

● POLITY

● ECONOMICS

● TECHNOLOGY

● ECOLOGY

## RAILWAY BOARD ALLEGES 'SIGNALLING INTERFERENCE', SEEKS CBI PROBE

BHUBANESWAR/NEW DELHI

The Railway Board has recommended a probe by the Central Bureau of Investigation into the devastating multi-train collision in Balasore district of Odisha, Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw said on Sunday. The Board said that "signalling interference" had been identified as the main cause of the accident, which claimed 275 lives and left more than 1,000 injured. It added that sabotage had not been ruled out.

"Keeping in mind the circumstances and administrative information received so far, the Railway Board is recommending a CBI inquiry for further investigation into the incident," Mr. Vaishnaw told presspersons in Bhubaneswar on Sunday evening.

At the accident site earlier in the day, he said the Commissioner of Railway Safety had completed its investigation. The root cause of the collision had been identified as a problem in electronic interlocking, the operational signalling system for this stretch of the track, Mr. Vaishnaw said. The people responsible for the error had been identified.

A group of Home Ministry officials have already visited the accident site and held discussions with Railway officials. At a press conference, the Railway Board member for operations and business development, Jaya Verma Sinha, said that the possibility of sabotage has not been ruled out, insisting that the system cannot malfunction without manual interference.

Sandeep Mathur, Principal Executive Director of Signalling at the Railway Board, said the electronic interlocking signal system works on two information points: a signal to pass is given based on which direction the track is set, and whether the track is free of obstruction. "As far as the digital record of what happened on that night, the signals sent out were all okay and as expected, but clearly the accident happened and now it has to be determined where the failure took place," Ms. Sinha said.

The electronic interlocking signalling system is controlled remotely in most cases. However, the controls reside in the section office of the railway station where they are supervised by signal men, section control officers, and section control heads; the stationmaster is privy to the details.

A senior Railway official said, "Interlocking malfunction is a big thing. There could be two things: either it was a sabotage or it was a software or a hardware malfunction, that is if the switching of tracks [to the loop line] happened despite signal being given for main line. This means that the signal and switching were not in sync."



*Fast-paced work: Workers busy restoring the track at the accident spot at the Bahanaga railway station in Balasore district of Odisha on Sunday. BISWARANJAN ROUT*

*Commissioner of Railway Safety completes investigation; Minister says root cause of collision found to be a problem in electronic interlocking; people responsible for the error identified; Board says sabotage has not been ruled out*

Ms. Sinha said the first point of contact after the accident was with the loco pilot of Coromandel Express. "He said that he had received the green signal for the main line and the train went on at top speed. The pilot is now in a critical condition in hospital."

She said all rescue work had been finished at the accident site and that restoration work on the tracks had begun. The Railway Board appealed to the public to reach out to them on Central helpline number 139 for any information.

### Goods train crosses ill-fated section

Later, the first train on the section started its journey around 10.40 pm on Sunday, 51 hours after the horrific crash.

The train carrying coal is headed towards Rourkela Steel Plant from Visakhapatnam port and is running on the same track where the ill-fated Yeshwantpur-Howrah train met with the tragedy on Friday.

## THE DELHI ORDINANCE IS AN UNABASHED POWER-GRAB

*Mathew Idiculla is a legal consultant and a visiting faculty at Azim Premji University, Bengaluru*

On May 19 this year, the Union government promulgated an ordinance to amend the Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi (NCTD) Act, 1991 that effectively nullified the Supreme Court judgment of May 11 on the powers over bureaucratic appointments in Delhi. After an eight-year long protracted legal battle, a five-judge Constitution Bench led by the Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud had unanimously held that the elected government of Delhi had legislative and administrative powers over "services".

The ordinance removes Entry 41 (services) of the State List from the Delhi government's control and creates a National Capital Civil Service Authority, consisting of the Chief Minister, Chief Secretary and Principal Secretary-Home, to decide on service matters in Delhi. Decisions of the Authority will be made through majority voting, which means that two Union-appointed bureaucrats could overrule the Chief Minister. Further, the ordinance provides that if a disagreement arises between the Authority and the Lieutenant Governor (LG), the decision of the LG shall prevail. The ordinance raises multiple legal and political questions regarding federalism, democracy, bureaucratic accountability, executive law-making, and judicial review. Several Opposition parties, barring

the Congress, have supported the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) government in its opposition to the ordinance. Congress leader Ajay Maken said that "cooperative federalism principles don't fit" Delhi since it is the "National Capital". In this context, it is important to examine how the ideas of federalism fit in unique contexts such as Delhi.

### Asymmetric federalism and Delhi

The position of Delhi in India's federal constitutional scheme is not straightforward. The Supreme Court, in its May 11 verdict, had noted that the addition of Article 239AA in the Constitution accorded the National Capital Territory of Delhi (NCTD) a "sui generis" status. The Court held that there is no "homogeneous class" of Union Territories and States; rather, India's Constitution has several examples of special governance arrangements which treat federal units differently from each other. It noted that the special provisions for States under Article 371 are in the nature of "asymmetric federalism" made for "accommodating the differences and the specific requirements of regions".

Scholars of federalism have long argued that for countries with deep social cleavages along ethnic, linguistic, and cultural lines, an asymmetric model

of federalism, which accommodates the interests of various social groups through territorial units, is desirable. India's federal system has been described as asymmetric due to the special status it accorded Jammu and Kashmir under Article 370 (before its dilution) and special protections under Article 371, and 5th and 6th Schedule Areas.

What is striking about the Court's judgment is that it used the asymmetric federalism framework to clarify the position of the NCTD in India's federal scheme. It remarked that though NCTD is not a full-fledged State, since its Legislative Assembly is constitutionally entrusted to legislate upon subjects in the State and Concurrent Lists, the insertion of Article 239AA created a "asymmetric federal model" for the NCTD. So, while the NCTD remains a Union Territory, the "unique constitutional status conferred upon it makes it a federal entity".

While the invocation of asymmetric federalism for Delhi is interesting, the Court was a mute spectator when this idea was annihilated in Jammu and Kashmir. Nevertheless, an articulation of the underlying principles of federalism in this case is welcome. The Court noted that the principles of federalism and democracy are interlinked since the States' exercise of legislative power gives effect to people's aspirations and that federalism creates "dual manifestation of the public will" in which the priorities of the two sets of governments "are not just bound to be different, but are intended to be different". Such a clear expression of the federal principle punctures hollow exhortations of "cooperative federalism" that have been weaponised to centralise Indian politics.

### The law and politics of federalism

The presidential ordinance is problematic at different levels. First, the government's swift and brazen act of undoing a Constitution Bench judgment does not augur well for judicial independence. While the legislature can alter the legal basis of a judgment, it cannot directly overrule it. Further, executive law-making through an ordinance, as the Supreme Court held in D.C. Wadhwa (1987), is only to "meet an extraordinary situation" and cannot be "perverted to serve political ends". Most crucially, adding an additional subject of exemption (services) to the existing exemptions (land, public order, and police) of Delhi's legislative power listed in Article 239AA, without amending the Constitution, is arguably an act of constitutional subterfuge. Finally, creating a civil services authority where bureaucrats can overrule an elected Chief Minister destroys long-established norms on bureaucratic accountability.

For all of these reasons, the ordinance is a direct assault on federalism and democracy. Such an unabashed power-grab by the Union government needs to be opposed by all who care for the future of India as a federal democracy. However, Opposition parties do not often take a position on federalism on first principles or articulate it as a normative idea. Hence, AAP cheered the dilution of Article 370, and now the Congress refuses to oppose this ordinance. This poses limits for federalism to act as a counter-hegemonic idea. As the foundations of India's constitutionalism are threatened, we need a new politics of federalism that reflects and articulates the underlying values of federalism consistently.

## UNDERSTANDING THE KAVACH SYSTEM



*Tragic loss: Restoration work is underway at the site of Friday's triple train accident in Balasore district on June 4. PTI*

*What are the salient features of the indigenously developed Automatic Train Protection (ATP) system by the Research Design and Standards Organisation? In which networks and routes has the system been implemented?*

### EXPLAINER

#### The story so far:

The death of over 288 passengers in the ghastly train accident on June 2 at Bahanaga Bazaar railway station in the Balasore district of Odisha has brought into sharp focus the safety mechanisms needed to prevent such tragedies.

#### What is Kavach?

The KAVACH is an indigenously developed Automatic Train Protection (ATP) system by the Research Design and Standards Organisation (RDSO) in collaboration with the Indian industry. The trials were facilitated by the South Central Railway to achieve safety in train operations across Indian Railways. It is a state-of-the-art electronic system with Safety Integrity Level-4 (SIL-4) standards. It is meant to provide protection by preventing trains to pass the signal at Red (which marks danger) and avoid collision. It activates the train's braking system automatically if the driver fails to control the train as per speed restrictions. In addition, it prevents the collision between two locomotives equipped with functional Kavach systems. The system also relays SoS messages during emergency situations. An added feature is the centralised live monitoring of train movements through the Network Monitor System. 'Kavach' is one of the cheapest, SIL-4 certified technologies where the probability of error is 1 in 10,000 years.

#### How does Kavach work on Railway Systems?

The Traffic collision avoidance system (TCAS), with the help of equipment on board the locomotive and transmission towers at stations connected with Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) tags, helps in two-way communication between the station master and loco-pilot to convey any emergency message. The instrument panel inside the cabin helps the loco-pilot know about the signal in advance without visual sighting, and the permissible speeds to be maintained. If a red signal is jumped and two trains come face to face on the same line, the technology automatically takes over and applies sudden brakes. Additionally, the hooter activates by itself when approaching a level crossing which serves as a big boon to loco-pilots during fog conditions when visibility is low.

Both the Shalimar-Chennai Coromandel Express and the Yeshwanthpur-Howrah Express were not fitted with KAVACH-TACS. The Kavach system project is yet to be implemented on the Howrah-Kharagpur-Chennai line. However, Jaya Varma Sinha, a member of the Operation and Business Development, Railway Board, reasoned that the reaction time and distance were very short as the train was travelling at a very high speed. "If an obstruction comes suddenly in front of a high-moving vehicle then no technology in the world would prevent an accident," she explained at a press conference.

#### Where has Kavach been implemented?

The Union Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw inspected the trial of the Kavach working system between Gullaguda-Chitgidda Railway stations on Lingampalli-Vikarabad section in the Secunderabad Division of South Central Railway last March.

The South Central Railway (SCR) Zone is a pioneer in the implementation of the KAVACH – (TACS). The Kavach system has been deployed over 1,465 kms in the SCR limits in 77 locomotives and 135 stations till March this year. Additionally, the Secunderabad-based Indian Railways Institute of Signal Engineering & Telecommunications (IRISET) hosts the 'Centre of Excellence' for Kavach. IRISET has been mandated by the Railway Board to train the inservice railway staff on Kavach. The Institute's Kavach lab carries out round the year training programmes.

#### What is the Kavach deployment strategy?

Kavach implementation is being taken up in a focused manner by the Railway Board. The first priority are the High Density Routes and the New Delhi-Mumbai and New Delhi-Howrah Sections, as they have higher chances of accidents because the trains run closer to each other. The second priority lines are the Highly Used Networks, the third ones are other Passenger High Density Routes and the final priority is of course to cover all other routes. The RDSO has approved three firms —Medha Servo Drives, HBL and Kernex — for providing Kavach equipment with two more being in the pipeline. Glitches about vulnerability of a vehicle crossing a closed level crossing, stray cattle or boulders on track, radio communication issues in tunnels, ghat sections, have been tackled.

## WHY DOES NORTH KOREA WANT SPY SATELLITES?

*Why is the isolated nation developing spy satellites? What are the other strategic developments in the region? Will more sanctions weaken N. Korea?*

### The story so far:

On May 31, a North Korean military reconnaissance satellite Malligyong-1 was launched through a new type of rocket named Chollima-1. The satellite is said to have flown for about 10 minutes before crashing into the Yellow Sea. The Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) reported the failure as the instability in the rocket's engine and fuel system. The launch, however, prompted evacuation warnings and emergency alerts in parts of South Korea and Japan. The U.S., Japan and South Korea expressed 'strong condemnation' to the launch.

### What is N. Korea's space programme?

North Korea in the past decade has had an active space program that is closely related to its missile program. Satellite launch vehicles use the same core technology as long-range missiles that deliver warheads capable of destroying intercontinental targets. (the Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles or ICBMs). Starting from 1998, North Korea successfully orbited its first satellite in 2012 after three failed attempts. The launch vehicle used was Unha-3, a likely variant of Taepodong-2 ICBM. The Unha-type launch vehicle was also used in the 2016 launch of Pyongyang's Earth Observation satellite. The flight on May 31 was the sixth satellite launch by Pyongyang. It was done through the Chollima-1 which is a new space launcher known to have an engine that is similar to North Korea's dual-nozzle liquid-fuel machine used in Hwasong-15 ICBM.

Additionally, in April, North Korea announced that it had completed the construction of its first spy satellite.

### Why does it want assets in space?

The North Korean spy satellites are expected to play a crucial role in providing advanced surveillance technology, that covers a large portion of the region, to improve the ability to strike targets during conflict. Kim Jong Un, the

leader of North Korea, stated that the nation would have the capability to "use preemptive military force when the situation demands."

Moreover, North Korea's space programme is a response to other strategic developments in the region. Earlier, the U.S. announced that it would be activating U.S. Space Forces Korea. This system would provide South Korea with advanced capabilities of missile warning and satellite communications throughout the Korean peninsula and its proximate areas. On May 25, South Korea successfully launched its Nuri rocket that is designed to assist Seoul's efforts to develop a space-based surveillance system. These developments nudged Pyongyang to hasten the launch of Malligyong-1.

### What does this mean for East Asia?

The security anxiety in East Asia in response to the North Korean satellite launch reveals a sense of urgency among the regional powers. North Korea no longer needs to develop its long-range missile technology under the guise of satellites since its test-firing in 2017. Pyongyang seems unafraid to reveal its technological intentions and strengthen its security apparatus in the region. While the launch is a breach of the UN Security Council resolutions, it is unlikely to attract additional economic sanctions. This displays the weak effectiveness of sanctions imposed on North Korea.

Additionally, while the international responses to the launch were largely focused on the missile technology, the possibility of a successful set of four to five military satellites by Pyongyang in-orbit would provide North Korea's military the surveillance capacity that covers the region, strengthening its missile-launch capabilities.

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## REFUGEE INFLUX INTO MIZORAM RAISES SECURITY ISSUE IN STATE

### NEW DELHI

In the past couple of years, Mizoram has seen an influx of refugees from Myanmar and recently from Bangladesh and now Manipur, adding to the internal security situation there. There is a variation in numbers from Myanmar given by the State government and security forces, while there are over 8,000 from Manipur and over 900 people from Bangladesh which officials said was expected to go up further. Officials on the ground say that the influx from Bangladesh is particularly worrying with potential for smuggling of narcotics and weapons opening a new front for security forces to deal with.

As per the State government, there are around 40,000 Myanmar nationals who have crossed into the border districts of Mizoram since the military takeover. Of them, about 8,000 to 10,000 had gone back and about 30,000 had been registered and issued identity cards as refugees, an official said.

However, according to assessments by security forces on the ground, there are over 18,000 Myanmar nationals as 8,000 to 10,000 have returned, which is accepted by sources in the security establishment. The State government had set up camps for them, however, a majority of them were not staying in there, having moved out to stay with relatives or looking for work, officials said.

The State government has stated that anyone coming in from Myanmar would be let in, with the Centre directing that they should be duly registered. Narcotics smuggling

Three Assam Rifles Battalions deployed in border guarding duties along

the India-Myanmar Border (IMB) were also monitoring the situation, a source in the security establishment said.

A particular concern on the IMB is smuggling, especially of narcotics the seizures of which have been growing year on year. For instance, this year, the total worth of narcotics seized in Mizoram is ₹603.43 crore, up from ₹355 crore in 2022.

In February 2022, Myanmar's military junta imposed martial law across Chin, Kachin, Karen, Karenni, and Mon States, as well as in Yangon and Mandalay regions and also air strikes recently very close to the IMB. That has added to tensions in areas close to the border. The security situation along the IMB in Mizoram was stable, the source said.

Given the tough terrain in south Mizoram, there was very little local produce and everything came in from the north. With refugees coming in, this was adding to shortage of resources and could lead to unrest in the local population, the official stated.

"South Mizoram has very thick jungles and there are no regular tracks. So someone is guiding them which could subsequently be used for smuggling of arms and narcotics," one official said.

Assam Rifles had projected security issues, but there had been no action in that direction, officials added.

Crystallising apprehensions, on March 10 the Lunglei Battalion of Headquarter 23 Sector Assam Rifles apprehended two cadres of the KCNA, one of them a high ranking cadre, at Hmunnuam village of Lawngtalai district.

## CITIZEN ACTIVISM THAT IS MISSING FROM THE WRESTLING RING

Over the past four months, a few nationally acclaimed wrestlers have been protesting against their federation chief, a strongman politician, who they accuse of both misusing his authority and of sexual harassment. On paper, the neat moral contrasts embedded in the saga seemed well suited to mobilise civil society opinion and force the government into a conciliatory posture.

Yet, as the protests met a disturbing denouement last week, the spurt of 'citizen activism' we saw a decade ago in the Nirbhaya protests and the Anna Andolan was nowhere to be seen.

The apparent impotency of the wrestler protests exhibits the narrow moral universe of middle-class rooted 'citizen activism'. This brand of activism was what steadily gained currency post-liberalisation, particularly through the

spread of television and social media.

Historically, the high point of middle-class activism has lain in the colonial period. In the book, *Serving the Nation: Cultures of Service, Association, and Citizenship* (2005), the historian, Carey Anthony Watt, described "a vibrant 'associational culture'" in early 20th century India. Although this associational culture was hardly free of social conservatism and caste/community-based fractures, it also contained a pluralistic and egalitarian dimension. According to Watt, the "richly variegated, autonomous" public sphere revolved around socio-economic initiatives "undertaken by urban elites of the upper castes, lower-middle and middle classes, and directed towards individuals of lower social status."

An evolution from the Nehruvian era

However, the middle classes retreated from active civil society participation from the Nehruvian era onwards, as they assumed control of the power networks within the state-centred political economy. Meanwhile, civil society came to be hinged around the framework of “segmental loyalties”, which the social-anthropologist, Ernest Gellner, held to be an inescapable fate of the ‘civil’ space in all traditional, heterogeneous societies. While some scholars have taken the preponderance of caste/community-based organisations to claim that the country effectively lacks a modern civil society, others have appreciated the role of these organisations in aiding democratisation and exemplifying the “modernity of tradition”. “In India, religion, caste, ethnicity and language have been effectively mobilised in articulating and representing group identities and interests,” as Sarbeshwar Sahoo wrote in *Civil Society and Democratization in India* (2013).

It was only in the decade of rule under the United Progressive Alliance that we saw a marked resurgence of urban, middle-class activism, particularly around issues of political corruption. In her book, *India’s New Middle Class* (2006), the sociologist, Leela Fernandes, captured the rising discontent of the middle classes with the “corrupting influences of mass-based politics and vote banks”, combined with latent “suspicions” towards “unions, subordinate castes and Muslims”.

Brand ‘Aamir Khan’ symbolised this middle-class worldview, where technocratic governance and entrepreneurialism were equated with progress, and the realm of politics represented social division and ‘barriers to development’.

Of course, forceful critiques of this “consumer citizen” activist model were mounted by many academics. John Harriss (2007) demonstrated, through research in the city of Chennai, that the “new politics of empowerment” ignored the concerns of the urban poor, viewing them to be “denizens” who need to be ‘disciplined’ and ‘patronized’ rather than “citizens” to be centred in the discourse and practice of development.

#### A ‘changing Indian sensibility’

Post-2014, the ideology of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and the personality of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, have effectively captured this middle-class space. In a recent paper, the political scientists, Aseema Sinha and Manisha Priyam, have framed the dominant political discourse as more of a demand-side phenomenon, reflecting the “changing Indian sensibility, especially among India’s professional and middle classes.”

Thus, the middle classes now represent a kind of a civil society base of the BJP, which perhaps explains a weakening attachment towards independent social actors, as the wrestlers discovered. “The consolidation of Hindu nationalism in India is being authored not only by parties or the state, but also by societal actors, specifically, ordinary middle-class Indians,” as Ms. Sinha and Ms. Priyam wrote.

The frailties of the populist, personality-driven activism of the Anna

Andolan have become clearer in hindsight. The same could be said about a similar brand of Leftist or neo-Gandhian activism, such as the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) in Gujarat, centred around Medha Patkar. Championed by celebrities as diverse as Arundhati Roy and Aamir Khan, the anti-dam movement ultimately ended in failure. The scholar, Judith Whitehead, explained this failure to be a function of the NBA’s disinterest in mobilising a wider political constituency among peasants and workers in rural Gujarat, and a narrow “ecological romanticism” which “tended to privilege urban middle class perspectives”.

However, we have not quite entered into a post-civil society era, and there still exists a (albeit circumscribed) space for popular mobilisation. In Tamil Nadu, labour rights organisations, led by the Communist-leaning Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) compelled the M.K. Stalin government to stall the implementation of a new labour law. And, of course, the long-drawn farmers agitation succeeded in forcing the otherwise dour hand of the Modi government, demonstrating the continuing heft of these organisations in parts of northern India. Some of these groups have now given their support in favour of the protesting wrestlers.

Yet, we must remember, the activism of these organisations is also weighed down with inherent limitations. Even as the farmers’ movement sought to cultivate “new solidarities across class, caste, gender, religion and regions” (Kumar 2022), many of them continue to be associated with the interests of landed “Jat” caste. Hence, the broad political support commanded by them in certain political contexts should not be seen as an automatic function of stable bonds of programmatic solidarity. The lower castes in Haryana, for example, might remember the experience of recurring anti-special economic zone protests, where farmer organisations have been critiqued for privileging the material interests of the Jat farmers and ignoring those of the landless workers. Similarly, while certain forms of militant labour activism can succeed in getting significant concessions in Tamil Nadu, they are likely to be firmly suppressed in States such as Uttar Pradesh and Haryana. This is because labour activism, particularly of left-wing organisations, often requires the political umbrella of communist parties. These communist parties, which have largely been a part of government coalitions since the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam-CPI(M) alliance of 1965. In Uttar Pradesh and Haryana, left-wing labour activism has been ruthlessly put down not just by the Congress but also by their erstwhile socialist/farmer allies. This regime continuity was immediately apparent in the Charan Singh government’s fierce suppression of the 1970 Communist-led agitation of landless agricultural workers, perhaps the last such large-scale mobilisation of workers in Uttar Pradesh.

The state of the wrestlers’ protests clarifies the need to look beyond the superficial, celebrity-dependent model of civil society activism. It is also a reminder that only a democratic process of building durable, programmatic solidarities can become truly capable of transcending the social ceiling of “segmental loyalties”.

## NATO CHIEF URGES TURKEY NOT TO VETO SWEDEN’S BID

NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg on Sunday called upon Ankara to drop its opposition to Sweden’s bid to join the U.S.-led defence alliance, hoping Stockholm’s accession would be finalised “as soon as possible”.

Pressure is building on Mr. Erdogan to greenlight Sweden’s NATO membership ahead of a summit planned for July in the Lithuanian capital Vilnius. “Membership will make Sweden safer but also make NATO and Turkey stronger,” Mr. Stoltenberg told journalists after meeting with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and newly appointed Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan, who was head of the intelligence agency, in Istanbul. “I look forward to finalising Sweden’s accession as soon as possible,” he said.

‘Haven of terrorists’

On Saturday Mr. Stoltenberg attended the inauguration of Mr. Erdogan, who was re-elected to serve another five years.

Mr. Erdogan has accused Sweden of being a haven for “terrorists”, especially members of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), a group blacklisted by Turkey and its Western allies.

“Sweden has taken significant concrete steps to meet Turkey’s concerns,” Mr. Stoltenberg said.

“Sweden has fulfilled its obligations,” Mr. Stoltenberg added.



Coercion tactic: NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg, left, and Turkey President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Istanbul on Sunday. REUTERS

# WE AIM TO INSPIRE YOU

## 'DISARM MEITEIS ONLY AFTER CANCELLING PACT WITH KUKI GROUPS'



People from the Meitei community protesting in New Delhi. Sushil Kumar Verma

THE HINDU BUREAU

Amid the ongoing ethnic conflict in Manipur, hundreds of people from Meitei organisations in New Delhi held a demonstration on Sunday, stressing that youth belonging to the community in the northeastern State should not be disarmed unless the government cancelled the Suspension of Operations (SoO) pact signed with Kuki insurgent groups in 2008.

The Meitei groups also demanded that the process for drawing up the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in the State had become imperative now more than ever.

The Meitei groups had gathered under the banner of the Manipur Coordination Committee (Delhi).

'Civil war'

"We wanted to come together in solidarity and raise our demands; the arms won't be used to harm common people, but sadly, we need them for protection, houses are still being burnt. A civil war is occurring, however, the government is not looking into such substantial problems and is concise about the reservation issue," said Professor Bhagat Oinam, who teaches at Jawaharlal Nehru University. Since the violence began, the Kuki-Zomi groups have maintained that a separate administration for the tribes in the hill areas was the only solution to this conflict.

On the other hand, Meitei leaders in the State and outside have maintained that the violence was allegedly being perpetrated by the Kuki militant groups. They also alleged that the violence was being orchestrated by "poppy cultivating drug lords", who were against the State government's policies to clear forest land.

In addition to calling for the NRC to be conducted as soon as possible to identify all foreigners who entered Manipur illegally after 1951, the Meitei groups on Sunday demanded immediate peace, protection of all religious places (Hindu, Sanamahi, and Christian), and "constitutional protection" for its people in the State. The groups also called for an end to poppy cultivation, "narco terrorism", and illegal immigration into the State.

## 'NATO-LIKE' ALLIANCES COULD LEAD TO CONFLICT IN ASIA-PACIFIC: CHINA

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
SINGAPORE

China's Defence Minister warned on Sunday against establishing NATO-like military alliances in the Asia-Pacific, saying they would plunge the region into a "whirlpool" of conflict.

Li Shangfu's comments came a day after U.S. and Chinese military vessels sailed close to each other in the flashpoint Taiwan Strait, an incident that provoked anger from both sides.

"Attempts to push for NATO-like (alliances) in the Asia-Pacific is a way of kidnapping regional countries and exaggerating conflicts and confrontations," Mr. Li told a security conference in Singapore also attended by U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin.

Mr. Li's comments echoed long-held Chinese criticism of the United States' efforts to shore up alliances in the region and counter China's rise.

**Military groupings**

The U.S. is a member of AUKUS, which groups it with Australia and Britain. Washington is also a member of the QUAD group, which includes Australia, India and Japan.

"Today's Asia-Pacific needs open and inclusive cooperation, not buddying up into small cliques," Mr. Li said at the Shangri-La Dialogue security summit.



Li Shangfu

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## KYIV SHELLING FORCES MOSCOW TO RELOCATE BELGOROD RESIDENTS

REUTERS

Ukrainian forces continued to shell Russia's border region of Belgorod overnight into Sunday after two persons were killed the previous night and hundreds of children were evacuated away from the border, Governor Vyacheslav Gladkov said.

"Overnight, it was quite restless," Mr. Gladkov said on the Telegram channel, adding that the Shebekino and Volokonovsky districts had suffered "lots" of damage from the latest shelling.

Mr. Gladkov later wrote that fires had broken out in the town of Shebekino after Ukrainian forces shelled a market area in the centre, adding that nobody had been injured. Shebekino is about 7 km from the Ukrainian border.

More than 4,000 people have been relocated to temporary accommodation in the region, Mr. Gladkov said.

The reality of the war, which Moscow launched in Ukraine in February 2022, has been increasingly brought to Russia, with not only intensified shelling on border regions but also air strikes deep inside the country, including last week on Moscow.

600 children moved

On Saturday, Gladkov escorted about 600 children from the region's Shebekino and Graivoron districts to the cities of Yaroslavl and Kaluga, far from the Ukrainian border. "The children of Shebekino are very worried about their hometown," he said.

Shebekino, a town of about 40,000, and other places in Belgorod have



*Sifting through: People evacuated from the Belgorod region receive humanitarian aid on Saturday.AFP*

*The overnight shelling on the border region that extended into Sunday killed two persons and displaced hundreds of children; more than 4,000 people relocated to temporary accommodation*

been attacked repeatedly recently, with Mr. Gladkov telling Russian media that his region now lives in "conditions of actual war".

## CREEPING CHANGE

*Courts should be wary of incremental steps to alter status of places of worship*

By holding that a suit filed by five women to offer worship to Hindu deities at the Gyanvapi Mosque in Varanasi was maintainable, the Allahabad High Court has possibly legitimised a clever attempt to question its status. In an order that upholds a district court verdict to the same effect, Justice J.J. Munir has ruled that the suit is limited in scope to enforcing the plaintiffs' right to worship Hindu deities and that it is not an attempt to convert the mosque into a temple. As a result, he has held that the suit is not barred by the Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991, a law that froze the status of places of worship as they stood on August 15, 1947. In the process, the court has rejected the objections by the Committee of Management of the Anjuman Intezamia Masjid, Varanasi, that the suit is barred by the 1991 law, as well as the Uttar Pradesh Wakf Act, 1995, and the U.P. Sri Kashi Vishwanath Temple Act, 1983. Given the fact that Hindu revanchism has been quite active in claiming that several places of worship of Muslims had been constructed on the ruins of Hindu temples after their demolition, it is a matter of concern that the judiciary has endorsed the use of legal means to lay the foundation to building a possible future claim on the

Gyanvapi Mosque.

The court is right in noting that while deciding a motion to reject a civil suit at the threshold, it has to limit itself to the assertions made in the plaint. The plaintiffs have claimed that Hindu deities were being worshipped at the mosque precincts before and after August 15, 1947. In particular, they have claimed that daily worship of Hindu deities was going on at Gyanvapi till 1990, after which it was suspended at the peak of the movement against the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. After 1993, it was limited to a single day every year. A relevant question is whether it is merely a suit to assert a right to worship, or if it is part of a larger design. The court has rejected the objection that the suit is an instance of 'clever drafting' to cover up an attempt to change the mosque's status. However, it should be noted that the plaintiffs also question whether the mosque was built on Wakf property, and assert that property vested in the deity would remain with the deity even if the structure was destroyed. It will be truly unfortunate if the customary right of worship is allowed to lead to incremental or creeping changes to the mosque's status.

## A VOTE FOR CHANGE

*The Thai generals should cede power without triggering chaos*

For Thai voters, the May 14 parliamentary election offered a stark choice between the royalist, military-backed government and the pro-democratic, reformist opposition. They overwhelmingly supported the latter. When the preliminary results were announced, the progressive Move Forward Party emerged as the single largest bloc with 152 seats. The Pheu Thai Party, another pro-democratic outfit led by Paetongtarn Shinawatra, daughter of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, came second with 141 seats. All the pro-government parties did poorly. Both the Move Forward and the Pheu Thai have promised to stand up to the military, which captured power in 2014 through a coup, and address the country's economic issues. The Move Forward, a political upstart led by 42-year-old Pita Limjaroenrat, is now leading coalition talks and has staked a claim to form the next government. During the campaign, Mr. Pita was critical of the establishment and offered a new beginning to Thai voters. The party's manifesto promised to stop military conscription, end the "cycle of coups", tackle business monopolies and scrap the military-drafted Constitution. It also vowed to amend the controversial lèse majesté law, which shields the monarchy from public criticism. The Move Forward's promises helped the fledgling party easily connect with a public which was increasingly angered by Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha's authoritarianism and the drying up of economic opportunities.

But an electoral victory does not necessarily mean that the Move Forward has an easy way towards forming a government. The Opposition coalition has a majority (309) in the 500-member elected House, but in Thailand's 750-member bicameral Parliament (250 members of the Senate are appointed by the military), Mr. Pita would need the support of 376 legislators to form the government. His criticism of the military and the promise to amend the royal defamation law have made the generals wary of his rise. If the Senate votes as a bloc against the Opposition coalition, he would not be able to form the government. It remains to be seen what will happen between now and July 13, when the Election Commission will officially ratify the results. In the 2019 election, the Future Forward Party, the predecessor of the Move Forward, emerged the third largest party, surprising the generals. It was subsequently dissolved and its leaders banned from politics. Mr. Pita is already facing cases for allegedly violating electoral laws. But any move to stop the winners of the election from forming the government would be disastrous for a country that is on the brink. Thailand witnessed widespread pro-democracy protests in 2020, which were crushed by the regime. Some 14 million people voted for Move Forward and if the military defies their mandate, it would only widen the cracks in society. Instead, the generals should see the elections as an opportunity to cede power and allow the winners to form the next government.



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