SOLUTION WITH REBELS

CONTEXT: Myanmar's junta chief has called on ethnic armed groups battling the military across the country to find a political solution. The junta is reeling from coordinated offensives near the borders with China, India and Thailand, in what analysts say is the biggest threat to its rule since it seized power in 2021.



Myanmar has more than a dozen ethnic minority armed groups, many of which hold territory in the country's border regions and have battled the military since independence from Britain in 1948. In late October, three groups launched a joint offensive across northern Shan state, capturing towns and seizing vital trade hubs on China border. More than 250 civilians, including children, are feared to have died since the launch of the offensive in October, according to UN field reports.

ECONOMICS AND DEVELOPMENT

MOODY'S CUTS CHINA OUTLOOK ON GROWTH, PROPERTY RISKS



CONTEXT: Ratings agency Moody's cut its outlook on China's government credit ratings to negative from stable, in the latest sign of mounting global concern over the impact of surging local government debt and a deepening property crisis on the world's second-largest economy.

The downgrade reflects growing evidence that authorities will have to provide more financial support for debt-laden local governments and state firms, posing broad risks to China's fiscal, economic and institutional strength. The outlook change also reflects the increased risks related to structurally and persistently lower medium-term economic growth and the ongoing downsizing of the property sector.

The credit ratings agency also affirmed China's A1 long-term local and foreign-currency issuer ratings, saying the economy still has a high shock-absorption capacity. China's blue-chip stocks slumped to almost five-year lows. The cost of insuring China's sovereign debt against a default rose to its highest since mid-November. The markets are more concerned with the property crisis and weak growth, rather than immediate sovereign debt risk.

ECONOMICS AND DEVELOPMENT

'BANKS WRITE OFF ₹10 LAKH CR., RECOVER ₹7 LAKH CR. IN 5 YEARS'

CONTEXT: The Union Ministry of Finance informed the Parliament that the banks have written off ₹ 10.57 lakh Cr. during the last five financial years, of which ₹ 5.52 lakh Cr. was in respect of loans pertaining to large industries.

As per RBI data, Scheduled Commercial Banks (SCBs) have written off an aggregate loan amount of ₹ 10.57 lakh Cr. during the last five financial years. The scheduled commercial banks have also recovered ₹ 7.15 lakh crore of non-performing assets during the five-year period.

Comprehensive steps have been taken to recover NPAs, enabled by which, SCBs have made an aggregate recovery of ₹ 7,15,507 Cr. (RBI provisional data for FY 2022-23) in NPA accounts, including written-off loans, during the last five financial years. Banks regularly evaluate the impact of write-offs as part of the exercise to clean up their balance sheet, in accordance with guidelines.

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