



# PIB, THE HINDU Newspaper and Editorial

## Current Affairs

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### India cuts off UN panel after J&K report

#### Why in news?

Reacting angrily to a submission from the **Geneva-based Human Rights Council** (HRC) on alleged violations in Jammu and Kashmir, India has informed the United Nations body that it will **no longer entertain any communication** with the HRC's Special Rapporteurs on its report.

#### Queries on action taken:

- The report from the UN body came at the same time as a report from two NGOs in Jammu and Kashmir on alleged cases of torture, was released in Srinagar, which was endorsed by a former UN Special Rapporteur.
- The current Special Rapporteurs on Extrajudicial Executions, Torture, and Right to Health Agnes Callamard, Dainius Puras and Nils Melzer respectively had referred to a previous June 2018 report of the **Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights (OHCHR)** and written to the government in March 2019, asking about steps taken by New Delhi to address alleged human rights violations listed in the report.
- In addition, the Special Rapporteurs had listed “**13 cases of concern**” from the year 2018 alone in which “four children were among eight civilians killed by members of the security forces.”
- Rejecting all the claims, the Indian Permanent Mission to the United Nations in Geneva replied to the OHCHR on April 23, saying that “India does not intend to engage further with these mandate holders

or any other mandate holders on the issue,” whom it accused of “individual prejudice”.

**‘Clear bias’ alleged:**

- India had also rejected the OHCHR’s report on the “**Situation of Human Rights in Kashmir**” the first ever such report on J&K that came out in June 2018 and accused the High Commissioner of Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein of “clear bias” in bringing it out.
  - When asked, the MEA clarified that India’s stand on not engaging with the special rapporteurs was only for those wishing to refer to the OHCHR report.
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### **Third party motor insurance premium**

**Why in news?**

A day after polling concluded, insurance regulator IRDAI proposed an increase in third party (TP) motor insurance premium rates for various categories of automobiles from cars, two-wheelers and school buses to trucks.

**Increase in Premiums:**

- The upward revision proposed for cars is in excess of 14% for two-wheelers it is up to 21.11% and public goods carriers (trucks) over 11%. The increase recommended for school buses is 5.29% in basic rate and 5.34% per licensed passenger.
- However, there will be no change in the long-term premium rates for new cars and two-wheelers — such covers come for three years in the case of new cars and five years for new two-wheelers.
- By issuing an exposure draft for the current fiscal (2019-20), the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (IRDAI) put to rest any expectations on continuing with the existing premium rates.
- Usually, the new rates come into force on April 1.

- It is preceded by an exposure draft that is placed in the public domain seeking comments.
- The revision proposed in the draft generally becomes the final tariff.
- Third party motor insurance premium to get pricier as IRDAI revises rate card
- This year, in March-end, IRDAI had extended the validity of the 2018-19 rates, beyond March 31, until further notice. The present exposure draft is open for comments till May 29.
- The increase proposed for most classes of vehicles suggests that premiums have not been keeping pace with the cost of claims in the past and hence further price correction is required.

### **Scientific exercise:**

- The motor TP rates proposed were the result of a scientific exercise and have been arrived at by relying on actuarial methods and after considering premium and claims for a period of seven years.
  - In revising the rates, IRDAI has opted to maintain status quo for a few category of vehicles and also proposed a discount of **15% on the premium rates for electric private cars and electric two-wheelers.**
  - **AS** in the past few years, IRDAI had proposed third party motor rate increase on the basis of standard actuarial calculations.
  - The increase varies by the vehicle segment and reflects the growing cost of TP claims as experienced by the industry. Overall a positive development for the general insurance industry provided the actual rate increase is in line with the exposure draft.
  - It is encouraging to see IRDAI create a separate segment for school buses, which has had a favourable claims experience.
  - IRDAI says school buses are those registered in the name of the school and used only for transporting students to or from a school or on school-related trips.
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## **New Government should liberalise agriculture**

### **Why in news?**

The government that comes to power should focus on agriculture **by removing all restrictions** placed on the sector in terms of sale, purchase, and exports, former member of the Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council Surjit Bhalla said. He further said that the new government should reduce the cost of capital in the country to boost investment and growth.

### Observations:

- Every country that has conducted large scale reforms, has reformed agriculture first,” Mr. Bhalla said, speaking at a FICCI event.
- In India, the **Agricultural Produce Market Committee** (APMC) says that farmers can only sell in the mandis and need a licence to sell in the mandis.
- Mr. Bhalla said that there were powerful interest groups that ensured this system did not change, and also questioned whether the Minimum Support Price system was helping the poor farmers.
- There should be zero intervention in agriculture,” he said. Farmers should be allowed to buy, sell, and export whatever.
- Mr. Bhalla said that India’s potential economic growth rate was 8-8.5%, but several factors had meant that this had not been achieved.
- **India has the second highest corporate tax rate in the world.** Taxes paid by corporates as a proportion of their profits are 24% in India, compared to 15-16% in large economies around the world.

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## **Gold imports rise 54% to \$ 3.97 billion in April**

### **Why in news?**

Gold imports increased 54 per cent to USD 3.97 billion in April, widening the country’s trade deficit and fuelling worries about the current account deficit (CAD).

### **Trade statistics:**

- Imports of the precious metal stood at USD 2.58 billion in April 2018, according to data from the commerce ministry.
  - Increase in gold imports pushed the country's **trade deficit** to a five-month high of USD 15.33 billion in April.
  - The country's **current account deficit (CAD) widened to 2.5 per cent of GDP** in the third quarter of the last financial year from 2.1 per cent a year ago, primarily on account of a higher trade deficit, though the foreign exchange reserves continued to soar.
  - **CAD is the difference between outflow and inflow of foreign exchange.**
  - After recording a negative growth in imports in February, gold imports started registering double-digit growth. In March, it grew 31 per cent to USD 3.27 billion.
  - **India is the largest importer of gold**, which mainly caters to the demand of the jewellery industry.
  - In volume terms, the **country imports 800-900 tonnes of gold annually**. The imports dipped about 3 per cent in value terms to USD 32.8 billion during 2018-19.
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## **India, Pakistan to attend SCO meet**

### **Why in news?**

For the first time, since the Pulwama terror attack and the Balakot airstrikes, Indian and Pakistani Foreign Ministers will together attend a ministerial meeting under the **Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic, on May 21-22.**

### **Recent developments:**

- The meeting will be attended by External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj, along with the Foreign Ministers of SCO member states, including Pakistan.
- In keeping with the evolving developments, Shah Mahmood Qureshi, Pakistan's Foreign Minister told the media that career diplomat Moinul Haq will be the new High Commissioner of Pakistan to India.

- Pakistan had not appointed a new envoy since the tenure of the previous incumbent Sohail Mahmood ended in mid-April.
- At the meeting in Bishkek, Ms. Swaraj is expected to take up cross-border terror attacks from Pakistan and India's response to it including the Balakot airstrikes.
- This is also the first meeting since India successfully ensured a global blacklisting of Jaish-e-Mohammed head Masood Azhar. India had blamed JeM for being behind the Pulwama attack.
- The meeting is expected to discuss the latest attack by the Islamic State in Sri Lanka, which claimed at least 253 lives and injured hundreds.

### **The RATS:**

- The Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure of SCO has emerged in the last few years as an important platform **where terrorism and security-related problems are discussed** among member countries.
- India and Pakistan have participated in the multilateral military exercises.
- The meeting acquires significance as it comes in the backdrop of an expanding U.S.-China trade war and the energy shock to several of the member countries after the U.S. administration ended waiver for energy trade with Iran.
- The Ministry of External Affairs said in an official press release that the Foreign Minister-level meeting will review preparation for the **forthcoming SCO summit in Bishkek on June 13-14.**

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### **EC to take up issues raised by Lavasa**

#### **Why in news?**

The Election Commission is expected to take up issues pertaining to the model code of conduct (MCC) that were raised by Election Commissioner Ashok Lavasa after his dissenting opinions were not recorded in the orders passed on speeches by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and BJP president Amit Shah.



## **What are the issues?**

- Following news reports that Mr. Lavasa had recused himself from MCC-related matters, an EC spokesperson had said: “It needs to be clarified categorically and unambiguously that this is purely an internal matter of the EC and as such, any speculation, innuendos and insinuations in this regard should be eschewed. A meeting had already been scheduled on Tuesday, i.e. May 21, to discuss this and related matters.
  - Mr. Lavasa wrote thrice to Chief Election Commissioner Sunil Arora on the issue, following which he replied saying it would be discussed later as the Lok Sabha election was under way.
  - The Election Commissioner was also reminded of the current legal position that, in non-quasi-judicial matters, dissenting notes were not included in the orders
  - Mr. Arora had issued a statement saying: “At the last meeting of the Commission on May 14, it was unanimously decided that some groups shall be formed to deliberate the issues that arose in the conduct of Lok Sabha election, 2019, just as it was done after the 2014 election. Of the 13 issues and areas identified, model code of conduct is one of them.
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## **India unlikely to give additional seats to foreign airline**

### **Why in news?**

India is unlikely to grant additional seats to foreign carriers, over and above the numbers agreed to under bilateral pacts, even though Indian expatriates in some of these countries are facing the prospect of having to pay sharply steeper airfares during the peak travel season this year following the grounding of Jet Airways.

### **Offer for enhanced capacity:**

- It is reliably learnt that authorities in the UAE have written to the Indian government requesting additional capacity for its Dubai-based

airlines Emirates and FlyDubai.

- Qatar Airways, too, announced last week that it had approached Indian authorities for more seats on high volume routes such as Delhi, Mumbai and Bengaluru on a temporary basis.

### **Indian carriers:**

- These rights are earmarked for Indian carriers as per our bilateral agreements with various countries,” said Pradeep Singh Kharola, Secretary, Ministry of Civil Aviation, when asked if foreign carriers would be allocated extra traffic rights.
- Emirates made an offer to temporarily enhance capacity but I believe Civil Aviation Ministry will give preference to domestic carriers,” a senior official of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), who declined to be identified, confirmed.
- Government officials, however, are worried that the failure to ramp up capacity on routes to West Asia will impact not just tourists, but also Indian workers based there.
- It is crucial to do it [raise capacity] before the holiday season because it really impacts low income expatriates,” the MEA official added.
- For example, an economy airfare for a Mumbai-Dubai flight on May 18 had risen to as much as Rs. 22,913 when booked 30 days before departure. This was about three times the fare that had been available for the same travel period last year.
- The requests have been made so that the demand between the two countries could be satisfied to ensure fares don’t go out of control, said an airline executive.

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## **Kilogram update to spur revision of textbooks**

### **Why in news?**

With the definition of the ‘kilogram’ getting a global, technical makeover, textbooks from those used in schools to ones recommended by engineering colleges in India are set to undergo an update.



## New Parameters:

- Until Monday, the kilogram derived its provenance from the **weight of a block of a platinum-iridium alloy** housed at the **International Bureau of Weights and Measures in France**.
  - All other prototypes that served as national reference standards, including the one at **New Delhi's CSIR-National Physical Laboratory (NPL)**, were calibrated to it. No longer.
  - On May 20, the kilogram joined other standard units of measure such as the second, metre, ampere, Kelvin, mole and candela that would **no longer be defined by physical objects**.
  - **The measures are all now defined on the basis of unchanging universal, physics constants.**
  - The kilogram now hinges on the **definition of the Planck Constant**, a constant of nature that relates to how matter releases energy.
  - **The CSIR-NPL, which is India's official reference keeper of units of measurements**, released a set of recommendations requiring that school textbooks, engineering-education books, and course curriculum update the definition of the kilogram.
  - The institute is also in the process of making its own '**Kibble Balance**', a device that was used to measure the Planck Constant and thereby reboot the kilogram.
  - NPL has already written to the NCERT and the AICTE to update the curriculum.
  - A Kibble Balance capable of measuring at least a kilogram takes about Rs. 50 crores to manufacture. So, it's still a work in progress.
  - An updated kilogram doesn't mean that weights everywhere will be thrown off balance.
  - For everyday measurements, consumers wanting to calibrate their instruments whether it's for high-precision drug manufacturing or retail weighing machines will continue doing it the same way.
  - The National Physical Laboratory itself will be relying on the kilogram maintained in the U.S.-based National Institutes of Standards and Technology to calibrate its one-kilogram weight.
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**EVM count along with postal votes**

## Why in news?

The Election Commission has issued directions to the Chief Electoral Officers that the EVM and postal ballot counting can be done simultaneously. Once the EVM counting is completed, the VVPAT slips counting can start.

### EC Directions:

- The EC said that with the introduction of the **electronically transmitted postal ballot system (ETPBS)** and casting of postal ballot by election duty staff at the facilitation centre, the number of postal ballot papers for counting has gone up considerably.
- Further, with the requirement of mandatory QR code reading for the ETPBS, the postal ballot counting will now require more time.
- Moreover, there is a **mandatory VVPAT slips count of five polling stations per Assembly segment** in addition to the cases of VVPAT count that may be required on account of other reasons, such as control units not being cleared after mock poll, the control units not displaying the results at the time of counting, etc.," the order said.

### Margin of victory:

- Where the margin of victory is less than the number of postal ballot papers rejected as invalid at the time of counting, all the rejected postal ballot papers will be mandatorily reverified by the returning officer before the declaration of result, the EC said.
- Whenever such reverification is done, the entire proceedings should be video-graphed as per the instruction" it said.

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## **Don't want war, but prepared to respond: Saudi**

## Why in news?

Saudi Arabia said that it wanted to avert war in the region but stood ready to respond with "all strength" following last week's attacks on

Saudi oil assets, telling Iran that the ball was now in its court.

### **Accusations:**

- Riyadh has accused Tehran of ordering Tuesday's drone strikes on two oil pumping stations in the kingdom, claimed by Yemen's Iran-aligned Houthi group.
- Two days earlier, four vessels, including two Saudi oil tankers, were sabotaged off the coast of the United Arab Emirates.

### **Security patrols:**

- In response, countries of the **Gulf Cooperation Council** (GCC) began "enhanced security patrols" in the international waters of the Arabian Gulf area on Saturday, the U.S. Navy's Bahrain-based Fifth Fleet said
- Iran has denied involvement in either operation, which come as Washington and the Islamic Republic spar over sanctions and the U.S. military presence in the region, raising concerns about a potential U.S.-Iran conflict.
- The kingdom of Saudi Arabia does not want a war in the region nor does it seek that," Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Adel al-Jubeir told a news conference.
- It will do what it can to prevent this war and at the same time it reaffirms that in the event the other side chooses war, the kingdom will respond with all force and determination, and it will defend itself and its interests."
- Saudi Arabia's King Salman invited Gulf and Arab leaders to convene emergency summits in Mecca on May 30 to discuss implications of the attacks.
- A Norwegian insurers' report seen by Reuters said Iran's Revolutionary Guards were "highly likely" to have facilitated the attack on vessels near the UAE's Fujairah emirate, a main bunkering hub lying just outside the **Strait of Hormuz**.
- Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif has dismissed the possibility of war erupting, saying Tehran did not want conflict and no country had the "illusion it can confront Iran.

### **Not pursuing war: Iran**

- This stance was echoed by the head of Iran's elite Revolutionary Guards. We are not pursuing war but we are also not afraid of war," Major General Hossein Salami said
  - Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman discussed regional developments, including efforts to strengthen security and stability, in a phone call with U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, the Saudi Media Ministry tweeted.
  - We want peace and stability in the region but we will not sit on our hands in light of the continuing Iranian attack," Mr. Jubeir said.
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## **As trade war rages, China's sway over the U.S. fades**

### **Why in news?**

China usually gets its way. In Washington, on Wall Street and in corporate boardrooms, Beijing has used the country's size and promise for decades to quell opposition and reward those who helped its rise.

### **Tougher stance:**

- Those days may be coming to an end. As it struggles with President Donald Trump's trade war, a maturing and debt-laden China is discovering that it no longer has the same pull. Members of both political parties in the U.S. favour a tougher stance against Beijing.
- China could still prevail on the trade war's major issues. But the conflict's length and severity reflect the growing perception that the country no longer holds the promise that once enthralled politicians and businesses in the U.S
- Many U.S. companies with large, profitable businesses in China do not want to pay expensive tariffs and worry that the U.S. is antagonising the Chinese public, said Ker Gibbs, the president of the American Chamber of Commerce in Shanghai.
- But many of the same businesses also chafe at the numerous restrictions that China has long maintained on foreign companies.
- **China's economic slowdown**, which could hinder growth globally, is a major reason its influence has ebbed. But there are other factors.

The country's heavy debts limit its options.

- If it retaliates against the U.S. sharply by devaluing its currency or shutting factories crucial to global supply chains, the moves could ricochet and hurt its own newfound wealth.
- Foreign businesses have found it less appealing to make or sell their products in China over the last several years because of heavy restrictions on foreign businesses, stronger local competitors and rising costs. Mr. Trump's tariffs last year gave many businesses a final reason to look elsewhere.

### **Anywhere but China:**

- Call it the ABC supply chain, as in "anywhere but China. Kelly A. Kramer, the chief financial officer of Cisco, the big telecom equipment supplier, told investors that the company had "greatly, greatly reduced" its exposure to China because of the tariffs.
- Morey, a company near Chicago that makes rugged electronics for bulldozers and other outdoor equipment, reluctantly paid more for printed circuit boards made in China after Mr. Trump imposed 10% tariffs on \$200 billion a year in Chinese imports.
- With those tariffs now rising to 25%, Morey has begun talking to suppliers in Taiwan, South Korea and Singapore.

### **Carrot and Stick Policy:**

- China has long used its tremendous size and growth potential as both carrot and stick. Companies that played by its rules could gain access to a market of more than 1 billion people who were becoming increasingly affluent. Companies that complained could be left out.
- It worked. GM and other companies caved in to demands like being forced to take on local joint venture partners, knowing that they were training future competitors. General Electric sold one complete diesel locomotive from Erie, Pennsylvania, to China, then taught the Chinese to build their own.
- China remains vital to many businesses, but the dynamic has shifted. Beijing has fewer ways to strike back against the U.S. now.
- Its tremendous success in nurturing its homegrown industries, which has helped China's economy rise up the value chain, has reduced its imports of U.S. goods.
- China has been so effective at squeezing manufactured imports out of



its market that it has really limited its options to retaliate,” said Brad Setser, a Treasury official in the Obama administration who is now an economist at the Council on Foreign Relations.

- The dilemma for China is that the longer the trade war lasts, the more companies may decide to invest elsewhere.
  - For now, domestic politics seem more important in China, with the leadership and the public reacting angrily to what is portrayed as peremptory American demands.
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## **Odisha plans to restore coastal green cover**

### **Why in news?**

The Odisha government has chalked out a Rs. 200-crore, five-year plan to restore the green cover lost due to Cyclone Fani in the coastal region.

### **Five-year action plan:**

- Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik has directed the Forest Department to implement the ‘Five-year action plan on revival of coastal shelter belt and afforestation programme’ on a mission mode.
- The government would undertake the afforestation programme on 8,000 hectares over a five-year period. While 65 lakh saplings were distributed in 2018-19 in Fani-affected districts, it would be doubled to 1.3 crore in 2019-20.
- Under an urban tree plantation programme, five lakh saplings would be planted in five years. Also, about 30,000 uprooted trees would be replanted and restored in suitable places. The government targets to plant fruit-bearing plants in 12,000 hectares which would help revive the livelihood of many cyclone-affected people.
- Of the 1.3 crore saplings, the Forest Department will plant 80 lakh, while 50 lakh will be planted by different educational institutions, industrial and private areas.

### **Replanting large trees:**

- In order to restore comparatively large trees, an action plan has been



prepared. These will be planted in the Balukhanda reserve forest area, and in different parks and roads of Cuttack, Puri and Bhubaneswar urban areas. All modern techniques will be adopted," government sources said.

- Different varieties of cyclone-resistant trees such as Neem, Karanja, Baula, Jamu, Korila, Chatian, Khaira, Arjun, Mahyoni, Ashok, Harida, Bahada, Shisu, Katha Champa and Dimiri will be planted.
  - Nearly 22 lakh trees have been destroyed causing a damage of Rs. 537 crore when Cyclone Fani hit the State.
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## **RISAT-2B**

### **Why in news?**

RISAT-2B, the satellite due to be launched before dawn on May 22 from Sriharikota, will mark the resumption of a vital ring of Indian all-seeing radar imaging satellites after seven years.

### **Comprehensive vigil:**

- At least a half-dozen could be foreseen in the near future, mainly to add to the reconnaissance capability from about 500 km in space. A constellation of such space-based radars means a comprehensive vigil over the country.
- In a recent conversation, Indian Space Research Organisation Chairman K. Sivan had said many RISATs were planned
- RISAT-2B is to be followed by RISAT-2BR1, 2BR2, RISAT-1A, 1B, 2A and so on.
- If ISRO orbited its first two radar satellites in 2009 and 2012, it plans to deploy four or five of them in 2019 alone.
- When it is cloudy or dark, 'regular' remote-sensing or optical imaging satellites which work like a light-dependent camera cannot perceive hidden or surreptitious objects on the ground.

### **synthetic aperture radar:**

- Satellites that are equipped with an active sensor, the **synthetic aperture radar** (SAR), can sense or 'observe' Earth in a special way from space day and night, rain or cloud.
- This all-weather seeing feature is what makes them special for security forces and disaster relief agencies.
- Radar imaging satellites are at a premium in the Earth observation scene," said Mukund Rao, former Deputy Director of Earth Observation Systems at ISRO and now professor at the National Institute for Advanced Studies, Bengaluru.
- Worldwide, quite a few of them are planned to be launched. There is also a large availability of radar images data in the market.

### **Complex task:**

- A radar imaging satellite is complex to assemble.
- Interpreting its images is equally complex. ISRO took almost 10 years to realise RISAT-1, said another expert who did not wish to be named. It sends much heavier data than plain remote sensing satellites.
- India has almost kept pace with the world with radar sats. Radar imaging satellites pick up structures, new bunkers very well, and sometimes help to count them, too.
- In India we also use radar imaging for crop estimation because our main crop growing season of kharif is in May-September when it rains and gets cloudy. We have used this data extensively for forestry, soil, land use, geology and during floods and cyclone.

