

### **Trump regime suspends security aid to Pakistan**

The U.S. said it was suspending most of its security assistance to Pakistan until it “takes decisive action against groups, including the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani Network.

- The announcements from the State and Defence Departments followed a public condemnation of Pakistan by President Donald Trump on January 1.
- The total amount in question could exceed a billion dollars, though no official figure was provided. The decision will delay, and perhaps eventually deny, pending payments to Islamabad.
- These include both payments under the State Department’s Foreign Military Financing and under the Coalition Support Fund, which involves reimbursement by Pentagon for Pakistan’s logistics support in the Afghanistan war.
- However, civilian assistance programmes are not included, and exceptions may be made on a case-by-case basis if they are determined to be critical to national security interests.

### **GDP growth seen slowing to 4-year low of 6.5% in 2017-18**

The Central Statistics Office (CSO) forecast that GDP growth in the current financial year ending March 31 will slow to a four-year low of 6.5%, from the provisional 7.1% pace seen in 2016-17, dragged down by deceleration in the agriculture and manufacturing sectors.

Gross Value Added (GVA) was also projected to expand by 6.1% in 2017-18, slowing from 6.6% in the preceding fiscal year, according to the first advance estimates of national income for 2017-18, released by the CSO.

- Within this, the GVA growth rate for ‘agriculture, forestry and fishing’ is expected to slow sharply to 2.1%, compared with the previous year’s 4.9% pace.
- Manufacturing sector growth has been forecast at 4.6% in 2017-18, compared with the 7.9% expansion provisionally estimated for 2016-17.

The CSO’s GVA full-year growth estimate of 6.1% compares with a 6.7% pace that the Reserve Bank of India had forecast at its December policy meeting.

### **Constitution Bench to look at adultery law**

The Supreme Court referred to a Constitution Bench a plea to decide if the pre-Independence provision of adultery in the Indian Penal Code, Section 497, treats a woman as a commodity owned by her husband and violates the constitutional concepts of gender equality and sensitivity.

Section 497 mandates that if a man has sexual intercourse with another’s wife without the husband’s “consent or connivance”, he is “guilty of the offence of adultery and shall be punished.”

The court had issued notice on December 8, 2017 on a petition filed by Joseph Shine

- The court observed in the order that the provision raised a question mark on social progress, outlook, gender equality and gender sensitivity.
- The Constitution Bench would likely consider whether Section 497 would treat the man as the adulterer and the married woman as always a victim.
- The larger Bench may also examine why the offence of adultery ceases the moment it is established that the husband connived or consented to the adulterous act.

So, is a married woman the “property” of her husband or a passive object without a mind of her own?

### **Come July, label mandatory for food certified as ‘organic’**

The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) has issued regulations that require food companies selling organic produce to get certified with one of the two authorities — the National Programme for Organic Production (NPOP) or the Participatory Guarantee System for India (PGS-India). Companies could also get a voluntary logo from the FSSAI that marked the produce as ‘organic.’

- Though NPOP and PGS-India have been in the certification business for some years, it was mostly a voluntary exercise.
- From July, any company that claims to sell organic food and not sticking to standards can be prosecuted.

For nearly two decades now, organic farming certification was done through a process of third party certification under the NPOP.

- It was run by the Ministry of Commerce and was used for certifying general exports. Nearly 24 agencies were authorised by the NPOP to verify farms, storages and processing units and successful ones got a special ‘India Organic’ logo.

The PGS-India programme, in contrast, has been around for only two years and — unlike the top-down approach of the NPOP — involves a peer-review approach.

- Here, farmers play a role in certifying whether the farms in their vicinity adhered to organic-cultivation practices. This programme was implemented by the Ministry of Agriculture through the National Centre of Organic Farming.

### **In regular touch with Pakistan: Centre**

The government is in regular contact with Pakistan, but any meaningful dialogue will depend on an end to terrorism and cross-border violence, the External Affairs Ministry told the Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs.

“The government has maintained the channels of communications open with Pakistan, including through respective diplomatic missions, and regular contacts between the border guarding forces on both sides,” said a reply from the Ministry quoted in the action-taken report by the government on the committee’s 16th report on India-Pakistan relations.

- At the same time, it has been made clear to Pakistan that a meaningful structured comprehensive bilateral dialogue will be possible only in an environment free from terror and violence.
- The Ministry said the government had been successful in ensuring that the groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammad and Hizbul Mujahideen had been condemned in statements by the BRICS, the U.S. in its South Asia policy statement and the European Union and Japan in joint statements with India.

The government made special mention of the UN terror finance watchdog, the Financial Action Task Force, which pulled up Pakistan in November 2017 for allowing the LeT and affiliates such as Jamaat-ud-Dawa and Falah-i-Insaniyat to access funds.

### **India dismisses Sikh group’s threat**

India has dismissed a warning from a U.K. Sikh group, that it would encourage diaspora gurdwaras to ban Indian officials from visiting them. Terming the statement a “knee jerk reaction”, officials said it reflected the group’s fears of the strengthening relation between Indian authorities and Sikh diaspora globally.

- The announcement is a sign of fear,” said Deputy High Commissioner to London Dinesh Patnaik after the group Sikh Federation (U.K.) accused Indian authorities of interfering in Sikh institutions and affairs and proposed a “worldwide ban” on Indian government officials from visiting gurdwaras in the diaspora.

The Sikh Federation (UK) said it believed up to 70 gurudwaras in the U.K. were ready to participate in the ban and that the number could rise to 100.

- The group has been running a campaign over the arrest of Mr. Johal, who was detained in Jalandhar last year, and is accused of involvement in “targeted killings” in Jalandhar, Ludhiana and Khanna.

The group has accused Indian authorities of torture and has been lobbying Members of Parliament to put pressure on the British government and Indian authorities.

### **Lawmakers oppose H-1B curb plan**

Some U.S. lawmakers and advocacy groups have criticised the Donald Trump administration's reported plan to curb H-1B visa extensions that could result in self-deportation of an estimated 5,00,000-7,50,000 Indian Americans, saying the move would drain the U.S. of talent.

- The proposal, which was part of President Donald Trump's "Buy American, Hire American" initiative that he vowed to launch on the campaign trail, is being drafted by Department of Homeland Security leaders, according to reports.

The H-1B programme offers temporary U.S. visas that allow companies to hire highly skilled foreign professionals working in areas with shortages of qualified American workers.

### **North Korea agrees to hold talks with South**

North Korea agreed to hold official talks with the South next week, the first in more than two years, hours after the United States and South Korea delayed a military exercise.

- The last time the two Koreas engaged in official talks was in December 2015.
- The meeting will take place at the border truce village of Panmunjom where officials from both sides are expected to discuss the Winter Olympics, to be held in the South next month, and other inter-Korean relations.

North Korean leader Kim Jong-un opened the way for talks with South Korea in a New Year's Day speech in which he called for reduced tensions and flagged the North's possible participation in the Winter Olympics.

### **Public stockholding of grains to stay'**

India's ongoing public stockholding programmes would remain unaffected and continue, Commerce Minister Suresh Prabhu informed the Rajya Sabha .

- The minister's assurance comes in the wake of the recent Eleventh Ministerial Conference of the World Trade Organization failing to reach a permanent solution on public stockholding for food security purposes.

India viewed the conference as an opportunity for achieving an outcome that would be an improvement over the existing interim solution through less onerous transparency and disclosure conditions, no additional safeguards in respect of programmes already covered by the interim solution and greater legal certainty.

- However, some developed countries sought explicit language on existing safeguards and the U.S. said it could not agree to a permanent solution.

- Our public stockholding programmes, however, continue to be protected due to the interim solution that the government negotiated in 2014, which is available in perpetuity.

Besides, An existing moratorium on imposing customs duties on electronic transmission was extended for two years in exchange for another moratorium on trade-related aspects of intellectual property rights non-violation complaint, which, inter alia, prevents 'evergreening' of patents in the pharmaceutical sector, thereby ensuring accessibility and affordability of generic medicines.

- The above decisions are in line with India's position in the matter

### **India plans budget boost for tourism**

India is planning to cut taxes on travel and tourism in next month's Union Budget and give more incentives to the \$210 billion sector, hoping to boost economic growth and create more jobs.

- The move could add to a domestic tourism boom in the world's second most populous nation, where low inflation and rising incomes are changing lifestyles and consumption patterns of an estimated 250 million middle-class Indians.
- With scores of destinations introduced on airline routes last year, air travel is also surging. India's tourism sector grew over 10% in the six months ending September, compared to near 8% in the year-ago period.
- According to an industry report, tourism employs 40 million people in India and could add 10 million jobs in a decade.

In India tourists, on average, pay 30% tax on hotel rooms and travel compared with less than 10% in Singapore, Thailand and Indonesia.

### **Rural BPO scheme: women form 40% of added headcount**

The government's India BPO promotion scheme, which aims to popularise the industry beyond metros, has so far provided employment to almost 11,000 people across the country, of which 40% are women.

- The scheme, under the Digital India Programme, was introduced in April 2016 to incentivise BPO firms to extend operations to tier-2 and tier-3 cities.

With an outlay of about Rs500 crore, it aims to incentivise establishment of 48,300 seats, providing about 1.45 lakh jobs, under a three-shift strategy.

- Under the scheme, there are special incentives for employing women and differently-abled persons, and generating employment beyond target.

A Nasscom report had said that more than 34% employees working in the \$155-billion IT industry are women.