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POLITY & GOVERNANCE

SC grants interim bail to Kejriwal till June 1

CONTEXT: The Supreme Court on Friday granted interim bail to Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal in the liquor policy case till June 1 to campaign for the Lok Sabha election.



The court barred Mr. Kejriwal from visiting the Chief Minister's office or the Delhi Secretariat. He cannot sign any official files unless it is required to obtain the clearance or approval of the Lieutenant-Governor of Delhi.

The order also prohibited him from making any comments with regard to his role in the liquor policy case. He will not interact with witnesses or have access to official files connected with the case. He has been directed to furnish bail bonds worth ₹50,000, with one surety to the satisfaction of the jail superintendent. Mr. Kejriwal has to surrender on June 2, and return to custody. The court made it clear that its grant of interim bail was not a comment on the merits of the case or on the pending appeal filed by Mr. Kejriwal against his arrest on March 21.

The eight-page order rejected an argument by the Directorate of Enforcement (ED) that releasing Mr. Kejriwal on interim bail would create an impression among the public — and worse still, a judicial precedent — that politicians are a separate class, higher in status than the ordinary citizen and immune from arrest. Every criminal would vie to be a politician, the ED had said.

During the short pronouncement of the order, which lasted a little over four minutes after the lunch break, Solicitor-General Tushar Mehta, for the Central agency, said that the ball has already started rolling, with Amritpal Singh, who is detained under the National Security Act over

Khalistani activities, approaching the court for bail to contest in the elections.

Arrest timing

The court noted that the ED had filed its Enforcement Case Information Report in August 2022. The case had been pending since then, but Mr. Kejriwal was arrested only on March 21, a few days after the Model Code of Conduct came into force. Justice Khanna said that 22 days of liberty for Mr. Kejriwal to campaign for the Aam Aadmi Party would “not make a difference now”. The order dismissed the ED's logic that if a politician could get interim bail to campaign, then a farmer or a company director was entitled to the same relief.

ECONOMICS AND DEVELOPMENT

Industrial output growth slowed to 4.9% in March

CONTEXT: India's industrial output growth slowed to 4.9% in March from 5.6% in February, the National Statistical Office revealed on Friday, with base effects from last March, when output had grown a feeble 1.9%, boosting the uptick. Mining output slid to a 19-month low growth of 1.2%, while electricity generation rose 8.6% from a 1.6% contraction in March 2023.

Highs and lows

India's industrial production growth slowed marginally to 4.9% in March 2024, from February's 5.6% pace

- Mining output growth decelerated to 1.2%, a 19-month low
- Consumer durables output recorded the sharpest surge for the second month in a row, rising 9.5%, albeit over an 8% contraction in March 2023



Manufacturing, which constitutes 77.6% of the Index of Industrial Production (IIP), grew at a five-month high pace of 5.2% in March, relative to a mild 1.5% uptick in the same month last year. Manufacturing growth for February was revised to 4.9% from 5% estimated earlier, along with the month's IIP growth which was downgraded from 5.7%.

Overall industrial output grew 5.8% in 2023-24, a tad higher than the 5.2% rise in the previous year, with manufacturing output growing 5.5% compared with 4.7% in 2022-23 and mining output accelerating by 7.5% last year from a 5.8% rise in the preceding year. Electricity generation grew 7.1% in 2023-24, easing from an 8.9% surge in the previous year.

Consumer goods

Seven of 23 major manufacturing segments recorded a contraction in March, but as many as 10 segments reported a drop in output through 2023-24, including wearing apparel (-14.2%), computers and electronics (-11.4%), furniture (-6.9%), wood products (-5.9%), chemicals (-1.7%) and leather (-1.1%).

Consumer goods remained the weakest performers through last year, despite beneficial base effects. Consumer durables grew the weakest at 3.6% compared with a meagre 0.6% rise in 2022-23, while non-durables rose 4% vis-à-vis a 0.7% uptick in the previous year.

In March, consumer durables output recorded the sharpest surge for the second month in a row, rising 9.5%, albeit over an 8% contraction in March 2023. In February, they had grown 12.3% relative to a 4.1% contraction a year ago.

Consumer non-durables broke a two-month streak of contraction to rise 4.9%, but again over a weak base from March 2023, when they shrank 1.9%. The consumption scenario remained mixed last year with urban demand showing resilience while rural demand continued to lag.

While hopes of a good monsoon, moderating inflation, and pick-up in rural demand are positives, a broad-based and durable improvement in consumption remains the key monitorable this year. Infrastructure and construction goods continued to record healthy growth at 6.9% in March, while capital goods growth picked up to 6.1% from just 1.2% in February.

POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

Dabholkar murder case: court convicts two, acquits three

CONTEXT: After nearly three years of trial, a Pune court on Friday convicted two persons and acquitted three in the murder of activist Narendra Achyut Dabholkar.



Dabholkar, 67, social activist, writer and rationalist, was shot dead on August 20, 2013, by two motorcycle-borne assailants on the Omkareshwar bridge near the Shanivar Peth area in Pune when he was out on a morning walk.

Sessions Court judge P.P. Jadhav pronounced the judgment sentencing the assailants — Sachin Andure and Sharad Kalaskar — to life

imprisonment and imposing a fine of ₹5 lakh. However, Virendrasinh Tawade, Vikram Bhavne and Sanjeev Punalekar were acquitted for lack of evidence. Dr. Tawade was alleged to be one of the masterminds of the murder.

The chargesheets, including those related to murders of Govind Pansare, M.M. Kalburgi, and Gauri Lankesh revealed alarming connections, indicating a broader conspiracy spanning multiple cases. All the cases had a common thread, which was what investigation agencies had been saying. Until the conspirator in all these cases was apprehended, the safety of all rationalists remains in jeopardy.

The Central Bureau of Investigation in a statement said it took over the case based on orders of the Bombay High Court in May 2014. "Chargesheets were filed in Pune court on September 6, 2016, supplementary chargesheets were filed on February 13, 2019 and November 20, 2019. The trial of the case was conducted in the special court for Unlawful Activities Prevention Act [UAPA] against the accused Sachin Prakashrao Andure, Sharad Bhausaheb Kalaskar, Virendrasinh Tawde, Vikram Vinay Bhavne and Sanjeev Punalekar. After completion of trial, on May 10, 2024 the sessions court convicted accused Mr. Prakashrao and Mr. Kalaskar and sentenced them. The other three accused were acquitted by the court."

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Folds and faults

CONTEXT: Proteins are long chains of amino-acid residues that fold into specific shapes. Properly folded proteins function normally whereas misfolded ones can lead to debilitating diseases. Since these chains are quite long, a given protein can actually fold into one of a very large number of shapes — yet it makes a beeline for a specific shape while avoiding all the others.

In 2018, five decades after it was mooted, a Google subsidiary named DeepMind developed a purpose-built AI tool to predict the shapes into which different proteins could fold, called AlphaFold. The upgraded AlphaFold 2 followed two years later. Many scientists and technologists acknowledge that these two deep-learning systems have transformed human awareness of protein structures, a feat the machines demonstrated in the biennial Critical Assessment of Protein Structure Prediction contest. Recently, DeepMind launched AlphaFold 3, which can reportedly predict the shapes with nearly 80% accuracy as well as model DNA, RNA, ligands, and modifications to them. As with the first two AlphaFolds, no. 3 is great for being able to elucidate the folded proteins' structures in seconds rather than the years humans have required with advanced microscopic techniques.

Not surprisingly, the excitement that followed the release of AlphaFold 3 has been unable to escape the hype and overblown expectations that dogged the launches of its predecessors. These machines can predict protein structures with relatively high accuracy but they cannot say why they are folded that way; this is still the task of human scientists. How the AlphaFolds will catalyse drug discovery is also unclear. Many drugs fail to make it to the market from the laboratory because medical researchers are unable to anticipate all the interactions between the drugs' various components and various parts of the body. The protein-folding problem is important to crack but it will not magically improve drugs' chances in human clinical trials. It is a step in that direction. Finally, the free use of AlphaFold 3 is limited while its inner mechanisms are unavailable for public exploration or scrutiny, so far. While the motivation to innovate of DeepMind is laudable, the cutting-edge value AlphaFold 3 presents to health care means the company should explore alternative revenue models in which the system is not trapped behind paywalls or exorbitant prices — a fate that has already befallen scientific papers and medicines born of publicly funded research. Recall that the AlphaFolds' training data itself includes protein structures first elucidated by such research.

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GEOGRAPHY

Freshwater quest, the likely new gold hunt



CONTEXT: In the 1960s, the U.S. Geological Survey drilled boreholes off the New Jersey coast and unexpectedly struck freshwater. Similarly, with time, a team of scientists from Vietnam and even in other countries have discovered underwater sources of fresh water.

For example, a river under the sea was discovered at the bottom of the Black Sea. This river appears to be over a 100 feet deep and has a flow rate of about four miles per hour; about 22,000 cubic meters of water passes through this particular channel.

Statistics show that the total volume of water on earth is estimated at 1.386 billion km³, where 97.5% is salt water and 2.5% freshwater. Out of this freshwater, only 0.3% is in liquid form on the surface, which means that the rest of the freshwater is underground, including on or under the ocean bed.

Considering that freshwater is a depleting resource, countries will begin exploring for and exploiting freshwater from above or under their ocean bed, within their maritime zones. Eventually, countries will expand exploration beyond their Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), into what is commonly known as the “Area”, which is covered under Part XI of the United Nations Law of the Sea Convention, 1982 (UNCLOS). The “Area” under UNCLOS is defined as the seabed and ocean floor and subsoil thereof, beyond the limits of national jurisdiction and is referred to as the common heritage of mankind. This means that it is available for everyone’s use and benefit, keeping in mind the future generations.

The law of the sea

Although UNCLOS arrays most of the internationally accepted law on the subject, customary international law continues to remain an important source of the law of the sea. While UNCLOS is known as a single comprehensive text covering the constitution and the governance of the oceans, it is interesting to know that the Convention on the Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone, the Convention on the High Seas, the Convention on Fishing and Conservation of the Living Resources of the High Seas and the Convention on the Continental Shelf (Geneva Conventions on the Law of the Sea, 1958) cover most of the issues as UNCLOS and these Geneva conventions are mostly platformed over customary international law.

To complicate matters further, Article 311 of UNCLOS states that this Convention shall prevail as between states parties, over the Geneva Conventions on the Law of the Sea, 1958. Hence, not only is UNCLOS not applicable to these non-signatory states but also these countries do not recognise the doctrine of Exclusive Economic Zone (200 nm) or the “Area” (beyond 200 nm). The least of the surprise is that the United States is a signatory to the Geneva Conventions 1958 and not UNCLOS.

Exploration and exploitation of the “Area” under UNCLOS is limited to the term “resources”, which is defined as all solid, liquid or gaseous mineral resources in situ in the Area at or beneath the seabed, including polymetallic nodules — and resources when recovered from the Area are referred to as “minerals”. The International Seabed Authority (referred to as the Authority) is empowered under UNCLOS to administer and control the activities in the Area. Consequently, exploration of all minerals from the Area is required to be in accordance with the rules, regulations and procedures laid down by the Authority. If state parties to UNCLOS are regulated by the Authority, who regulates state parties to the Geneva Conventions, especially in activities concerning mining and exploratory activities in the “Area”?

A zone of exploration

Freshwater will become a very scarce and an expensive commodity, the Area will qualify as a potential zone for freshwater exploration and extraction. Just as oil wells are explored and capped for future use, fresh water wells may be identified and capped for future use. In the lacuna of specific legislation and terminologies governing and controlling the advancement of resource beyond national jurisdiction (such as fresh water) integrated with multiple legislations governing the law of the sea, the “Area” will once again attract controversy.

ECONOMICS AND DEVELOPMENT

FinMin pushes for CPSEs adopting NPS

CONTEXT: The Department of Public Enterprises (DPE) in the Finance Ministry has shot off letters to various Administrative Ministries and government departments to sensitise the Central Public Sector Enterprises (CPSEs) under their control about the benefits of adopting the National Pension System (NPS) for their employees.

As of March, 76 CPSEs had already adopted the NPS to extend the pension benefit to their employees. According to sources, the latest DPE letter has been sent to the Chief Executive Officers of about 120 CPSEs that are yet to adopt NPS for their employees. The NPS was made mandatory for all Central employees (except armed forces personnel) who joined service on or after January 1, 2004.

Most States have adopted the NPS. Since May 1, 2009, the NPS has been available to every citizen voluntarily, including corporates. The DPE identified the CPSEs still not on board on NPS and letters had gone to the controlling ministries, sources added.

NPS assets

Aided by a buoyant stock market, the NPS assets under management (AUM) grew 27% year-on-year to ₹11.89-lakh crore as of May 4. The overall AUM, including that of the Atal Pension Yojana (APY), however, was only slightly up when compared with the end-March 2024 level of ₹11.73-lakh crore.

The number of new NPS and APY subscriber registrations till May 6 stood at 82,061, PFRDA data showed.

As of May 4, the number of subscribers in the non-government sector grew 8.76 lakh year-over-year, while the increase in the government sector was just 7.14 lakh.

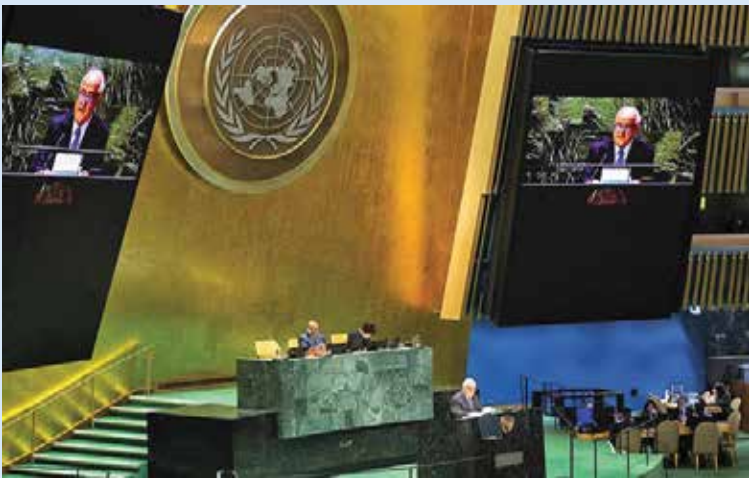
In 2023-24, as many as 9.47 lakh new subscribers joined the NPS from the non-government sector. Of these, 8.10 lakh were from the 'all citizen model' and 1.37 lakh corporate employees.

The overall robust growth in NPS assets was driven by buoyant equity markets and a widening NPS subscriber base as more working-age Indians take up retirement planning seriously.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

India backs Palestine's bid for full UN membership

CONTEXT: India on Friday voted in favour of a draft UN General Assembly resolution that said Palestine is qualified and should be admitted as full member of the United Nations and recommended that the Security Council "reconsider" the matter "favourably".



The 193-member General Assembly met in the morning for an emergency special session where the Arab Group resolution 'Admission of new Members to the United Nations', in support of the State of Palestine's full membership in the UN, was presented by the UAE, as Chair of the Arab Group in May.

The resolution got 143 votes in favour, including by India, nine against and 25 abstentions. The UNGA hall broke into an applause after the vote was cast. The resolution determined that "the State of Palestine is qualified for membership in the United Nations" in accordance with Article 4 of the Charter of the UN and "should therefore be admitted to membership in the United Nations". It recommended that the Security Council "reconsider the matter favourably, in the light of this determination".

India was the first non-Arab State to recognise the Palestine Liberation Organisation as the sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people in 1974. India was also one of the first countries to recognise the State of Palestine in 1988 and in 1996, Delhi opened its Representative Office to the Palestine Authority in Gaza, which was later shifted to Ramallah in 2003.

Rights and privileges

An annex to the resolution said the additional rights and privileges of participation of the State of Palestine will be effective as of the 79th session of the General Assembly that begins in September this year.

These include the right to be seated among member states in alphabetical order; the right to make statements on behalf of a group, including among representatives of major groups; the right of members of the delegation of the State of Palestine to be elected as officers in the plenary and the Main Committees of the General Assembly and the right to full and effective participation in UN conferences and international conferences and meetings convened under the auspices of the General Assembly.

Palestine, in its capacity as an observer state, does not have the right to vote in the General Assembly or to put forward its candidature to UN organs.

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INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

After 18 months, China sends Ambassador to India

CONTEXT: Senior diplomat Xu Feihong arrived in Delhi to assume office as the 17th Ambassador to India on Friday, after 18 months of China not having an Ambassador in India.



Mr. Xu said his priority is to work to restore exchanges and cooperation in various fields and create favourable conditions for a sound and steady India-China relationship.

“President Xi [Jinping] and Prime Minister [Narendra] Modi have agreed on the important assessment that China and India are cooperation partners and not competitors. And reached an important common understanding that our two countries are each other’s development opportunities and not threats. This should serve as the fundamental guidelines for the growth of bilateral relations.

Ties between the two countries have been strained since tensions along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), following China’s multiple transgressions starting in April 2020 and violent clashes in

Galwan in June 2020, which resulted in casualties on both sides.

Reaching out

Mr. Xu said he looks forward and trusts that he will have the support and assistance of the Indian government and friends from all sectors. “Both India and China are each other’s important neighbours and the biggest emerging markets and developing countries of the world. I will follow the important consensus between our leaders and reach out to friends from all sectors of India.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

India withdrew its troops, says Maldives

CONTEXT: India withdrew its last remaining soldiers stationed in the Maldives on Friday to meet a deadline set by the archipelago nation’s government, an official at the Maldivian Foreign Ministry said.

Pro-China President Mohamed Muizzu won office last year while campaigning on a promise to downgrade ties with India, and has since reoriented the strategically placed archipelago nation towards Beijing. After coming to power, he demanded the withdrawal of at least 88 Indian soldiers who had been stationed in the territory to assist with maritime patrols. The third and final batch of 27 Indian troops left the archipelago on Friday, the official said. They added that there was no public ceremony held to mark the end of the Indian military deployment.

Both India and the Maldives struck a conciliatory note on Thursday, ahead of the withdrawal deadline. Maldives Foreign Minister Moosa Zameer met his Indian counterpart during an official visit to New Delhi on Thursday.



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