



# PIB, THE HINDU Newspaper and Editorial Current Affairs

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## **NIA looks for Hashim links in Kerala**

### **Why in news?**

The National Investigation Agency (NIA) searched the houses of at least four people in north Kerala as part of the international probe into the Easter Day suicide bombings in Sri Lanka.

### **Social Media Followers:**

- According to the State police, the NIA appeared to have inspected private residences in Kasaragod and Palakkad after evidence emerged that the targets of their probe had avidly followed on social media Zahran Hashim, the architect of the attacks that claimed hundreds of lives.
- Officials said law enforcement agencies across the world, including the NIA and the FBI, had been digging up the digital trail left behind by Hashim on social media, which he zealously used to recruit persons to his global jihadist cause.

### **No one booked:**

- According to officials, the NIA had not booked anyone, possibly due to lack of proof of complicity in the attacks.
- The NIA's investigations into the alleged affiliates of the now notorious **National Towheeth Jamaat (NTJ)**, a construct of Hashim to unleash terror in mainland India, were still at a nascent stage, the officials said.
- However, it did not stop NIA agents from swooping down on the houses of the potential suspects in Palakkad.

- Officials said the agency summoned the suspects to their office in Kochi for further questioning. It was not immediately known whether the agency had made any seizures

### **Radical activity in Southern India:**

- According to officials the NIA appeared to be investigating if there was any correlation between the attacks in Sri Lanka and radical activity radical activity radical activity in India.
  - They said coastal States in South India, including Kerala, were not immune from upheavals in the island nation, given the sizeable Tamil population whose security concerns often dovetail with their counterparts in Sri Lanka.
  - The NIA also appeared to have factored in reports that Hashim, the terror mastermind, had travelled widely in India. Hence, his itinerary, contacts and places of stay were currently subjects of interest for the agency.
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## **Lego Braille bricks may give blind literacy a needed lift**

### **Why in news?**

A new effort is under way to help blind and visually impaired children more naturally learn to read Braille, a system based on different configurations of six small, raised dots that blind people read with their fingertips. And it is coming in the form of a favorite childhood toy: Lego bricks.

### **New System:**

- This week, the Lego Foundation, which is funded by the Lego Group, the Danish toy company that makes the blocks, announced a new project that will repurpose the usual knobs atop the bricks as Braille dots.
- And because the blocks will also be stamped with the corresponding written letter, number or punctuation symbol, they can be played with by blind and sighted children alike.

- The **project, called Lego Braille Bricks**, is in a pilot phase and is expected to be released in partnership with schools and associations for the blind in 2020.

### **Learning through play:**

- They learn Braille almost without noticing that they are learning. It is really a learning-through-play approach.
- Advocates say the **product could transform reading for blind and visually impaired children**, making the experience of learning Braille more inclusive and helping to combat what has been called a “**Braille literacy crisis.**”
- Though the research is limited, some estimates suggest that just 10 percent of blind children in the United States learn to read Braille, even though Braille literacy is associated with better job outcomes for adults.

### **Game Changer:**

- In 2017, less than half of American adults with visual impairments were employed, according to a disability report by Cornell University.
  - Braille, once widely taught in schools for the blind, has fallen by the wayside since the 1970s, when the law began requiring public schools to offer equal education to children with disabilities.
  - Blind students were able to join their sighted peers in the classroom, but traditional schools, biased toward sight and facing a lack of specialised teachers, often pushed children with any sight at all to rely on magnified print.
  - And an explosion of accessible technologies, including audiobooks, apps and screen readers, has strengthened reliance on audio, which advocates say cannot effectively teach critical skills like spelling and grammar, let alone complicated math.
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## **11 months in ISS**

### **Why in news?**

Astronaut **Christina Koch** will set a record for the **longest single spaceflight by a woman** when she completes her 11-month-long mission aboard the International Space Station (ISS) in February 2020.

### **Effects of long-duration spaceflight on a woman:**

- Ms. Koch's mission will provide researchers the opportunity to observe effects of long-duration spaceflight on a woman, NASA said.
- Her planned mission duration will be just shy of the longest single spaceflight by a NASA astronaut 340 days set by former NASA astronaut **Scott Kelly** during his one-year mission in 2015-16.
- Her long stay on the ISS has to do with NASA's preparation of human missions to the Moon and Mars.

### **Lack of data:**

- The mission became necessary as the majority of data available is on male astronauts. But male and female bodies respond differently, and health conditions occur at different rates in male and female populations.
- With this mission, researchers hope to better understand astronaut adaptability over long periods of space exposure and better support the development of effective countermeasures to maintain crew health.
- NASA last month accepted a challenge from the Donald Trump administration to return humans to the Moon by 2024, four years ahead of the U.S. space agency's earlier set target.
- Ms. Koch's stay on the space station will eclipse the previous mark set by **Peggy Whitson of 288 days** on Expeditions 50 through 52 in 2016-17, NASA said.
- Ms. Koch arrived on board the space station March 14, beginning scientific research activities as part of the Expedition 59 crew. "It's an honour to follow in Peggy's footsteps," Ms. Koch was quoted as saying by NASA.

### **Human Research Programme:**

- Meanwhile, NASA's Human Research Programme continues to lay the groundwork for future one-year missions on the space station and has selected 25 proposals to investigate biological, physiological, and

behavioural adaptations to spaceflight.

- With information gained from the selected studies during future missions, NASA said it aims to address five hazards of human space travel, space radiation, isolation and confinement, distance from Earth, gravity fields (or lack thereof), and hostile/closed environments that pose great risks to the human mind and body in space.
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## **Public sector banks' long-term strategy on Jan Dhan**

### **Why in news?**

Public sector banks stand to earn as much as Rs. 5,000 crores due to the increasing quantum of deposits placed in Jan Dhan accounts, and can vastly monetise this resource once they start implementing advanced analytics and begin lending to these customers, according to industry players and analysts.

### **Further Financial inclusion:**

- Over the last three years, the number of Jan Dhan beneficiaries has risen from 22 crore to 35 crores, as of April 10, 2019.
- This represents a growth of nearly 60% over the three years.
- The growth in the number of accounts has been pretty steady over the last three years, with the demonetisation year of 2016-17 seeing the fastest growth of about 27%, which then subsequently slowed to a nevertheless robust 10% in 2017-18 and 12% in 2018-19.
- Deposits, however, have seen a much stronger growth rate over this period.
- The total quantum of deposits in Jan Dhan accounts has grown from a little more than Rs. 36,000 crore in April 2016 to Rs. 98,400 crores in April 2019, a growth of more than 2.5 times.

### **Impact on Demonetisation:**

- Demonetisation, as expected, resulted in a rapid increase in the quantum of deposits soon after the announcement.
- Deposits surged 66% from about Rs. 44,500 crores in mid-October

2016 to Rs. 74,000 crores by mid-December 2016.

- To put this in perspective, the growth in the same two-month period of the subsequent year was just 4.6%.
- Deposit levels declined over the next five months to fall to as low as Rs. 64,500 by June 2017, but have been consistently growing since then.

### **Rising balances:**

- A balance of about Rs. 1 lakh crore is equal to a revenue of Rs. 3,000 crore and maybe up to Rs. 4,000-Rs. 5,000 crores made by the banks with these accounts.
- With that amount of revenue, the banking system can start making it a break-even business, and if they start lending on top of it, it can really become viable.
- This is one of those stories where the public sector, because of its ownership, can take a longer-term view while the private sector has a shorter horizon
- This is a view taken by industry players as well, who say that the business of opening and maintaining Jan Dhan accounts must be viewed in the long-term, and must also be taken in combination with other activities that see the opening of bank accounts for the poorer sections of society.
- Under that programme, banks opened the accounts of marginal sections of society, predominantly women. These provide banking services to similar sections of society that are targeted by Jan Dhan.

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## **Corridor linking India, Myanmar no longer under BRI framework**

### **Why in news?**

India's decision to skip the Belt and Road Forum (BRF) may have led to the exclusion of the **Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) economic corridor** from the list of projects covered by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) umbrella.



### **Only exclusion in South Asia:**

- In an annex tagged with the Joint Communiqué of the Leaders' Roundtable of the BRF, which concluded in Beijing on Saturday, the Chinese Foreign Ministry website has not listed the BCIM as a project covered by the BRI the giant connectivity initiative spearheaded by China to revive the ancient Silk Road across Eurasia and Africa.
- Instead, South Asia is covered by three major undertakings the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC); the Nepal-China Trans-Himalayan Multi-dimensional Connectivity Network, including Nepal-China cross-border railway; and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

### **India's non-participation:**

- Citing "sovereignty" concerns, India, for the second time, did not participate in the BRF, as the CPEC passes through Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK).
- The 2,800-km BCIM corridor proposes to link **Kunming in China's Yunnan province with Kolkata, passing through nodes such as Mandalay in Myanmar and Dhaka in Bangladesh before heading to Kolkata.**
- Significantly, a report titled, "The Belt and Road Initiative Progress, Contributions and Prospects," released by the Leading Group for Promoting the Belt and Road Initiative on April 22, did list the BCIM as a BRI project.
- Last September, the BRI had got a high-octane boost when Myanmar inked an agreement with China to establish the CMEC.
- The 1,700-km corridor provides China yet another node to access the Indian Ocean.
- **The CMEC will run from Yunnan Province of China to Mandalay in Central Myanmar.** From there it will head towards Yangon, before terminating at the Kyaukpyu Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in the Bay of Bengal.

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**Cyclone Fani won't hit TN's coast**

## Why in news?

Cyclone Fani will not hit the Tamil Nadu coast, said officials of the India Meteorological Department.

### Minor respite from heat:

- As far as Chennai is concerned, the residents may get minor respite from the heat as there could be some mild showers for a day or two this week.
- While the maximum will be around 36 degree Celsius, the minimum temperature is likely to be 28 degree Celsius.
- The storm now lies about 910 km off the coast and it is likely to bring in only moderate rains to some parts of northern Tamil Nadu.

### Change of direction:

- The cyclone may get as close as 300 km off the Tamil Nadu coast on April 30 and after that, there may occur a change of direction too, officials said.
- Cyclone Fani is likely to turn into a '**severe cyclonic storm**'.

### Fishermen on alert:

- Fishermen are advised not to venture into the sea from April 29 to May 1. Also, fishermen in deep sea have been asked to return at the earliest.

