GOVT. HIKES KHARIF MSP; FARMERS DEMAND MORE

The Centre has set the minimum support price (MSP) for paddy sown in the kharif or monsoon season at ₹2,183 per quintal, an increase of ₹143 a quintal from last year's figure.

The 2023-24 MSPs for 17 kharif crops and variants were approved at a meeting of the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA), chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The sowing of crops, mainly paddy, has started in most States.

While the Centre said that its aim was to ensure reasonably fair remuneration for the farmers and encourage crop diversification, several farmers' organisations said the increase would not cover the rising input costs.

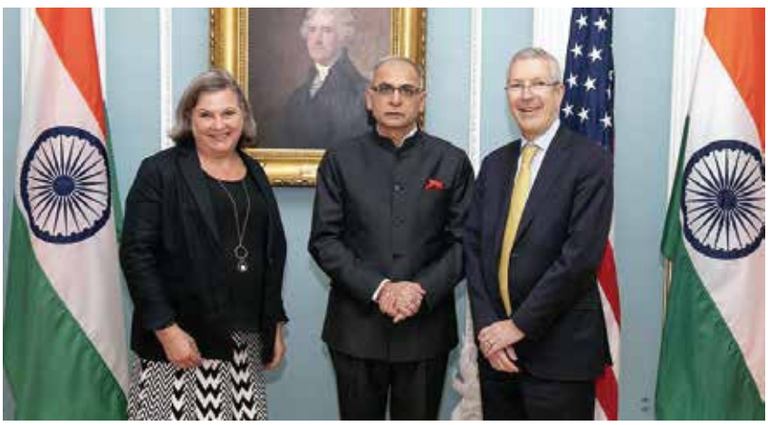
Food Minister Piyush Goyal told presspersons after the CCEA meeting that farmers would benefit from the MSP increase at a time when retail inflation was declining.

"In agriculture, we have been fixing MSP from time to time based on the recommendations of Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices (CACP). The increase in MSP of the kharif crops for this year is highest compared with the previous years," Mr. Goyal said.

Apart from paddy, new MSPs have been set for major pulses. The MSP for moong is ₹8,558 a quintal, an increase of ₹803 from last year. The MSP for tur or arhar has been set at ₹7,000 a quintal, which is estimated to be 58% above the cost of production. This is in keeping with the Centre's promise to set MSPs which are at least one-and-a-half times the all-India weighted average cost of production.

"The expected margin to farmers over their cost of production are estimated to be highest in case of bajra (82%) followed by tur (58%), soybean (52%) and urad (51%)," said an official statement.

INDIA, U.S. REVIEW EXPORT CONTROL REGULATIONS



Crucial meet: Foreign Secretary Vinay Kwatra with U.S. Under Secretary of State Victoria Nuland and Under Secretary for Commerce Alan Estevez.Special arrangement

India and the U.S. pledged to streamline their export control regimes for critical technologies at the inaugural India-U.S. Strategic Trade Dialogue (IUSSTD), as senior delegations led by Foreign Secretary Vinay Kwatra and U.S. Under Secretary of State Victoria Nuland and Under Secretary for Commerce Alan Estevez met in Washington on Tuesday.

The talks came just ahead of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Washington when a number of high-technology partnerships, including a deal that will involve GE-414 jet engine sales to India, are on the cards.

Meanwhile, senior U.S. officials indicated a softer line on India-Russia ties and said Mr. Modi's visit would help build trust and confidence in the U.S.'s "most important bilateral relationship".

"IUSSTD focused on ways in which both governments can facilitate the development and trade of technologies in critical domains such as semiconductors, space, telecom, quantum, AI, defence, bio-tech and others," said a press release issued by the Indian Embassy on Wednesday. "Both sides reviewed the relevant bilateral export control regulations with the objective of building and diversifying resilient supply chains for these strategic technologies," it said.

Change in stance

Although the U.S. had issued a number of statements immediately after the Russian invasion of Ukraine calling for India to reduce its military ties with Russia, forgo Russian oil and vote alongside western countries at the UN, none of which New Delhi agreed to, it has in more recent months given up those demands. Ahead of his visit to Delhi next week, U.S. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said the U.S. should be prepared to "meet" India and other countries not joining the sanctions, rather than "debate" them.

"The big thing the United States needs to do is not have a debate with each of these countries about Ukraine, but rather meet them where they are in terms of what they are trying to accomplish," said Mr. Sullivan referring to countries that have refused to join sanctions against Russia imposed by the U.S. and European Union over the war in Ukraine.

Mr. Sullivan said that India had not joined the sanctions but the U.S.-India partnership has "never been stronger" in terms of technology, defence cooperation and people-to-people ties.

SEDITION — ILLOGICAL EQUATION OF GOVERNMENT WITH STATE

P.D.T. Achary is a former Secretary General, Lok Sabha

In its 279th Report, the Law Commission of India has recommended the retention of Section 124A of the Indian Penal Code which contains the Law of Sedition. It has also recommended enhanced punishment for this offence in the name of national security. While Section 124A provides for a minimum imprisonment of three years, the commission recommends a minimum of seven. In 2022, the Supreme Court of India had ordered a stay on all existing proceedings and also on the registration of fresh cases (S.G. Vombatkere vs Union of India) under sedition upon the Union Government assuring the Court of a review of this law at the earliest. The Court's stay order was in consideration of the fact that this law was widely misused by the law enforcement authorities.

An offence against government, not country

The law of sedition in India has a long and infamous history. Section 124A was incorporated in the Indian Penal Code in 1870. The purpose was to suppress the voice of Indians who spoke against the British Raj, as the government did not want any voice of dissent or protest. The wording of Section 124A clearly reveals the intention of the colonial government. Sedition is an offence against the government and not against the country, as many think. The offence is in bringing or attempting to bring in hatred or contempt or exciting or attempting to excite disaffection towards the government established by law. The offence is committed by spoken or written words, by signs or by any other means. Thus, the gist of the offence is bringing a government into hatred or contempt or causing disaffection towards the government of the day.

The law of sedition was defined and applied in two different ways during

the British period. The first major case was Queen Empress vs Bal Gangadhar Tilak 1897 in which the Bombay Court found Bal Gangadhar Tilak guilty of sedition for writing a couple of articles in Kesari, a Marathi weekly, invoking Shivaji, which was interpreted as exciting disaffection towards the British government. Judge Stratchy explained the law as: "The offence (Sedition) consists in exciting or attempting to excite in others certain bad feelings towards the government. It is not the exciting or attempting to excite mutiny or rebellion or any sort of actual disturbance great or small.... but even if he neither excited nor intended to excite any rebellion or outbreak or forcible resistance to the authority of the government that is sufficient to make him guilty under the Section." Later, the Privy Council upheld this exposition of law. Thus,sedition meant exciting or attempting to excite bad feelings towards the government. It was a very draconian law.

The second case was Niharendu Dutt Majumdar And Ors. vs Emperor which was decided by the Federal Court. Acquitting the accused Majumdar, Sir Mauris Gwyer, Chief Justice, explained the law as: "Public disorder or the reasonable anticipation or likelihood of public disorder is thus the gist of the offence."

These two statements of the law of sedition given by two courts in British India differ from one another. One defines sedition as disaffection, which was interpreted as 'political hatred of government' and comes within the mischief of sedition. The other interprets it to mean that the offence is committed only when there is incitement to violence or disorder.

It may be noted that the Privy Council, the highest appellate court of that time, approved the law stated by Justice Stratchy in Tilak's case. Further, it is said that the opinion of the Privy Council on sedition was not brought to the notice of the Federal Court when it decided Majumdar's case. Otherwise it would have followed the Privy Council's decision.

'Kedarnath' and constitutionality of sedition

The brief journey into the British era is necessary to better understand the judgment in Kedarnath vs State of Bihar (1962) by the Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court and the Law Commission's recommendations for incorporating the essence of that judgment.

Kedarnath decided the constitutionality of sedition. The Court held that it is constitutionally valid for two reasons. One, sedition, though an offence against the government, is against the state because the government is a visible symbol of state and the existence of the state will be in jeopardy if the government is subverted. Second, Article 19(2) imposes restrictions in the interest of the security of the state which has wider amplitude and which includes the law on sedition.

Sedition is an offence against the government. Anyone who causes disaffection towards the government is liable to be prosecuted under this law. Disaffection has been defined as 'political hatred' towards the government by the full Bench of the Bombay High Court which upheld the punishment of Tilak. So, causing political hatred towards the government in the minds of the public is the offence of sedition. In this sense, it clearly violates the fundamental right to freedom of speech and expression under Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution. In a democratic republic where people have the freedom to change a bad government, disaffection towards a government cannot be an offence. In fact, it is a part of the democratic process and experience. Therefore, making it an offence directly conflicts with the fundamental rights of citizens. We cannot expect citizens to have any affection towards a bad government.

The law declared by the Privy Council was final, according to which even a gesture which indicates political hatred towards the government comes within the mischief of sedition. Obviously, sedition contained in Section 124A goes against Article 19(1)(a).

However, the Supreme Court had, in an attempt to declare sedition constitutionally valid, admittedly adopted the Federal Court's approach and held that Section 124A is valid but can be invoked only when the words or gestures have a tendency to incite violence. The Court was aware that sedition, as it is worded in Section 124A in IPC and interpreted by the Privy Council, could not have remained in the statute book after the Constitution came into force in 1950. The Court was also conscious of the fact that sedition, as a reasonable restriction on the right of speech and expression, was deleted from the draft Constitution by the Constituent Assembly.

The implication was clear. Sedition was not meant to be a reasonable restriction. But the Court wanted to retain sedition because it was genuinely worried about an imminent communist revolution in the country, which Kedarnath, a local communist in Begu Sarai in Bihar was advocating. But, on a closer scrutiny, we will find that the position taken by the court in Kedarnath is not radically different from Tilak. As per Kedarnath, a tendency to incite disorder would amount to sedition, and actual disorder need not occur. So, in substance there is not much difference between Kedarnath and Tilak.

The Law Commission has suggested that the tendency to incite disorder should be incorporated in Section 124A. The commission defines tendency as a slight inclination. It is a policeman who will detect the tendency to incite disorder in a speech or article, and the citizen will be behind bars for seven years or even for life. In fact, the Kedarnath judgment did not soften the law on sedition. If anything it has brought it closer to the judgment in Tilak without mitigating the rigour of the law. The recommendation for the enhancement of punishment defies common sense when there is a universal demand for the scrapping of this law. The commission could not see the absurdity of a law which punishes citizens of a democratic country for making comments which may cause disaffection towards a government which they have the power to remove.

It is unconstitutional

The real issue is that the law of sedition contained in Section 124A of the IPC is unconstitutional. The Law Commission failed or did not want to see the fallacy in the Kedarnath judgment which did not in effect soften this harsh law but declared that it is constitutionally valid. Kedarnath equates government with state, which is illogical in the context of a democratic republic. Therefore, its attempt to bring sedition within the framework of reasonable restriction under Article 19(2) is constitutionally impermissible.

'CROP SHORTAGES COULD EXACERBATE INFLATION FOLLOWING MSP INCREASES'

Spillover effects on food prices from higher assured remuneration to farmers to hinge on foodgrain procurement strategy as well as prevailing market prices, say economists; inflation in rice, other coarse cereals cited as already running 'high'

The inflationary impact of the 5%-11% increase in the minimum support price (MSP) for farm produce will be an additional factor for the RBI's Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) to consider at its bimonthly policy review to be announced on Thursday.

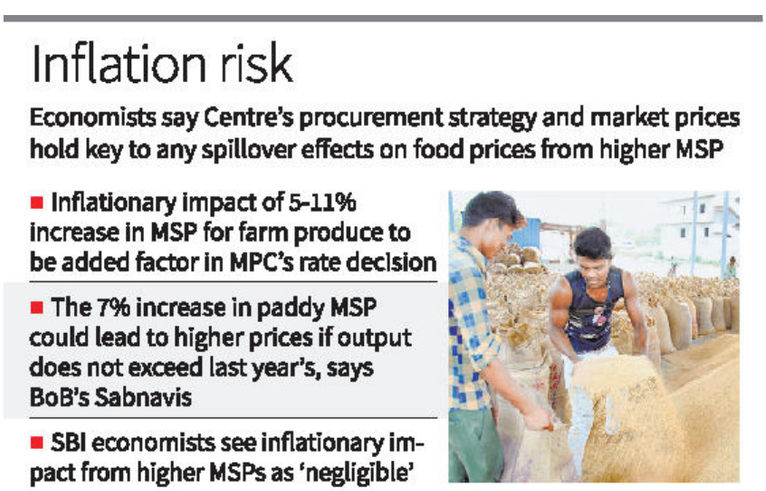
The spillover effects on consumer food prices from higher assured remuneration to farmers would hinge on the government's procurement strategy and prevailing market prices, but any output shortages could lead to higher prices, economists cautioned.

The 7% increase in paddy MSP could lead to higher prices if the crop did not exceed last year's output, said Bank of Baroda chief economist Madan Sabnavis, who termed the hikes 'quite aggressive' relative to past increases.

Inflation in rice

"Procurement takes place for rice, whose inflation is already high at 11%," noted Mr. Sabnavis. "So an increase of 7% will add to benchmark prices... Similarly, jowar, bajra and maize are all running inflation of 13-15% and hence, also run a risk of higher prices in case of crop failure," Mr. Sabnavis added.

" The crux will hence be the size of the crops this season," he said, stressing that food prices were the major risk to inflation so the Reserve Bank of



India would be cautious until there was more clarity on kharif crop prospects.

State Bank of India economists said that the inflationary impact of higher MSPs "will be negligible" depending on the prices prevailing in the e-National Agriculture Market (e-NAM) as well as procurement levels.

HOW CAN WE TRANSITION TO A LOW-CARBON CITY?

What is the sector-coupling approach? How do strategies to mitigate excessive energy use change with different kinds of cities? Will a one-size-fits-all approach work with respect to transitioning to a low-carbon city? How do we make energy governance equitable?

STUTI HALDAR
EXPLAINER

In 2020, cities dumped a whopping 29 trillion tonnes of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. Therefore, given the significant impact that cities have on the environment, low-carbon cities are crucial to mitigate the effects of climate change. Transitioning to low-carbon or even net-zero cities requires us to integrate mitigation and adaptation options in multiple sectors. This is called the 'sector-coupling approach', and it is necessary to decarbonise urban systems.

Why are energy-system transitions important?

An energy-system transition could reduce urban carbon dioxide emissions by around 74%. With rapid advancements in clean energy and related technologies and nosediving prices, we have crossed the economic and technological barriers to implementing low-carbon solutions. The transition must be implemented both on the demand and the supply side. Mitigation options on the supply side include phasing out fossil fuels and increasing the share of renewables in the energy mix, and using carbon capture and storage (CCS) technologies. On the demand side, using the 'avoid, shift, improve' framework would entail reducing the demand for materials and energy, and substituting the demand for fossil fuels with renewables. Secondly, in order to address residual emissions in the energy sector, we must implement carbon-dioxide removal (CDR) technologies.

As we now have the appropriate technologies and knowledge base to build net-zero urban systems through energy transitions, the only impediments are social and political in nature.

What are the different strategies?

The strategies to mitigate and adapt to low-carbon varies based on a city's characteristics. Transitioning to renewable energy sources is not as simple as replacing fossil fuels with clean energy. There are multifarious issues of energy justice and social equity to be dealt with. This is a key consideration when we frame energy-transition policies that are socially and environmentally fair. These considerations are a city's spatial form, land-use pattern, level of development, and the state of urbanisation.

An established city can retrofit and repurpose its infrastructure to increase energy efficiency, and promote public as well as active transport like bicycling and walking. In fact, walkable cities designed around people can significantly reduce energy demand, as can electrifying public transport and setting up renewable-based district cooling and heating networks. A rapidly growing city can try to colocate housing and jobs — by planning the city in a way that brings places of work closer to residential complexes, thus reducing transport energy demand. Such cities can also leapfrog to low-carbon technologies, including renewables and CCS.

New and emerging cities have the most potential to reduce emissions — using energy-efficient services and infrastructure, and a people-centric urban design. They can also implement building codes that mandate net-zero energy use and retrofit existing buildings, all while gradually shifting to low-emission construction material.

How can an energy transition be just?

Energy systems are directly and indirectly linked to livelihoods, local economic development, and the socio-economic well-being of people engaged in diverse sectors. So a one-size-fits-all approach is unlikely to ensure a socially and environmentally just transition. For example, transitioning to renewable-energy sources could disproportionately affect groups of people or communities in developing economies and sectors that depend on fossil fuels. Broadly, the energy supply needs to be balanced against fast-growing energy demand (due to urbanisation), the needs of energy security, and exports. Additional justice concerns include land dispossession related to large-scale renewable energy projects, spatial concentration of poverty, the marginalisation of certain communities, gendered impacts, and the reliance on coal for livelihoods. For instance, developing economies, including Nigeria, Angola, and Venezuela, owe a significant fraction of their gross domestic products (GDPs) to fossil-fuel exports. Transitioning away from these industries could devastate their economies, with the consequences landing particularly heavily on the workers employed in the fossil-fuel sector. Similarly, in developed countries, many communities suffer energy poverty and inequity due to high energy costs, low incomes, and inadequate infrastructure. In the U.S., expenditure on energy bills is a significant chunk of the total income of low-income households. This can crowd out expenses for other amenities like healthcare and nutrition.

Are there any solutions that foreground justice?

Ensuring a transition to low-carbon energy systems in cities at different stages of urbanisation, national contexts, and institutional capacities requires strategic and bespoke efforts. They must be directed at governance and planning, achieving behavioural shifts, promoting technology and innovation, and building institutional capacity. We must also adopt a comprehensive approach to address the root causes of energy and environmental injustices. This includes mitigation and adaptation responses that engage multiple stakeholders in energy governance and decision-making, promoting energy-efficiency, scaling up climate investments, and capturing alternate knowledge streams (including indigenous and local lived experiences).

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HOW KFON AIMS TO BRIDGE THE DIGITAL DIVIDE IN KERALA

How is the Kerala Fibre Optic Network project going to be rolled out? Has any other State declared access to Internet as a basic right? Who are the beneficiaries of the project?

The story so far:

On November 7, 2019, the Left Democratic Front (LDF) government in Kerala announced that access to the Internet would be a basic right in the State, becoming the first State in the country to do so. The declaration came three years after the UN had passed a resolution recognising Internet access as a basic human right. The announcement was accompanied by a detailed plan to ensure that it would become a ground reality, with the setting up of the Kerala Fibre Optic Network (KFON), through which Internet connections would be provided free of cost to 20 lakh below-poverty-line (BPL) families. The project is aimed at ensuring universal Internet access and narrowing the digital divide, which has become especially acute after the COVID-19 outbreak.

How is the government running the network and providing services?

The Kerala government's role involves setting up the vast infrastructure required for providing Internet, especially to remote corners of the State. The network has reached remote locations, including tribal hamlets in Wayanad and elsewhere, which had remained out of the information superhighway until now. The cabling works, stretching to 34,961 km, piggybacks on the Kerala State Electricity Board's (KSEB) existing infrastructure. KFON Limited is, in fact, a joint venture of the KSEB and the Kerala State Information Technology Infrastructure Ltd (KSITIL).

In July 2022, the Department of Telecommunications (DoT) granted KFON an infrastructure provider (IP) licence and also approved it as an internet service provider (ISP).

How will the plan be rolled out?

The aim was to provide Internet connections to 14,000 BPL families, with 100 each from the State's 140 assembly constituencies in the first phase. The panchayats and the urban local bodies were given the responsibility of choosing the beneficiaries. However, the process of selection has been slow, with many local bodies delaying the submission of a list of beneficiaries from their area. As of now, Internet connection has been provided to 7,000 BPL families across the State. Each household will get 1.5 GB of data per day at 15 Mbps speed. In the second phase, Internet services will be made available to the public at affordable rates.

Free Internet connections for BPL families and government institutions is just one part of the ₹1,548 crore KFON project. The rest of the network will be monetised. The State government in 2022 had constituted a committee headed by the Chief Secretary to study the possibilities of monetising the network. About 22 of a total of 48 fibres will be used for the network's own operations,

with the KSEB also using some. The rest can be leased out, Santhosh Babu, Managing Director, KFON, had earlier told The Hindu.

What is the road ahead?

The commissioning of the first phase of KFON comes a week after the Chief Minister declared Kerala as India's first fully e-governed State. The e-office system has already been implemented in the Secretariat, district collectorates, commissionerates and directorates. As many as 900 government services, comprising all the services usually required by the public, are now available through a single-window portal.

The government has also begun a digital literacy campaign at the grassroot level through various local bodies to ensure that everyone is equipped to access basic services through the Internet. If the KFON project achieves what it has envisaged, it can bring about a change at the ground level as far as access and opportunities are concerned.

END THE DEBATE

The retention of sedition goes against the grain of current thinking

The Law Commission's recommendation that the offence of sedition be retained in penal law, albeit with some safeguards, flies in the face of current judicial and political thinking that the country may not need this colonial vestige any more. Section 124A of the IPC, which describes sedition, seeks to punish speech or writing that brings or tries to bring into hatred or contempt, or excites or tries to excite disaffection towards, the government established by law. Its validity was upheld by the Supreme Court as far back as 1962, but with the reservation that it would be a constitutionally permissible restriction on free speech, only if the offence was restricted to words that had a tendency to incite violence or cause public disorder. However, legal experts have pointed out that the panel's report fails to consider how far free speech jurisprudence has travelled since then. While keeping pending sedition cases in abeyance last year, the Court had observed that "the rigours of Section 124A of IPC are not in tune with the current social milieu". The Union government, too, had decided to reexamine and reconsider the provision. The time has come to consider the provision in the light of recent principles to test the validity of any restriction on fundamental rights, especially free speech. Given its overbroad nature, the sedition definition may not survive such scrutiny.

The Commission has sought to address two concerns usually raised about sedition: its rampant misuse and its relevance to the present day. It has repeated the hackneyed argument that a law's misuse is no ground to withdraw it. However, what it has failed to consider is that its very existence on the statute affords great scope for its unjustified use, often with deliberate intent to suppress dissent and imprison critics. It is doubtful if a mere prior sanction requirement, as mooted in the report, or a mandatory preliminary probe, will lead to fewer sedition cases. Further, the panel has argued that the fact that something is a colonial-era provision is no ground to discard it. It has justified the need to keep sedition on the penal statute by citing the various extremist and separatist movements and tendencies in the country, as well as the "ever-proliferating role of social media in propagating radicalisation". This may not be a sufficient reason to retain it, as divisive propaganda, incitement to violence and imputations affecting social harmony can be curbed by other penal provisions. In fact, an effective legal framework against hate speech is what is needed more than one to penalise speech or writing that targets the government. Notwithstanding the report, the government should consider the repeal of the provision.

DEADLY BILLBOARDS

Despite frequent accidents, there is no political will to regulate billboards

Incidents of giant outdoor billboards crashing and becoming death traps are no longer an exception in urban environments. Tragedies such as the deaths of three workers, in Coimbatore last week, after they were crushed by the falling steel frames of a hoarding under replacement, are no rarity. Authorities lost no time in declaring that the billboard was illegal, offering no explanation on how it stood there. Ironically, it was in April that the Tamil Nadu Urban Local Bodies Rules 2023 were notified, with terms for the licensing of hoardings, banners and placards. Amid concerns that billboards would mushroom in cities, the Minister for Municipal Administration had explicitly said the rules were notified to ensure that unauthorised billboards are not allowed. Reports from at least two decades show the failure of many municipal corporations in curbing unlicensed hoardings. Occasional corrective actions have most often been the result of the intervention of the judiciary or triggered by fatal accidents. A case in point is that of Tamil Nadu and its capital Chennai, where thousands of unauthorised hoardings were removed on the directions of the Supreme Court in 2008, revealing hidden green landscapes and urban skylines.

Unfortunately, this action was not sustained. Among the first violators were political parties, with many leaders encouraging their larger-than-life projections on flex banners and illuminated cut-outs. Considerable outrage was triggered in Chennai in 2019, when a young woman scooterist lost her life in a road accident after she was hit by a banner put up by a political party. With lucrative outdoor advertising rights being cornered by politically influential individuals and cartels, there is little administrative will to enforce legal and all-weather structural stability requirements. A lack of manpower in municipalities to enumerate unlicensed hoardings, periodically inspect authorised billboards, and act against unstable or illegal ones, also contributes to accidents. It is of concern that the judiciary, which calls for a regulation of billboards, often passes orders restraining authorities from removing unauthorised ones. Violators deserve stringent punishment; in the case of deaths, it would be appropriate to slap graver charges, blacklist and recover compensation from them, and also prosecute complicit officials. International studies have pointed to billboards being dangerous distractions on roads as they affect a driver's response time, vehicle lateral control and situational awareness. Accidents caused by such distractions must be documented in the annual Road Accidents in India report. This could help devise better policies on billboards and the outdoor advertising market, globally poised to grow to $67.8 billion in 2023.

NIGERIA'S NEW PRESIDENT FACES OLD PROBLEMS

Mahesh Sachdev a career diplomat, was India's High Commissioner to Nigeria during 2008-13. He is author of the book, 'Nigeria: A Business Manual'

May 29 was a historic yin-and-yang moment for Nigeria, Africa's most populous country and largest economy. On the positive side, a peaceful and orderly transfer of power followed a general election with Bola Ahmed Tinubu, 70, being sworn in in Abuja as Nigeria's 16th Executive President. He was also the seventh elected leader, completing a quarter of a century of unbroken constitutional democracy. This puts Nigeria as an outlier in a continent with a merited reputation for political instability.

Issues and solutions

Yet, this stellar accomplishment stands diminished by a stubborn constant: a puzzling inability of the Nigerian leadership to realise the evident socio-economic potential of this oil-rich and fertile country known for competent professionals and entrepreneurs. Endemic issues of insecurity, high unemployment and corruption have long defied resolution. Nigeria has the dubious distinction of having the world's largest number of people below the poverty line and children out of school. Insecurity has been a recurrent feature, with reports punctuated by Boko Haram carnage, mass kidnappings for ransom, bloody ethnic conflicts and petty robberies. Despite various "energetic" attempts, the country's grid power generation has remained stuck at around 4GW — approximately half the peak power consumption of Delhi. Even after spending $25 billion on revamping the oil refineries, these continue to operate at less than 30% of their capacity, forcing the oil-exporting country to import petroleum products. Theft of the crude and its "bunkering" is estimated to cost the country $5.4 billion annually, and fund illegal activities including armed militias.

Nigeria's socioeconomic recovery and sustainable development would need front-loading of its multiple assets. First, Nigeria has a reasonably competent civil service and professional security establishment and the political elite should allow them to handle the issues without being ridden roughshod. Second, a proactive hand holding of Nigeria's vibrant entrepreneurial class, particularly its informal sector, could drive economic growth. Third, Nigeria is a

young society, with a median age of 18.3 years; they desperately need better education, skilling and jobs. Fourth, Nigeria is blessed with large swathes of fertile, irrigated land, and reversing its neglect of the farming sector can make the country food self-dependent. Lastly, the oil sector, the mainstay of exports and government revenue, needs better focus. Nigeria's current crude production capacity is 1.56 mbpd, which is significantly lower than its Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) ceiling of 1.742 mbpd. This gap needs plugging by curbing oil theft and bunkering.

The rollout of reforms

To his credit, the incoming President has acknowledged these stubborn challenges and vowed to confront them. Having been a Governor of Lagos State, Nigeria's economic capital, a long-standing political "kingmaker" and a businessman in his own right, he knows what needs doing and how. He has lost no time in initiating the badly needed, but politically difficult, economic policy reforms. Within days of taking over, the national currency, the Naira, has been sharply devalued. The oil product subsidy, costing roughly $10 billion annually, has also been abolished. These long-needed disruptors raise hope for an eventual end to Nigeria's long economic sclerosis.

Several factors predicate Nigeria becoming more important in the foreseeable future, globally and for India. Thanks to its high birth rate, Nigeria's population is expected to double by 2050 to cross 400 million, then the world's fourth largest. How Nigeria harnesses its human resource and natural wealth (such as oil and gas and land) would matter globally. This would be a double-edged sword: either leveraging a huge demographic dividend or a society scrimmaging ever more intensely for untapped and more scarce resources. The country already has enormous influence over Sub-Saharan Africa, often serving as a role model and trendsetter, and its role is destined to rise further.

India's stakes

India, too, has important stakes in the political stability and progress of Nigeria, which besides being a friendly Commonwealth country is also a large economic partner. Over 50,000 people of Indian origin live in Nigeria, its largest non-African community. As a rule, Nigerians value India's appropriate technology which is seen as well-suited to the local conditions. Nigeria has over 135 Indian-owned companies; collectively, these are the second-largest employer in the country. The total Indian investments in Nigeria are estimated to be in the vicinity of $10 billion. Although India has traditionally been Nigeria's largest trading partner, its position has slid down as the bilateral trade shrunk by 21% in 2022-23 to $11.852 billion.

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh represented India at the presidential swearing-in. This is quite apt as bilateral defence cooperation has a glorious past: six of Nigeria's past 15 Presidents were India-trained defence officers. The Defence Minister's visit would help revive these ties. Mr Tinubu's campaign slogan was "Emi lo kan" or "It's my turn" in Yoruba language. With enhanced engagement, India should be able to use the same catchphrase to resonate with Nigeria.

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