



# PIB, THE HINDU Newspaper and Editorial

## Current Affairs

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### Judiciary Under RTI

#### Why in news?

Opening up the “highly-sensitive” correspondence of the Supreme Court’s collegium and its workings to the Right to Information (RTI) regime would make judges and the government “shy” and “destroy” judicial independence, Attorney General K.K. Venugopal submitted to the SC.

#### AGI Observations:

- Addressing a Constitution Bench, led by Chief Justice of India Ranjan Gogoi, Mr. Venugopal asserted that were the RTI to be applied to the collegium, its member judges would not be able to sit back and have a free and frank discussion for fear that their confidential views may later come into the public domain.
- Mr. Venugopal represents the Supreme Court’s Central Public Information Officer (CPIO), who is the authority tasked to respond to RTI queries related to the court.
- For the past decade, the **Supreme Court has refused to divulge information under RTI** about the collegium’s confidential communications with the government.
- The collegium recommends judges for the High Courts and the apex court.
- The Supreme Court, after losing legal battles before the Central Information Commission (CIC) and the Delhi High Court, finally had to appeal to itself to protect the collegium’s workings.
- After nine years, the appeal is now being heard by the Constitution

Bench.

- The Bench is hearing the broad question whether it would be deleterious to judicial independence to bring the collegium under RTI.

### **Judicial Independence:**

- AGI asserted that pushing the collegium under the public spotlight through RTI would “destroy” judicial independence.
- Elaborating on some of the reasons to exclude the collegium from the purview of RTI, AG said: “If reasons for his rejection come into public domain, will a judge be able to function independently? The entire future of the judge is ruined.
- The public, litigants lose their confidence in him. A judge whose integrity has been questioned and overlooked for appointment or elevation, is handicapped. He cannot go to the press to clear the air.
- Disclosure of highly sensitive communication under RTI will risk the very existence of the judicial way of functioning. So, the information should be kept confidential.
- Acknowledging that the right to know was part of the right to free speech, Mr. Venugopal said the right to free speech was, however, subject to reasonable restrictions.

### **Disclosure of assets:**

- The AG said even disclosure of personal assets of judges under RTI was an “unwarranted intrusion” into their privacy.
- Some judges may have submitted their assets. Some not. ‘Information’ under RTI means something in material form like a document, memo or a circular and something which is already existing in the possession of a public authority.
- Here, in cases of judges who have not submitted their assets, a third party is not asking for an existing document. In fact, he wants the judge to compute his assets and liabilities and arrive at a final figure,” Mr. Venugopal submitted.

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### **WhatsApp makes group chats more secure**

## Why in news?

The new privacy feature will allow its users to decide whether they want to get added to groups.

## New Changes:

- WhatsApp said it has introduced a **new invite system** on its platform that will enable users to decide who can add them to a group.
- As people turn to groups for important conversations, users have asked for more control over their experience,” the Facebook-owned firm said in a statement.
- The company has introduced a new privacy setting and an invite system to help users decide who can add them to groups. Currently, users can be added to a group without their consent. However, they can leave the group once they are added.
- The company said with the new features, users will have more control over the group messages they receive. The new privacy settings will begin rolling out to some users and will be available worldwide in the coming weeks to those using the latest version of WhatsApp.

## Rumours and fake news:

- WhatsApp, which counts India as one of its largest markets with over 200 million users, had faced flak from the Indian government after a series of mob-lynching incidents, triggered by rumours circulating on the messaging platform, claimed lives last year.
- Under pressure to stop rumours and fake news, **WhatsApp had last year restricted forwarding messages to five chats at once**. It has also been putting out advertisements in newspapers and running television and radio campaigns offering tips to users on how to spot misinformation.
- With ensuing general elections, **the Indian government had warned social media platforms of strong action if any attempt was made to influence the country’s electoral process** through undesirable means.
- One of the amendments being mulled in the IT intermediary rules (meant for online and social media platforms) will require them to enable tracing out of such originators of information as needed by government agencies that are legally authorised.

- However, WhatsApp has so far resisted the government's demand for identifying message originators, arguing that such a move would undermine the end-to-end encryption and the private nature of the platform, creating potential for serious misuse.
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## **Air pollution is the third-highest cause of death among all health risks**

### **Why in news?**

The current high level of air pollution has shortened the average lifespan of a South Asian child by two-and-a-half years while globally the reduction stands at 20 months, according to a global study released.

### **Findings of the report:**

- **State of Global Air 2019, published by Health Effects Institute (HEI)**, said exposure to outdoor and indoor air pollution contributed to over **1.2 million deaths in India in 2017**.
- The State of Global Air 2019 annual report and accompanying interactive website are designed and implemented by the Health Effects Institute in cooperation with the Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) at the University of Washington, the University of British Columbia, and the University of Texas, Austin.
- The report added that worldwide, air pollution was responsible for more deaths than many better-known risk factors such as malnutrition, alcohol abuse and physical inactivity.
- In India, air pollution is the third-highest cause of death among all health risks, ranking just above smoking; each year, more people globally die from air pollution related disease than from road traffic injuries or malaria.

### **In China and India:**

- The study found that China and India together were responsible for over half of the total global attributable deaths, with each country

witnessing over 1.2 million deaths from all air pollution in 2017. China has made initial progress, beginning to achieve air-pollution decline.

- Overall, long-term exposure to outdoor and indoor air pollution contributed to nearly 5 million deaths **from stroke, diabetes, heart attack, lung cancer, and chronic lung disease** in 2017.
- The South Asian region Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan led the world as the most polluted, with over 1.5 million air-pollution related deaths according to the report.

### **Steps taken in India:**

- At the same time, India has initiated major steps to address pollution sources: the **Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana** Household LPG program, accelerated **Bharat Stage 6/VI clean vehicle** standards, and the new **National Clean Air Programme**.
- These and future initiatives have the potential, if fully implemented as part of a sustained commitment to air quality, to result in significant health benefits in coming years.

### **Effect on life expectancy:**

- Meanwhile, for the first time, this year's report and website include worldwide estimates of the effect of air pollution on life expectancy.
  - Worldwide, air pollution reduced life expectancy by an average of 20 months in 2017, a global impact rivalling that of smoking; this means a child born today will die 20 months sooner, on average, than would be expected without air pollution.
  - The report also highlighted that nearly half of the world's population a total of 3.6 billion people were exposed to household air pollution in 2017.
  - Globally, there has been progress: the proportion of people cooking with solid fuels has declined as economies develop.
  - But in India, 60% of the population still uses solid fuels; in Bangladesh that number rises to 79%, underscoring the importance of achieving success in government initiatives to address the problem.
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## **Regime Change in Algeria**

### **Who is Bouteflika?**

- Since February 22, tens of thousands of Algerians, especially the youth, have thronged Algeria's cities, including the capital Algiers, demanding that President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, 82, go.
- His political career goes back to the pre-independence years. At age 19, Mr. Bouteflika joined the National Liberation Army, the military wing of the National Liberation Front (FLN) that was fighting the French colonialists for independence.
- In the post-independence government led by revolutionary leader Ahmed Ben Bella, Mr. Bouteflika was a Minister. In 1963, Bella appointed him Foreign Minister, a post which he would hold till 1979.
- In 1999, when the country was in the midst of a civil war between the government and the Islamist militants, he won the presidency.
- In three years, Mr. Bouteflika brought the civil war to an end and his government built a strong welfare state funded by revenues from oil and gas exports.

### **Why were there protests?**

- While Mr. Bouteflika is credited with ending the civil war and stabilising the economy, he is also known for his ruthless administrative style that denied several basic freedoms. The presidential elections were hardly free and fair.
- In 2014, he won a fourth term without inviting much public protest even as he had withdrawn from the public by that time following the previous year's stroke.
- But the resentment was gradually rising, particularly amid mounting economic woes following the 2014 commodities meltdown.
- While the country was battling economic woes, the President was missing. He has been wheelchair-bound and has rarely been seen in public recently.
- Five years of economic troubles and growing scepticism about the President's health have added to the public resentment. So, when the ruling party said Mr. Bouteflika will seek a fifth term, the Algerian society erupted into protests.

### **Why did he resign?**



- After protests broke out, he backed off from the early plan to seek a fifth term, but said elections would be postponed.
- He also promised to introduce political and economic reforms. Protesters rejected these offers. As it was evident that Mr. Bouteflika could not resolve the crisis, both the FLN, the ruling party, and the Army turned against him.
- On April 2, Army chief Ahmed Gaid Salah held a meeting with generals and top officials of the Defence Ministry after which he demanded Mr. Bouteflika vacate immediately. Within hours, Mr. Bouteflika announced the resignation.

### **What next?**

- According to Algeria's Constitution, the head of the Council of the Nation, the upper house of Parliament, should become interim leader for up to three months if the President steps down and then elections have to be held.
  - Abdelkader Bensalah, the current Parliament chief, has already taken over the responsibility.
  - It is to be seen whether the protesters will now vacate the streets and accept the transition.
  - Some of them have called for a break with the system and demanded a democratic transition. They don't want the vestiges of the old regime to be in control. But for now, only Mr. Bouteflika is gone. The regime he built has survived.
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## **India-US \$2.6 billion chopper deal**

### **Why in news?**

The U.S Department of State has approved the sale of **24 MH-60R 'Romeo' multi-mission helicopters** to India under its **Foreign Military Sales (FMS)** programme.

### **About the deal:**

- The value of the potential sale is \$2.6 billion, as per a statement released by the Defence Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA), the body that administers the FMS programme. The principal contractor for the deal will be **Lockheed Martin**.
- The DSCA submitted its certification notifying the U.S. Congress of the possible sale, kicking off a 30-day notification period.
- Congress is not required to approve or disapprove the potential sale.
- If it simply takes no action for the 30-day period, the sale moves forward.
- The Indian government had submitted a Letter of Request for the Romeos last year, as reported by the media last November.

### **Enhanced capability:**

- The proposed sale will provide India the capability to perform **anti-surface and anti-submarine warfare missions** along with the ability to perform secondary missions, including vertical replenishment, search and rescue, and communications relay. India will use the enhanced capability as a deterrent to regional threats and to strengthen its homeland defence
- In the case of India and most other non-NATO countries, Congress must be notified for sales of Major Defense Equipment (MDE) of \$14 million and above, defence articles and services of \$50 million and above and design and construction services of \$200 million and above.
- The statement notes that India typically requires offsets and that any offset agreement will be defined between India and the contractor.
- An MH-60R acquisition allows the Indian Navy to benefit from the ongoing support provided for over 300 MH-60Rs in operation around the world today.
- Along with the hardware requested by the Indian government are requests for personnel training and training equipment, U.S. government contractor engineering, logistics and technical support services, the statement said.

### **Multi-mission role:**

- There are over 300 MH-60R helicopters globally and they have accumulated over 6,00,000 flight hours, according to Lockheed Martin.



- The chopper is available off the shelf and costs no more than \$5,000 per flight hour, and it is designed to operate from destroyers, frigates, cruisers and aircraft carriers as per the manufacturer.
- The multi-mission capability of the Romeo includes anti-submarine and anti-surface warfare, search and rescue, vertical replenishment, command and control.
- The MH-60R has **situational awareness and actionable knowledge**, enabling target engagement both close-in and over-the-horizon, according to its manufacturer.
- This proposed sale will support the foreign policy and national security of the U.S. by helping to strengthen the U.S.-Indian strategic relationship and to improve the security of a major defensive partner which continues to be an important force for political stability, peace, and economic progress in the Indo-Pacific and South Asia region,” the DSCA said.

### **Major Defence Partner:**

- India was granted the unique **Major Defence Partner (MDP) designation in 2016** by the Obama administration a step towards India accessing U.S. military technology at a level on par with those of the U.S.’s closest allies.
- India was then given **Strategic Trade Authorisation-1 (STA-1)** status by the U.S. in August last year, the third Asian country after South Korea and Japan (and 37th country globally) to acquire it.
- This was to further facilitate the transfer of technology in the defence and space sectors.

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## **Ensure borrower discipline**

### **Why in news?**

With SC quashing RBI’s 2018 circular, new norms needed, says NITI Aayog CEO.

### **Observations:**

- With the Supreme Court quashing the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) circular on loan defaults, the central bank and the government will now have to sit together and bring a new regulation to ensure financial discipline among borrowers, said NITI Aayog Chief Executive Officer Amitabh Kant.
- A lot of work has been done by the government and the RBI to bring financial discipline and good regulation to end crony capitalism in India.
- It is important that we ensure discipline so that money borrowed from financial institutions is repaid. With the Supreme Court striking down the RBI circular as ultra vires, the issue needs to be relooked by both RBI and central government to arrive at a new regulation, which will ensure that the financial discipline from borrowers should continue.
- The apex court struck down a February 2018 circular issued by the RBI that gave lender banks six months to resolve their stressed assets or move under the Insolvency Code against private entities who have defaulted in loans worth over Rs. 2,000 crores.
- Incidentally, one of the factors missing from the RBI circular, as per the apex court order, was an authorisation from the government.

### **Long-term growth:**

- Mr. Kant further said that the regulation was essential for the long-term growth of the country, and hence the banking regulator and the government would have to come up with a new regulation.
- The Indian economy must grow rapidly at 9-10% even as the country faced four main challenges manufacturing with a focus on exports, gender parity, agriculture, and transforming areas that have remained backward.
- He highlighted the fact that while India had demonstrated that it can manufacture on a huge scale, the focus had to be on exports that gave better value per unit of sales.
- He also said that agriculture needed radical reforms and outdated laws related to Agriculture Produce Market Committee (APMC) and Essential Commodities Act needed to be scrapped.

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### **Why a rate cut won't help lower lending rates?**

## Why in news?

With the first bimonthly review of the Reserve Bank of India's monetary policy of this fiscal scheduled to be announced on April 4, there is an expectation of another rate cut as inflation continues to remain soft.

## What is the issue?

- Though **retail inflation, the central bank's main yardstick for policy making** rose to a four-month high of 2.57% in February, it is still below the RBI's medium-term target of 4%.
- In the previous policy in February, the central bank had reduced the repo rate by 25 basis points (bps) to 6.25%. [100 basis points = 1 percentage point]
- Despite the rate cut, the response from banks, in cutting lending rates, has only been partial. Only a few banks reduced their **marginal cost of funds-based lending rate (MCLR), the benchmark lending rate to which all the loans are linked** by 10-15 bps.

## Lack of monetary transmission:

- Bankers justify not passing on rate changes to end customers on two grounds: one, their **cost of deposits** has not fallen with a cut in the repo rate; two, **monetary transmission comes with a lag**. So, even if the RBI cuts lending rates again, it is unlikely that banks will pass on the entire benefit to the customers.
- But banks have been prompt, and even ahead of the curve, when rates were rising. Many lenders, including State Bank of India and ICICI Bank, announced 20 bps MCLR hikes from March 1, 2018, while the RBI started the repo rate increase cycle only in June 2018.
- Monetary transmission has been an issue for the central bank for more than a decade and all the Governors tried to address it in the last 10 years.

## Changing Benchmarks:

- First, Duvvuri Subbarao replaced the then **benchmark prime lending rate regime with the base rate in July 2010**.
- His successor Raghuram Rajan introduced the **MCLR regime, which**

**replaced the base rate from April 2016.**

- Both the base rate and the MCLR were a function of cost of funds of the banks.
  - With both the regimes largely failing to address the issue of monetary transmission, Dr. Rajan's successor Urjit Patel proposed a new regime in which the **floating loan rates for small borrowers would be linked to an external benchmark.**
  - Four options were given to banks to choose the external benchmark, one of them being the repo rate.
  - In his last monetary policy held on December 5, Dr. Patel mandated that this new system of **external benchmark-linked lending rates** will come into effect from April 1, 2019. The final guidelines were scheduled to be issued by the end of December 2018.
  - The final guidelines are yet to be issued. Hence the new scheme was not made operational from the beginning of this month.
  - Banks have opposed this system tooth and nail. They argue that the costs are not linked to external benchmark and lending rates should be a function of cost. But at the same time, SBI decided to link the savings account rate (for deposits over Rs. 1 lakh) to the repo rate from May 1.
  - RBI is yet to clarify why there is a delay in implementing the scheme even after it was announced.
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## **Bleaching hits world's southernmost coral reef**

### **Why in news?**

The world's southernmost coral reef has been hit by bleaching this summer, Australian scientists said, as they **warned rising sea temperatures from climate change** were affecting even the most isolated ecosystems.

### **Affected Reefs:**

- The corals off **Lord Howe Island** some 600 km offshore from Sydney were affected by elevated temperatures this summer, despite

escaping severe bleaching that damaged the Great Barrier Reef in 2016 and 2017.

- It's a canary in the coal mine that we are seeing bleaching at this very isolated southernmost reef.
- It's just another indicator that climate change is affecting everywhere around the world. Here is a reef that is 600 km from the mainland and we are seeing bleaching there in a lovely, beautiful ecosystem.

### **Shallow lagoons:**

- Scientists found severe bleaching of up to 90% at Lord Howe's inshore, shallow lagoon reefs.
  - Deeper-water corals in the marine park, which contains species not found anywhere else and like the Barrier Reef is a World Heritage site, were still "looking quite healthy" having mostly escaped the bleaching.
  - Increasing baseline temperatures caused by climate change, and local factors such as elevated temperatures in the area this summer, caused the bleaching to occur.
  - The scientists are set to return to Lord Howe in the next few months to find out if some corals have been so severely bleached, they can't recover.
  - **Bleaching occurs when abnormal environmental conditions, such as warmer sea temperatures, cause corals to expel tiny photosynthetic algae, draining them of their colour.**
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## **Dark matter not made up of tiny black holes**

### **Why in news?**

Dark matter is not made up of primordial black holes smaller than a tenth of a millimetre, say scientists who have put the theory put forward by the late Stephen Hawking to its most rigorous test to date.

### **About the study:**

- **About 85% of the matter in the universe is believed to be made up of dark matter.** Its gravitational force prevents stars in our Milky Way from flying apart.
- However, attempts to detect such dark matter particles using underground experiments, or accelerator experiments including the world's largest accelerator, the **Large Hadron Collider**, have failed so far, according to a study published in the journal Nature Astronomy.
- Researchers led by Kavli Institute for the Physics and Mathematics of the Universe in Japan used the **gravitational lensing effect** to look for primordial black holes between the earth and the **Andromeda galaxy**.

### **Hawaii telescope:**

- In order to maximise the chances of capturing an event, the researchers used the **Hyper Suprime-Cam digital camera on the Subaru telescope in Hawaii**.
- From 190 consecutive images of the Andromeda galaxy taken over seven hours during one clear night, the team scoured the data for potential gravitational lensing events.
- If dark matter consists of primordial black holes of a given mass, in this case masses lighter than the moon, the researchers expected to find about 1,000 events. However, after careful analyses, they could only identify one case.

### **What is dark matter?**

- Dark matter is a kind of matter that is thought to occupy a little more than 85 per cent of this universe.

### **Why is it called 'dark matter'?**

- This kind of matter's name has to do with a property that scientists believe it should have: **it does not absorb or emit light**, remaining (optically) dark to our search for it.

### **What is dark matter made of?**

- We don't know. Scientists think it could be composed of strange particles. Some other scientists think it could be composed of known



particles that are for some reason behaving differently.

- At the moment, the leading candidate is a particle called the **WIMP (weakly interacting massive particle)**, just like particles called electrons are an indicator of there being an electric field or particles called **Higgs bosons** are an indicator of there being a Higgs field.
- A WIMP gets its name because it doesn't interact with other matter particles except through the gravitational force.
- We don't know how heavy or light WIMPs are or even what each WIMP's mass could be. So, using different detectors, scientists are combing through different mass-ranges.
- And by 'combing', what they're doing is using extremely sensitive instruments hidden thousands of feet under rocky terrain (or orbiting the planet in a satellite) in an environment so clean that even undesired particles cannot interact with the detector (to some extent).
- In this state, the detector remains on 'full alert' to note the faintest interactions its components have with certain particles in the atmosphere - such as WIMPs.
- The LUX detector team, in its October 30 announcement, ruled out that WIMPs existed in the  $\sim 10 \text{ GeV}/c^2$  mass range (because of a silence of its components trying to pick up some particles in that range).
- This is important because results from some other detectors around the world suggested that a WIMP could be found in this range. ( $\text{GeV}/c^2$  is a measure of energy and, by the mass-energy equivalence, of mass, too. To compare: A proton weighs about  $1 \text{ GeV}/c^2$  in its non-accelerated state.)

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## **Skymet expects a 'below normal' monsoon**

### **Why in news?**

A month after ruling out a drought, private weather forecaster Skymet said it expects the coming monsoon rains to be "below normal" and about 7% short of the 89 cm the country usually gets from June to September.

## **Impact on Agriculture:**

- Not only is the monsoon expected to begin sluggishly but rain in July a key month for agriculture is expected to be nearly 9% short, the company said at a press briefing.
- In terms of geographical risk, Skymet expects that eastern India, along with a major portion of Central India, is likely to be at a higher risk of being rain deficient, especially during the first half of the season.

## **Sluggish start:**

- The onset month of June is going to have a very sluggish start and deficit rains are likely to spill into July.
  - The second half of the season would see better rainfall wherein August is expected to be a shade better than September.
  - There is a 15% chance of a drought (seasonal rainfall less than 90% of the average), 30% chance of normal (seasonal rainfall that is between 96%-104% of the long period average or LPA), and 55% chance of below normal (seasonal rainfall that is between 90%-95% of LPA).
  - June was likely to post only 77% of its historical average of 164mm, July 91% of its average, according to Skymet.
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