



# PIB, THE HINDU Newspaper and Editorial

## Current Affairs

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### U.S. new points-based green card system

#### Why in news?

U.S. President Donald Trump announced a proposal that will include significant changes to the way green cards are allocated, by dramatically reducing the number of **family-based green cards** and **moving towards a points-based ("merit-based") system** that will reward, among other factors, education, skills and English language proficiency.

One who gets green card becomes a **Lawful permanent resident**, also known as legal permanent resident, and informally known as green card holder, is an immigrant under the Immigration and Nationality Act, with rights, benefits, and privileges to reside in the United States permanently.

#### New System:

- The plan, which the President outlined at a Rose Garden gathering, with senior administration officials and influential Hill Republicans in attendance, sought to boost border security and tighten asylum procedures.
- Mr. Trump's new plan, details of which had already been reported widely in the U.S. media before the announcement, **will dramatically increase the number of green cards** that are given through the skills route versus the family-based route.
- However, the overall number of green cards, just over 1.1 million in 2017, will remain the same.
- Currently about 12% of those receiving green cards entered the U.S. based on **skill-based visas (such as the H1B)**, while some 66% are

family-based green cards. The new proposal will increase skills-based green cards to 57%.

- Points will be awarded to applicants based on their education, work experience, age (more points for younger workers), English language ability etc.
- New immigrants will have to show that they can financially support themselves and will need to pass a civics exam.

### **Build America visa:**

- Mr Trump also announced that there would be a new “Build America” visa details of which were not provided yet.
- His Rose Garden speech made references to foreign workers displacing low income Americans’ jobs and highly valuable graduates leaving America to start companies in their own countries because they could not get a visa in America.
- People given green cards on humanitarian and diversity grounds will now only constitute 10% of all green card recipients, according to a handout given to the press at the end of the Rose Garden event.
- Currently, the diversity lottery offers 50,000 green cards to under-represented groups each year.

### **Impact on Indian emigrants:**

- The proposals, if they eventually turn into law, are likely to have a significant impact on Indians who interact with the U.S. immigration system.
- **A large majority (over 70%) of H1B visas, for skilled workers, went to Indians in fiscal year 2018.**
- Many of these are eventually converted to green cards. Indian residents getting green cards have been in the range of 57,000-62,000 in the 2015-2017 period.
- However, it is far from clear that a shift towards a points-based system will make the **prospects of Indian skilled migrants wanting to settle in the U.S. easier**, as bringing family members over, especially **elderly parents, may get more complicated**.
- If Trump's plan became law, millions of U.S. citizens and permanent residents including those who first arrived as H-1B workers would no longer be able live in America with their parents and children.
- But this has no chance of becoming law it's just a cynical PR move that

pays lip service to high-skill immigration even as the Trump administration is systematically dismantling high-skill immigration with every tool at its disposal.

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## **Iran, India discuss visa extension**

### **Why in news?**

Two days after the visit of Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, India held the 11th Consular Committee Meeting with Iran which dealt with smoothing visa and legal matters essential for bilateral ties.

### **Agreement on Mutual Legal Assistance:**

- Both sides discussed issues of mutual interest, including early conclusion of **Agreement on Mutual Legal Assistance on civil and commercial matters**, extending longer duration of e-Visa for each other's' nationals on reciprocity and visa facilitation for greater people-to-people contact," a press release issued by the External Affairs Ministry said.
- Iran at present provides visa-on-arrival to Indian travellers which is given as a paper visa. Iranian visas are also given to Indians online and through missions.
- Joint Secretary in charge of consular affairs Amit Narang from India and Ali Asghar Mohammadi, Director General of Consular Affairs of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, led the two delegations at the talks here.

### **Travel concerns:**

- Iran has been conducting talks with various countries for bilateral visa arrangements to help facilitate smooth travel as the country is facing U.S. government-backed international sanctions that can potentially affect the free movement of business travellers.
- India offers e-visa facilities to Iranian travellers. It is understood that **Iran wants longer duration e-visas from India.**

## **Balancing act:**

- Both sides went ahead with the talks, even as Saudi Arabia blamed Tehran for a drone attack on Saudi oil installations on May 14.
  - However, indicating a balancing act, India issued a statement on Thursday, “strongly” condemning the attack
  - India seemed to be carefully balancing its moves with the Gulf rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran, and issued a statement in support of Saudi concerns after talks with Iran.
  - We strongly condemn the drone attack on oil installations in Saudi Arabia. We reiterate our resolve to fight terrorism,” the official spokesperson said.
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## **Images of Iran missiles set off U.S. alert**

### **Why in news?**

The intelligence that caused the White House to escalate its warnings about a threat from Iran came from photographs of missiles on small boats in the Gulf that were put on board by Iranian paramilitary forces, three U.S. officials said.

### **Potential attacks:**

- Overhead imagery showed fully assembled missiles, stoking fears that the **Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps** would fire them at U.S. naval ships.
- Additional pieces of intelligence indicated the possibility of potential attacks, on U.S. troops in Iraq, by militias having Iranian connections.

### **Threat perception:**

- But just how alarmed the Trump administration should be over the new intelligence is a subject of fierce debate among the White House, the Pentagon, the CIA and America’s allies.
- The photographs presented a different kind of threat than previously

seen from Iran, said the three officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

- Taken with the other intelligence, they could indicate that Iran is preparing to attack U.S. forces.
- That is the view of John Bolton, President Donald Trump's hard-line National Security Adviser, and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.
- But other officials including Europeans, Iraqis, members of both parties in Congress and some senior officials within the Trump administration said Iran's moves might mostly be defensive against what Tehran believes are provocative acts by Washington.
- Either way, the questions about the underlying intelligence, and complaints by lawmakers that they had not been briefed on it, reflect the deep mistrust of Mr. Trump's national security team.

### **Evacuation of Embassy:**

- The State Department ordered the partial evacuation of the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad and a consulate in Iraqi Kurdistan, a move that one senior U.S. official said was an overreaction to the intelligence and could possibly do more to endanger diplomats than to keep them safe.
- Speaker Nancy Pelosi, in a closed-door meeting of House Democrats, criticised the administration's lack of transparency on the intelligence, according to a Democratic aide. She also said that the administration must consult Congress before taking any action.

### **Intelligence asymmetry:**

- Intelligence officials were set to meet with senior congressional leaders for a briefing on the new intelligence about Iran.
- As military officials struggled to show that the threat from Iran was growing, intelligence officials declassified a photograph of one of the **small boats, called dhows**, carrying what was described as a functional Iranian missile.
- The Pentagon has not released the photograph. On its own, two U.S. officials said, the photograph was not compelling enough to convince the American public and lawmakers, nor foreign allies, of the new Iranian threat.
- The other photographs, which remain classified, show the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps loading missiles onto the boats in several

different Iranian ports, the two officials said. It is believed the boats are under the Revolutionary Guards's control.

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## **GDP numbers suggest high growth in medium term**

### **Why in news?**

The 15th Finance Commission said that India's GDP numbers suggest a continued high growth trend in the medium term even though they have fluctuated in the last few years.

### **Panel Observations:**

- The Finance Commission held consultations with senior officials of the Ministry of Finance on the overall economic situation and key economic variables," the Commission said in a statement.
- These discussions are credible to the ongoing work of the Commission to reach an appropriate conclusion on both the **vertical and the horizontal devolution**.
- The Commission observed that the GDP numbers have somewhat fluctuated within the overall global trend, which suggests continued high growth trend over the medium term.
- The Commission also made note of the revenue projections and said that although the **direct tax collections and projections are healthy**, the ones **for indirect tax have been fluctuating and need to stabilise in a stronger position**.

### **Rationalising schemes:**

- The Commission and the Ministry also spoke about the expenditure side and how to rationalise the Centrally-sponsored schemes.
- The 15th Finance Commission has been holding detailed discussions with the Finance Ministry over the last few months to discuss the **consequences of the Seventh Pay Commission and the UjwalDiscom Assurance Yojana (UDAY)** on financial positions of the States.



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## **RBI mandates risk officers for NBFCs**

### **Why in news?**

The RBI has asked all **shadow banks** with a size of over Rs. 5,000 crore to appoint chief risk officers (CROs) with clearly specified roles and responsibilities.

### **RBI order:**

- The CRO shall be a senior official in the hierarchy of an NBFC [non-banking finance company] and shall possess adequate professional qualification/ experience in the area of risk management," the RBI said, adding that the CRO should be appointed for a fixed tenure with the approval of the board.
- Removal or transfer will need the board's approval and has to be reported to the regulator.
- The CRO shall have direct reporting lines to the MD & CEO/ Risk Management Committee (RMC) of the Board.
- In case the CRO reports to the MD & CEO, the RMC/ Board shall meet the CRO without the presence of the MD & CEO, at least on a quarterly basis," the RBI added.

## **Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement**



### **Foundational Agreements:**

1. **General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA):**

General Security of Military Information Agreements (GSOMIA) is one of the four foundational agreements that the U.S. signs with allies and close partners to **facilitate interoperability between militaries and sale of high-end technology**. India had signed the GSOMIA in 2002. It allows the sharing of classified information from the U.S. government and American companies with the Government of India and Defence Public Sector Undertakings (DPSU) but not with Indian private companies.

2. **The Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA):** In August 2016, both countries had signed the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) that **lays down the guidelines for reciprocal use of each other's military facilities**.

3. **Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geo-spatial Cooperation (BECA):** The third 'foundational' agreement, Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) **is still under negotiations**.

4. **Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA):** Known by its acronym COMCASA, the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement provides the **legal mechanism to allow for exchange of cyber communications, surveillance data, transfer of communication equipment and setting up secure communication channels**. By signing the COMCASA in 2018 with the US will help to improve India's defence preparedness. India also announced that India and the US will hold their first ever joint tri-services exercises off the eastern coast of India in 2019.

### **Foundational agreement:**

- Adm. Richardson said the foundational agreement, Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA), which India signed last year would enable exchange of information on such threats.
- We can constantly share information that we have. That will help in situational awareness in fighting terror," he said.
- He was addressing a teleconference from Singapore on the sidelines of the three-day Asia-Pacific naval and maritime event, **International Maritime Defence Exhibition (IMDEX)**.
- With COMCASA, **India has signed three of the four foundational agreements with the U.S.**, and discussions are under way on the final one, Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geo-spatial Cooperation (BECA).
- COMCASA allows India to procure **specialised equipment for encrypted communications from the U.S. origin military**



platforms.

### **Indian warships:**

- Two warships, INS Kolkata and INS Shakti, are also participating in IMDEX as also several Indian engineering and ship-building firms, including the Larsen & Toubro and the BrahMos aerospace corporation.
  - After IMDEX, the Indian ships along with a Navy P-8I long range maritime surveillance aircraft will participate in the 26th edition of the **Singapore India Maritime Bilateral Exercise (SIMBEX)** scheduled from May 16 to 22.
  - SIMBEX is the longest uninterrupted naval exercise that India has with any other country, the Navy said.
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## **India gives 2 attack copters to Afghanistan**

### **Why in news?**

India handed over two **Mi-24 attack** helicopters to Afghanistan.

### **Help in combating the terrorism:**

- These helicopters are a replacement for the four attack helicopters gifted by India to Afghanistan in 2015.
  - The Mi-24 helicopters shall boost the capability of the Afghan Air Force (AAF) and enhance the effectiveness of the Afghan National Defence and Security Force in combating the scourge of terrorism.
  - The helicopters were formally handed over by Indian Ambassador Vinay Kumar to the Minister of National Defence of Afghanistan, Asadullah Khalid, at the Kabul Air Force base. The helicopters were purchased from Belarus, Mr. Khalid said in a tweet. "Two more will be supplied to the AAF," he said.
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## **Crop insurance fail**

### **Why in news?**

Out of Rs. 1,400 crores earmarked annually for the north-eastern States under the Centre's flagship **Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana**, only Rs. 8 crore or just over half a per cent was actually spent last year, according to senior Agriculture Ministry officials. Four north-eastern States — Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram are not covered under the scheme at all. In fact, farmers in seven States and four Union Territories nationwide will not be covered by the scheme in this kharif or summer season, for which sowing begins next month.

### **Lack of interest:**

#### **Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana:**

The Union Cabinet in 2016 has approved the 'Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana' - a path breaking scheme for farmers' welfare.

#### **The highlights of this scheme are as under:**

- There will be a **uniform premium** of only 2% to be paid by farmers for all Kharif crops and 1.5% for all Rabi crops. In case of annual commercial and horticultural crops, the premium to be paid by farmers will be only 5%.
- The **premium rates to be paid by farmers are very low** and balance premium will be paid by the Government to provide full insured amount to the farmers against crop loss on account of natural calamities.
- There **is no upper limit on Government subsidy**. Even if balance premium is 90%, it will be borne by the Government.
- Earlier, there was a provision of capping the premium rate which resulted in low claims being paid to farmers.
- This capping was done to limit Government outgo on the premium subsidy. This capping has now been removed and farmers will get claim against full sum insured without any reduction.
- The **use of technology** will be encouraged to a great extent. Smart phones will be used to capture and upload data of crop cutting to reduce the delays in claim payment to farmers.
- Remote sensing will be used to reduce the number of crops cutting experiments.
- The new Crop Insurance Scheme is in line with **One Nation - One Scheme** theme. It incorporates the best features of all previous schemes and at the same time, all previous shortcomings/weaknesses have been removed.

- Some large States like **Bihar and West Bengal have withdrawn**

**from PMFBY** to set up their own State-level schemes and Punjab has never participated in the scheme, while UTs like Delhi and Chandigarh are largely urban spaces.

- However, States in the Northeast, as well as the Union Territory of Daman and Diu, face challenges such as the **lack of interest by insurance companies** and the lack of State budgetary resources to pay their share of the premium, say officials.
- The Centre is now making it compulsory for insurance companies to bid for these States as well.
- This lack of coverage has left thousands of maize farmers devastated by losses from the fall armyworm pest there without any hope of insurance.
- Although the north-eastern States have only 2.5% of the country's cultivable area, 10% of the budget for PMFBY and RWBCIS [Restructured Weather Based Crop Insurance Scheme] is earmarked for them. But all the funds are lapsed.
- While Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland have never been covered under the scheme, which was launched with much fanfare in 2016, the scheme was implemented in Mizoram and Manipur only in the initial season.

### **Major Issues:**

- Insurance companies have been reluctant to bid for these States, as the administrative costs are high. There are no proper land records.
- Historic yield data is not available for these States, particularly at the gram panchayat and block level.
- It is difficult to conduct CCEs [crop-cutting experiments] needed for many of the horticulture crops," said the official.
- Insurance companies are also not interested because the coverage is so limited. There are low number of loanee farmers in the Northeast, except in Assam," added the official.
- Lack of forecasting infrastructure has also hampered the penetration of the weather-based insurance scheme in these states.
- The Centre also argues that several State governments are not sufficiently interested in promoting the scheme.

## **Scorching heat forcing animals out of Seshachalam biosphere**

### **Why in news?**

With the summer heat touching 45 degree Celsius, the wild animals in the Seshachalam biosphere, which is spread over Chittoor and Kadapa districts, are facing a torrid time.

### **Run for water:**

- The phenomenon, which is preceded by deficit rainfall in the region, is forcing the animals to enter the forest fringe villages to quench their thirst.
- The intensity of heat this year is said to be the highest in the biosphere. As a result, **even shy and critically endangered species such as the pangolin and the slender loris** (devangapilli) are venturing out of their habitat.
- According to information, a combing party of the **Red Sanders** Anti-Smuggling Task Force spotted an emaciated slender loris close to the Kalyani Dam a few days ago.
- Before it could be rescued, the animal slid down a tree and vanished into the bushes.

### Global warming:

- In another incident, a forest official found the species close to a human habitation near the Talakona forests.
- It's a surprise that this nocturnal animal, a rare species to be found close to humans, is seen loitering in a dried-up water body in broad daylight," he said.
- Generally found clinging to the top tree branches and moving on the canopy, these animals have become a victim of steady signs of global warming in the biosphere.
- In search of water, they are forced to slide down the trees.
- The species is considered "critically endangered" in forest parlance, and is **poached for its eyeballs and others body parts**, which are believed to have healing power for multiple human health debilities.
- The pangolin is another species that has fallen on hard times in the biosphere, hit by paucity of food and water sources.
- The oppressive heat has not only led to vanishing of water in the ditches, ponds and streams but also suppressed the moisture content in the soil.
- The **anteater** is finding it difficult to gather food, mostly worms, insects, flies, bees and ants.
- Failure of rains for over three years led to the earth developing clods in several parts of the biosphere.
- These conditions would generally prevent the small creatures from coming out of the earth surface.
- Present in small number, the pangolin is not a widely seen animal in

the region.

- However, morning walkers in the forest fringe area in Tirupati have spotted the animal moving feebly towards a water tap, several metres away from the forest.
- The species is also found close to human habitations surrounding the biosphere.
- According to the forest officials, this species is the **most smuggled one from India for its scales**, which are believed to be in great demand in Vietnam and several South-East Asian nations.

### **Dig at officials:**

- Nature lovers deplore that no serious efforts are being taken by the forest officials to provide succour to the animals during summer.
  - Most of the saucer pits and ditches inside the forest are found empty while the summer is at its peak, they lament.
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## **XPRIZE award for child literacy**

### **Why in news?**

A California company founded by game-developer parents who wanted to help their special-needs son is sharing a \$10 million (Rs. 70 crore) award with a London-based educational organisation for creating **programmes to train children how to teach themselves to read**.

### **The Winners:**

- Kitkit School from the U.S. and onebillion from the U.K. were declared co-winners of the XPRIZE for global learning at a presentation. A team from Bengaluru was among the five finalists.
- Nearly 200 teams from 40 countries entered the competition, jumping at the chance to become the latest winner of an XPRIZE, a coveted international award funded by future-looking entrepreneurs, billionaires and philanthropists who have banded together with the goal of making the world a better place through technology.



- Elon Musk announced the winners honouring all the finalists. The total XPRIZE For Global Learning, funded by Mr. Musk, was worth \$15 million, with each finalist getting \$1 million just for making it to the final round. The winners additionally receive \$5 million each.
- The goal was to develop open-sourced software, put it on tablets donated by Google and have thousands of children in 170 remote villages in Tanzania test it.
- The five finalists, which also included teams from New York, Pittsburgh and Bengaluru, spent 15 months refining the software.
- They had to develop programmes filled with games that could grab children's attention and then, like teachers do, use drawings, letters, numbers and sounds to teach them to teach themselves to read, write and do arithmetic.

### Games and stories:

- For instance, the Chimple team from Bengaluru created a learning platform aimed at encouraging children to learn reading, writing and mathematics on a tablet through more than 60 games and 70 stories.
- When testing began, XPRIZE officials said only 2% of the children could read as much as a sentence in their native Swahili.
- Three-quarters had never attended school and many had to be shown how to swipe their finger across a tablet's screen just to power it up. But 15 months later, 30% of the children had acquired basic reading skills.
- Representatives of both winning teams said the hardest part was developing software at their home bases, putting it on tablets and hoping the children would take to it and figure out how to use it.

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## **Chinese probe reveals secrets of the moon**

### **Why in news?**

Scientists have said they could be a step closer to solving the **riddle behind the Moon's formation**, unveiling the most detailed survey yet of the far side of Earth's satellite.

## Chang'e-4:

- In January, the Chinese spacecraft Chang'e-4 named after the moon goddess in Chinese mythology became the first ever craft to touch down on the far side of the lunar surface.
- The moon is believed to have gone through a phase during its formation when it was partially or entirely composed of molten rock.
- As it cooled, **denser minerals sank to the bottom of the magma-ocean**, while lighter materials gathered near the surface to form its mantle.
- The team landed its probe in the **Von Karmen Crater in the Aitken Basin at the Moon's south pole** — home to one of the largest impact craters known in the solar system.
- They detected materials such as **olivine and low-calcium pyroxene** that are rare elsewhere on the surface.
- Authors of the study, which was published in the journal Nature, suggest that these materials were ejected from the Moon's upper mantle when it was struck by a meteor.

## Magma ocean theory:

- Our results support the lunar magma ocean theory, and demonstrate that the magma ocean hypothesis can be used to describe the early evolution history of the moon," said Chunlai Li from the Chinese Academy of Sciences.
  - Unlike the **near side of the moon that always faces the Earth** and offers many flat areas to touch down on, the far side is mountainous and rugged.
  - The United States, Russia and China have all landed probes on the near side of the moon, though neither NASA's Apollo missions nor the Soviet Union's probes have ever returned samples of the lunar mantle.
  - Writing in a linked comment piece, Patrick Pinet, from France's L'Institut de Recherche en Astrophysique et Planetologie, said the findings were "thrilling". The results "might also affect our understanding of the formation and evolution of planetary interiors," he said.
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## **Teen pregnancies linked to poor nutrition in babies**

### **Why in news?**

Teen pregnancies contribute to under-nutrition in babies, according to a study that analysed data from India and appeared in The Lancet Child and Adolescent Health.

### **Findings of the study:**

- The paper recommends policies and programmes to delay marriage, especially in districts where there is a higher prevalence of child marriage.
- The study examined data for over 60,000 women from the **National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4)** to study the extent to which teenage pregnancy contributes to under-nutrition among children. Of these, 14,107 women first gave birth during adolescence; 31,475 during young adulthood, and 14,514 during adulthood.
- According to the study, **children born to adolescent mothers (10-19 years) were 5 percentage points more likely to be stunted** (shorter for their age) than those born to young adults (20-24 years) and 11 percentage points more stunted than children born to adult mothers.
- Children born to adolescent mothers also had 10 percentage points higher prevalence of low weight as compared to those born to adult mothers.
- The study said that **lower education levels among adolescent mothers had the strongest impact on stunting levels** and accounted for 18% of the difference, followed by socioeconomic status which contributed to 13% of the difference in a child's height for age.
- Teen mothers were also likely to be underweight, exacerbating the stunting among children.
- The research also highlights that while **adolescent pregnancy is more likely to occur in high poverty contexts**, it could trap mothers in an unending cycle of poverty as "women who bear children early are more likely to discontinue education and, thus, have lower earning potential."



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