

Business and Politics in Muslim World

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Economic Front:

National Summary:

Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha Sushma Swaraj said the BJP would oppose the Nuclear Liability Bill. The Opposition parties are objecting to the compensation cap of Rs 500 crore on the operator envisaged in the Bill. BJP also apprehends that through the legislation, the government is trying to enable foreign private companies to enter India's nuclear market.

The chairman of the National Minorities Commission, Mohamed Shafi Qureshi, has asked the Centre to review its decision on allowing Tasleema Nasreen to stay in India. Referring to the recent violence in Karnataka over an article in a Kannada newspaper that was purportedly written by the exiled author, Qureshi, in a letter to Home Minister P Chidambaram and External Affairs Minister S M Krishna, has said that the contentions made in the article are “derogatory, humiliating and insulting” to the “Prophet of Islam, women in Prophet’s family and his colleagues.” He has said that “the verses from Quran and references from Hadith have been twisted and interpreted in a way that portrays a savage and heinous image of Islam.”

BJP president Nitin Gadkari stressed on the need for a modern idiom to articulate Hindutva for the youth. “Hindutva cannot become any political party’s agenda,” Gadkari said by way of explaining that it was “more of a way of life”. “Our credo has always been ‘justice for all; appeasement of none’. A true Hindu can never attack a Muslim, and a true Muslim can never attack a Hindu. A terrorist, on the other hand, has no religion, caste, or creed. It’s the pseudo-secular brigade that has unduly highlighted the religion of terrorists who happened to be Muslims,” said Gadkari.

Operation against Maoists on 19 September, 2009 in Chhattisgarh proved fake. Security forces claimed a major victory in which 30 Maoists and six police personnel were killed but villagers from Gachanpalli and the neighboring hamlets of Gattapad and Palachalam told that at least 12 of the 30 killed were innocents with no links to the Maoists.

A 48-hour bandh called by Maoists in seven States began on a violent note, with extremists blowing up a rail track between Midnapore and Godapiasal in West Bengal's Paschim Medinipur district.

Over 11,000-km rail line across the country has become vulnerable to Maoist attacks. The states affected by naxal menace are West Bengal, Andhra, Orissa, Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh.

The Reserve Bank of India raised its key short-term lending and borrowing rates by 25 basis points each as part of its tight money policy to combat inflation. The repo and reverse rates (short-term rates at which the RBI lends and borrows from banks) were hiked to 5 per cent and 3.5 per cent, respectively, and could make banks commercial lending dearer. These measures should anchor inflationary expectations and contain inflation going forward, the RBI said.

Overseas investors have infused a net Rs 14,732 crore or USD 3.2 billion in Indian stock markets in March, taking their total inflow so far in 2010 to nearly Rs 15,500 crore. With this renewed shopping in local market, the total net inflow by foreign institutional investors (FIIs)

has crossed the Rs 15,000 crore (USD 3.4 billion) level so far this year, as per data available with the capital market regulator SEBI.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh exuded confidence the economy would grow by 8.5 per cent in the next fiscal and accelerate to 9 per cent the following year from an estimated 7.2 per cent this fiscal.

Indian authorities will be able to question David Coleman Headley, accused in the 2008 Mumbai attacks and facing 12 terror charges in a Chicago court, but within the United States, only but Indian government officials are still hopeful for Hadley's extradition.

In light of the dip in ties with Islamabad, the Ministry of External Affairs has advised the government to walk out of the proposed Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) gas pipeline but continue talks with Tehran for a deep-sea pipeline that avoids Pakistan.

Making his first contact with a senior Chinese functionary on his trips abroad, Hurriyat chairman Mirwaiz Umar Farooq has met Director Foreign Affairs Ying Gang and discussed a possible Chinese role in resolving the Kashmir issue.

Regional Summary:

Haryana Chief Minister Bhupinder Singh Hooda announced that his regime would launch a State-wide urban infrastructure development programme called Rajiv Gandhi Urban Development Mission, Haryana. He said it would focus on providing affordable housing for the urban poor, water supply, sewerage, integrated solid water management and other civic amenities.

The West Bengal government is raising a counter-insurgency force to be trained by the elite Greyhounds force based in Andhra Pradesh for specialising in counter-guerrilla activities of Maoists active in certain parts of the State.

The controversial Bill to bring about a ban on cow slaughter and draught cattle received approval of the Andhra Legislative Assembly amidst stiff resistance put up by the Opposition.

In a significant judgment, the Supreme Court on Thursday permitted Andhra Pradesh to provide four per cent reservation in jobs and education for backward members of the Muslim community, but referred to a special bench the issue of its constitutional validity.

The Anti-Naxal Task Force will soon intensify its operations in the Maoist hotbed of Gadchiroli in Maharashtra, drawing an additional 9,000 security personnel. Official sources said that about nine battalions (9,000 personnel) of the CRPF are on their way to the South Gadchiroli as part of a strategy being planned for the area which has witnessed heightened Naxal activities in the last one year.

National Report

Politics:

Karat: CPI(M) struggles against UPA policies will continue

Cautioning the Manmohan Singh government of increased struggles against the “pernicious legislation” it plans to push after the budget session reconvenes, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) said its efforts to isolate the ruling party and reverse its retrograde policies would continue. “The fight within parliament is not some design to topple the government. It is part of the political struggle to isolate the ruling party and to carry forward the fight to reverse the retrograde policies,” CPI (M) general secretary Prakash Karat said in an article in the latest edition of party organ People's Democracy. Commenting on the struggles by the party both in Parliament and outside, Mr. Karat said the first part of the budget session brought out some clear markers about the political scene in the country. While the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) coalition won last year's Lok Sabha elections, it failed to get majority on its own having won only 262 seats. It was able to form the government with support from the Samajwadi Party (SP), the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) without the Congress formally requesting these parties to do so. “But the Congress-led government started behaving as if it had got a sweeping endorsement for its policies. It didn't recognise the fragility of the coalition and its outside support. Months hence, the arrangement lies shattered,” the article said, pointing to the SP and the RJD as parties that distanced themselves from the UPA. Flagging the unprecedented price rise of food items and essential commodities, the hike in the customs and excise duties on petrol and diesel, slash in subsidy on fertilizers, increasing encroachment of the States' sphere in education, he said, these issues were bound to cause further friction. “The move by the UPA government to push the Civil Nuclear Liability Bill, that concerns the lives and safety of the people in the event of a nuclear disaster, is the other indication of how the Congress-led UPA government is impervious to the mood of the people. “The purpose of the Bill is to ensure that the U.S. suppliers of nuclear equipment have no liability in case of a nuclear accident in the reactors supplied by them and to see that the entire burden falls on the Indian government and the tax payers.” Yet, the Manmohan Singh government had no compunction in bringing such a Bill. The failure to introduce it in the Lok Sabha in the face of strong resistance from all sections of the opposition only highlighted how isolated the UPA government had become, he said. “The sharpened conflict within parliament is only a reflection of how popular discontent is growing to the UPA government's failure to curb price rise and the policies which favour big business and pro-U.S. lobbies.” (The Hindu)

BJP to oppose Nuclear Liability Bill: Sushma Swaraj

Even as the Centre expressed its readiness to look into "genuine" issues which the opposition might raise over the proposed legislation, Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha Sushma Swaraj on Sunday said the BJP would oppose the Nuclear Liability Bill. "The BJP would oppose the Bill as the provision of compensation made in the legislation was quite insufficient," Swaraj told reporters. Her statement comes after Science and Technology Minister Prithviraj Chavan, who is in-charge of Department of Atomic Energy, said in Delhi that the government was ready to "look into" any genuine and sincere issues the opposition may raise over the Bill. The BJP and the Left

parties had forced the government to decide against introduction of the Bill in Lok Sabha on March 15. The Opposition parties are objecting to the compensation cap of Rs 500 crore on the operator envisaged in the Bill. BJP also apprehends that through the legislation, the government is trying to enable foreign private companies to enter India's nuclear market. Swaraj, who hails from Ambala, also credited her party with the passage of the Women's Reservation Bill in the Rajya Sabha saying without the support of BJP and Left parties it would not have been possible. Replying to a question, she said Congress should not give credit to UPA chairperson Sonia Gandhi for this (Women's Reservation Bill) as they did not have the numbers neither in the Lok Sabha nor in Rajya Sabha to get the Bill cleared. Asserting that BJP was in favour of the Women's Reservation Bill, she hoped that RJD and SP might also change their stand after some amendments in the legislation. Blaming the Centre for price rise, the BJP leader said the entire opposition was united on the issue as it was hitting the common man hard. (The Indian Express)

BJP concern over U.S. aid to Pakistan

The Bharatiya Janata Party on Monday expressed its suspicion that billions of dollars given as grants by Washington to Islamabad were finding their way to terrorist groups in Pakistan. The BJP's concern came on a day when a high-level team from the U.S. Embassy, led by Ambassador Timothy J. Roemer, met party president Nitin Gadkari to persuade the party to give up its opposition to the Nuclear Damage Liability Bill. Only a few days ago, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Robert Blake had said the Bill would help U.S. companies do nuclear business with India. Separately, National Security Adviser Shiv Shankar Menon had met senior party leaders Sushma Swaraj, Arun Jaitley and Yashwant Sinha and tried to make the BJP soften its stand on the proposed legislation. Party spokesperson Tarun Vijay was forthright in his criticism of the U.S. having committed \$1.5-billion aid to Pakistan each year for the next five years. Over the past decade, the U.S. had given some \$12 billion to Pakistan to subsidise the cost of fighting the Taliban and al-Qaeda, he pointed out and wondered whether the U.S. would ensure that this money was not used to fund terrorist groups active against India on the eastern borders of Pakistan. Mr. Vijay said it was imperative for India, surrounded as it was by two hostile nuclear powers, to demand that the U.S. ensure its billions would not be used for jihadi activities against it. "We need a foolproof mechanism to be convinced of the U.S. monitoring its aid to Islamabad." Pakistan had a history of using American money to facilitate and strengthen terror groups, including those working against India, he said. (The Hindu)

Minorities' Issues:

Muslim Law Board distances itself from Women's Reservation Bill

The All-India Muslim Personal Law Board (AIMPLB) has distanced itself from the much talked about Women's Reservation Bill. The Board began its three-day annual convention in Lucknow on Friday. The Assistant Secretary-General of the Law Board, Maulana Abdul Rahim Qureshi, made it clear that the 33 per cent reservation for women in Parliament and State Assemblies envisaged in the Women's Reservation Bill does not figure on the Board's agenda. Though the issue of women's reservation is important, it is not in the Board's jurisdiction nor under its purview, the Maulana told reporters. He said the Board's jurisdiction extended only to matters related to interference in the "shariat" laws of the Muslims and formulation of strategy to counter

it and “Islah-e-Ma'ashra” (reform of Muslim society). Not all issues were within the purview of the Board, he added. Stating that the Board was opposed to the Communal Violence Bill, Maulana Qureshi said it had serious objections to certain points proposed in the legislation. He made it clear that since the Communal Violence Bill is related to the Liberhan Commission report on the demolition of the Babri Masjid, it figures on the Board's agenda. The Board's spokesman, Qasim Rasool Ilyas, said the organisation wants a thorough discussion on the Bill. It was felt that the suggestions and views of the Board's representatives should be incorporated. After the opening session at Darul Uloom Nadwatul Ulema, which was addressed by AIMPLB Chairman Maulana Rabey Hasni Nadwi, the election of the new president by the Board members would take place on Saturday. This would be followed by a thorough discussion on the issues on the Board's agenda. An important issue related to the Board's objection to some recent court verdicts not in consonance with the shariat laws. Mr. Ilyas said it was felt that the shariat laws had not been properly interpreted in these verdicts. “Islah-e-Ma'ashra” or reform of Muslim society has figured on the Board's agenda since its inception and though it has achieved notable success, its implementation has been hampered by the absence of proper documentation. The status of “Darul Qazas” or Islamic courts dealing with personal matters would also be discussed at this meeting. On the Babri Masjid, the Board will demand an early verdict in the demolition case. Maulana Qureshi said the Board would demand that the names of those mentioned in the Liberhan Commission report be included in the FIR. (The Hindu)

Review decision to let Taslima stay: Minority panel chief to govt

Claiming that controversial Bangladeshi author Taslima Nasreen is in the “chronic habit” of “demonising” and “cursing” Islam, the chairman of the National Minorities Commission, Mohamed Shafi Qureshi, has asked the Centre to review its decision on allowing her to stay in India. Referring to the recent violence in Karnataka over an article in a Kannada newspaper that was purportedly written by the exiled author, Qureshi, in a letter to Home Minister P Chidambaram and External Affairs Minister S M Krishna, has said that the contentions made in the article are “derogatory, humiliating and insulting” to the “Prophet of Islam, women in Prophet’s family and his colleagues.” He has said that “the verses from Quran and references from Hadith have been twisted and interpreted in a way that portrays a savage and heinous image of Islam.” Earlier, Nasreen had denied writing any article for the newspaper, and dubbed the controversy as a deliberate attempt to malign her and misuse her writings to create disturbance in the society. However, Qureshi said it was needless to debate over whether the article was written by Nasreen, or if it had been twisted to make it a “spicy and blasphemous piece of prose”. He claimed that the author is in the “chronic habit of cursing, demonising and making a mockery of religion in general and Islam in particular”, making a reference to her controversial novel Dwikhandita to buttress his charge. (The Indian Express)

Hindu Fundamentalism:

Togadia arrested in Kandhamal, out on bail

Firebrand VHP leader Praveen Togadia, who was arrested while trying to enter riot-hit Kandhamal district despite prohibitory orders, was on Saturday released by Orissa Police on a personal bond. The VHP leader was arrested on Friday night under Section 151 of the CrPC when he tried to walk into Kandhamal along with supporters. Earlier, the state government had

put a ban on Togadia's visit in view of the communally-fragile nature of the district, which had seen communal violence in the wake of the killing of VHP leader Lakshmananda Saraswati in August 2008. Kandhamal Collector Krishan Kumar said the administration had taken the decision in view of the fragile peace in the district after the riots of 2008. Protesting the government ban on his movement, Togadia squatted on the road along with his supporters, asking why he could not enter Kandhamal when an European delegation was allowed to visit the district. "I am sitting on a dharna in protest against the Orissa government's undemocratic act of preventing me from going to meet tribals in Kandhamal," said Togadia, terming the ban as "illegal and undemocratic". Togadia's arrest triggered massive protests in several parts of the state with VHP enforcing a bandh in Kandhamal. Though shops in Kandhamal remained closed, government offices and educational institutions were open. BJP and VHP activists staged protests in front of the Additional District Magistrate's office in Bhubaneswar and burnt an effigy of Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik. Similar protests were also reported from places like Rourkela, Cuttack, Balasore, Berhampur, Phulbani and Bolangir. "Denying permission to Togadia is unconstitutional, unreasonable, arbitrary and a deliberate affront against Hindus. The Chief Minister will be squarely responsible for any untoward incident that might erupt due to this blatantly discriminatory treatment," said Jual Oram, president of the BJP's state unit. (The Indian Express)

I was not 'summoned' to appear on March 21

Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi has denied he was "summoned" by the Supreme Court-appointed Special Investigation Team for questioning on March 21. He reiterated his respect for the judiciary and "commitment" to the law enforcing machinery. For the first time since the news of the SIT issuing "summons" broke on March 11, Mr. Modi on Monday issued a three-page "open letter to the countrymen," which also mentioned about the developments since the Godhra train carnage in February 2002, and the subsequent communal riots in the State. The Chief Minister described the date mentioned for his appearance before the SIT as a "cook-up by some vested interests" and cried foul over "the systematic campaign of disinformation aimed at maligning Gujarat and defaming him." Such systematic campaign was going on in the country and "spreading such falsehoods has only one single purpose to instigate people." He regretted that such "sinful action will only harm the working of a democratic State." Mr. Modi expressed his "deep sense of anguish at the systematic campaign to defame Gujarat through propagation of false reports." He said some recent headlines in a section of the media painted a false picture of him as a villain of the judiciary and the law enforcing machinery. Reports with titles such as "SIT summons Narendra Modi," "Narendra Modi did not appear before SIT," and "Modi has shown disrespect to the Supreme Court and SIT" were aimed at making "baseless allegations against me and to once again defame Gujarat." Mr. Modi said that in view of the developments, he was "compelled to put the facts before the people of the country" that he was neither "summoned" on March 21 nor had he shown any disrespect to the judiciary and the law enforcing machinery by not appearing on that day. Mr. Modi said he always extended "cooperation to every procedure of law" and was "committed to do so in the future as well." It was a "matter of grave concern and needs investigation as to why and who started spreading lies about the SIT summoning him on March 21." Those who spread the untruth even failed to realise that the day happened to be a Sunday and public holiday. "These purveyors of lies did not even once bother to check whether the key SIT officers, who are appointed by the Supreme Court,

were present in Gujarat on the day in question.” Mr. Modi said the SIT did not fix March 21 as the date for his appearance before it. The date was “invented by some vested interests and as a part of their effort to interfere in the due process of law.” The “vested interests” wanted to paint him as a person who did not respond to the due process of law. (The Hindu)

To attract youth, Gadkari seeks new Hindutva idiom

BJP president Nitin Gadkari on Monday stressed on the need for a modern idiom to articulate Hindutva for the youth, even as he said that the Supreme Court’s 1995 description of Hindutva (wherein it described it as “a way of life”) must be the touchstone while explaining the idea. “Hindutva cannot become any political party’s agenda,” Gadkari said by way of explaining that it was “more of a way of life”. This was the first time he spoke at length on Hindutva after taking over as party president. “From Vivekananda to the Supreme Court definition, the idea of Hindutva has been variously discussed. Hindutva is not against any religion. While Hindutva is our philosophy, there’s a need to employ a new idiom to articulate it to connect with the youth,” Gadkari said while speaking on “Hindutva and Politics” at a function to mark the launch of an association of volunteers “that will promote the BJP among the youth”. “Our credo has always been ‘justice for all; appeasement of none’. A true Hindu can never attack a Muslim, and a true Muslim can never attack a Hindu. A terrorist, on the other hand, has no religion, caste, or creed. It’s the pseudo-secular brigade that has unduly highlighted the religion of terrorists who happened to be Muslims,” said Gadkari. The BJP president said that while a “democracy would always need truly secular institutions”, individuals “can never become secular”. After taking over as the party president, Gadkari has attempted to bring about certain changes in the organisation, something that won the approval of RSS ideologue M G Vaidya. (The Indian Express)

Insurgency Movements:

Witnesses allege biggest anti-naxal operation of 2009 was fake

Aftershocks of the “Operation” still reverberate along the 35-km stretch of broken track, bombed-out schools and graves that leads from the Andhra Pradesh border to Gachanpalli, a village deep in the forests of Chhattisgarh’s Dantewada district. On 19 September, 2009, security forces claimed a major victory in which 30 Maoists and six police personnel were killed in the very same area. But villagers from Gachanpalli and the neighbouring hamlets of Gattapad and Palachalam told The Hindu that at least 12 of the 30 killed were innocents with no links to the Maoists. Gachanpalli, Gattapad and Palachalam lie along the same axis on the border between A.P. and Chhattisgarh, bookended by two police camps at Kishtraram and Bhejji. In the two-day operation, the ‘Commando Battalion for Resolute Action’ (CoBRA) set out from Bhejji, a day’s march northwest of Gachanpalli, while the Chhattisgarh police came from Kishtaram, 15 km south east of the village. “None of those killed in the operation was a naxal,” said an eyewitness from Gattapad, “The villagers were killed in cold blood.” The witness said that while six villagers three of them over the age of 65 were killed in Gachanpalli and their bodies left where they fell, security forces picked up three men each from Gattapad and Palachalam and subsequently killed them, passing them off as naxals. “The Gachanpalli force came from Bhejji, we were attacked by policemen from Kistaram Thana and [salwa] judum members from Maraigudam Camp,” said a witness from Palachalam. “They asked us to prepare food.” The

men-folk were also ordered to destroy a massive minar the Maoists had built on the remains of the village school. Earlier, the Maoists had blasted the school claiming the security forces would use it for shelter. While villagers chipped away at the base of the structure, the force moved further towards Gattapad. There, security forces picked up Padam Deva, 25, Dudhi Pojja, 25, and Sodi Massa, 20. "Deva, my son, was herding cattle on the outskirts of the village when the force picked him up," said Padam Chumri, her eyes filling with tears as she recounted the incident, "They dragged him to Palachalam at gun point." The minar was still standing when the force returned to Palachalam. "By now it was afternoon," said an eyewitness, "The forces apprehended three more men Sodi Sanyasi, 35, Dudhi Hadma, 35, and Tunki Sinna, 25. They told us they were going to Kistharam Thana from where they would head to Konta." En route, the force stopped at a shallow gully near Velkanguda where, villagers allege, the six men were stripped and shot in cold blood. The bodies were loaded onto a tractor and taken to the Andhra Border from where they were transferred to a van and driven to Konta. "We found their shirts and lungis in the gully," said a Palachalam villager. In Dharmapenta, a village en route, villagers said they saw the tractor but couldn't say if they saw the bodies. The Hindu was unable to independently verify these claims. However, circumstantial evidence suggests the September 2009 killings merit further investigation. The six Gachanpalli victims were buried in the village graveyard. A petition filed in the Supreme Court holds the security forces responsible for their deaths and has asked for a Special Investigative Team to examine the matter. But questions are now being raised about the six victims from Gattapad and Palachalam. Director-General of Police Chhattisgarh Viswarajan told The Hindu that the case had been handed over to the Criminal Investigation Department of Chhattisgarh and an investigation was under way. The police claimed at the time that "seven of the bodies of the slain naxalites were traced and six of them brought from Kistaram to Konta for identification and post mortem." The September 19, 2009 edition of The Hindu quoted Konta subdivisional police officer Ravi Kumar Khure as saying that six Maoists were killed when they ambushed the Koya Commando unit of the Chhattisgarh armed police force. The police said four of the alleged 'Maoists' were wearing olive green uniforms. Villagers and even some security officials dispute that claim. "Maoists do not wear green camouflage patterns," said a senior security officer well versed in counter-insurgency operations, "They usually operate in civilian clothes or in an all black uniforms." The clothes recovered by the villagers also suggest the bodies were stripped and put in uniform as an afterthought. Speaking on background, sources have confirmed that "there have been instances when uniforms have been put on bodies after an encounter," but insisted that such incidents were rare and difficult to prove. (The Hindu)

As bandh begins, Maoists blast track

A 48-hour bandh called by Maoists in seven States began on a violent note, with extremists blowing up a rail track between Midnapore and Godapiasal in West Bengal's Paschim Medinipur district shortly after midnight on Sunday. The blast affected the services in the Adra-Midnapore section of the South Eastern Railway (SER). They were restored only at 10.35 a.m. Monday. The bandh received a mixed response in the Maoist-affected districts of Paschim Medinipur, Bankura and Purulia. While life was normal in the urban centres, regions along the fringes of the forests witnessed a shutdown. While seven trains were delayed, two were cancelled and two short-terminated. Suspected Maoists set on fire an office of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the homes of three CPI(M) supporters at Bagjhappa near Jhargram in the district late on

Sunday. Santosh Murmu, a supporter of the Maoist-backed Police Santrash Birodhi Janasadharaner Committee (PSBJC), was shot dead at Belpahari on Sunday. (The Hindu)

11,000 km rail routes under Maoist radar: railway official

With naxals targeting railway property and prestigious trains, a senior official on Tuesday said over 11,000-km rail line across the country has become vulnerable to Maoist attacks. In the last two days, naxals triggered several blasts in areas like Dhanbad, Kharagpur, Mugalsarai, Chakradharpur, Ranchi and Adra, disrupting train services. They also targeted the Bhubaneswar-New Delhi Rajdhani Express in Gaya in Bihar by blasting a rail line. "Indian Railways runs a network extending upto 64,015 km. Out of this, a considerable section has become vulnerable to Maoist attacks," a Railway official said. "Though we do not have a definite data about the exact length of rail route directly affected by Maoist violence, about 11,000-km rail route in Maoist-affected states have become vulnerable to such attacks," he said. The states affected by naxal menace are West Bengal, Andhra, Orissa, Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhatisgarh and Madhya Pradesh. Keeping the security threat in mind, Railways have beefed up security in the Maoist-affected areas. It also held a high-level security review meeting in Rail Bhawan here today. It was attended by RPF DG Ranjit Sinha and other senior Railway officials involved in security and safety. (The Indian Express)

Economic Front:

RBI raises key rates by 25 basis points to combat inflation

The Reserve Bank of India on Friday raised its key short-term lending and borrowing rates by 25 basis points each as part of its tight money policy to combat inflation, which the government feels is a cause of concern. The repo and reverse rates (short-term rates at which the RBI lends and borrows from banks) were hiked to 5 per cent and 3.5 per cent, respectively, and could make banks commercial lending dearer. "These measures should anchor inflationary expectations and contain inflation going forward," the RBI said a month ahead of the announcement of its annual monetary policy on April 20 for 2010-11. Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee had expressed concern saying inflation was heading to double digits from 9.89 per cent at present while at the same time not giving up on growth. "As liquidity in the banking system will remain adequate, credit expansion for sustaining the recovery will not be affected," the RBI said. The decision to tighten monetary policy follows inflation surpassing the RBI's March-end projection of 8.5 per cent and the government's recent decision to hike prices of petrol and diesel. "Headline Wholesale Price Index (WPI) inflation on year-on-year basis at 9.9 per cent in February has exceeded our baseline projection of 8.5 per cent for end March 2010," the RBI said, justifying its decision to hike key rates ahead of its monetary policy. Rising commodity and energy prices are exerting pressure on overall inflation, it said, adding that "the acceleration in the process of non-food manufactured goods and fuel items in recent months has been of particular concern." Besides raising the excise duty by 2 percentage points to 10 per cent, the government also increased duties on crude, petrol and diesel which saw the petrol and diesel prices going up by over Rs. 2.50 a litre. The central bank further said that even as food prices, which soared to around 20 per cent in December, had started moderating "they remain elevated." The food inflation for the week ending March 6 declined to 16.3 per cent. The RBI has also expressed concern over food inflation spilling over to non-food manufactured goods. "More importantly,

the rate of increase in prices of non-food manufactured goods has accelerated quite sharply ... taken together, these factors heightened the risks of supply-side pressures translating into generalised inflationary process," it said. The RBI also expressed the fear that rising industrial growth could add to further inflationary pressure in the coming days. Lenders expect interest rates to rise, though moderately, following the RBI's move. However, many bankers said they would assess market conditions, before taking any such decision. Several banks, including major players like ICICI Bank, HDFC Bank, and Bank of India, have already raised deposit rates which will increase the cost of funds and have implications for the lending rates.

To impact growth

Though not surprised over the policy rate hikes by the Reserve Bank, industry on Friday said the move was the beginning of tightening of interest rates which may impact growth. Given the tight-rope walk by the government and the central bank in the wake of near double-digit inflation, industry, however hopes that the modest hike in policy rates could be absorbed in a growing economy. Assocham Secretary General D. S. Rawat said the impact would not be "substantial". He, however, said inflation had become a serious cause of concern and needed to be addressed. "Therefore, these measures are expected. There will not be any substantial impact on the growth of the economy because it will be absorbed," he said. PHD Chamber of Commerce and Industry President Ashok Kajaria said "it appears the government has decided to control inflation in coordination with the RBI. But it would mean the beginning of an interest regime which will blunt the competitiveness of our industry." (The Hindu)

FII inflow in Indian stock market crosses Rs 15,000-cr level

Overseas investors have infused a net Rs 14,732 crore or USD 3.2 billion in Indian stock markets in March, taking their total inflow so far in 2010 to nearly Rs 15,500 crore. With this renewed shopping in local market, the total net inflow by foreign institutional investors (FIIs) has crossed the Rs 15,000 crore (USD 3.4 billion) level so far this year, as per data available with the capital market regulator SEBI. An analysis of FII flow in the Indian stock markets shows that till March 19, 2010, they are the gross buyer of shares worth Rs 1,41,283 crore, while they offloaded equities valued worth Rs 1,25,834.4 crore, resulting in a net investment of Rs 15,448 crore. In this foreign investment, a major chunk of funds came in through primary market route, which saw the divestment in big ticket NMDC. The USD 2 billion follow-on public offer of the state-run mining giant NMDC was subscribed 1.23 times. "FIIs will continue to put in money in the Indian shares. But the flow will somewhat be lessened till the end of March as it is the corporate year ending. This will also limit the gains in the market," said an analyst at a broking house. The stock market barometer Sensex (of the Bombay Stock Exchange) has gained 6.5 per cent so far in March. On Friday, the BSE's 30-shares index Sensex closed at 17,578.23 points, higher by 0.34 percent, or 58.97 points ζ its best close in eight weeks. Buoyed by FII inflow during last year, the Sensex gained over 80 per cent and was one of the best performers among the leading global bourses. In 2009, foreign fund houses had made a net investment of about Rs 88,000 crore. The selling trend of FIIs was reversed in February, when they invested a net Rs 1,216 crore in the domestic equities. In January, FIIs withdrew a net Rs 500.3 crore from the markets, turning net sellers for the first time since February 2008. Till mid-February this year, FIIs were net sellers. (The Indian Express)

Bharti board OKs \$9 bn offer for Zain Africa ops

Bharti Airtel board on Saturday approved the company's plans to acquire Kuwaiti telecom firm Zain's Africa operations for \$9 billion. The board discussed the funding plans in detail for the acquisition, sources said, adding Singapore's SingTel, which has around 32% stake in Bharti, was also present at the meeting. Though the exact funding details firmed up by the company were not available, sources said Bharti was confident of concluding the deal by March 25, the day the two sides had set for concluding their exclusive talks. As reported earlier, Bharti is looking at raising up to \$8.5 billion in offshore loans to fund the deal and has issued a term sheet to banks. It is likely that Zain may be asked to provide legal protection from a dispute in Nigeria, though the Bharti board has not insisted on it. (The Indian Express)

India to grow 8.5% next fiscal: PM

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh exuded confidence the economy would grow by 8.5 per cent in the next fiscal and accelerate to 9 per cent the following year from an estimated 7.2 per cent this fiscal. Going forward, the country should step up the pace of economic expansion to above 10 per cent per annum in the 12th Five Year Plan (2012-2107) to generate employment for the youth and remove poverty, the Prime Minister said at a conference on building infrastructure hosted by the Planning Commission. "We expect to achieve 8.5 per cent growth rate in the year 2010-11... I hope we can achieve growth rate of 9 per cent in the year 2011-12," he said. However, the country should do even better, he said. "For eliminating poverty and providing productive employment for our young population in the near future, we must aim at accelerating the pace of economic growth to above 10 per cent per annum. This is the growth target which we should work towards for the 12th Five Year Plan," Singh said. The Prime Minister's remarks assume importance since the original target of nine per cent growth rate in the 11th Five Year Plan is set for a downward revision to little over 8 per cent. After growing at over 9 per cent in the three preceding year, India's economic growth declined to 6.7 per cent last fiscal due to the global financial crisis. However, due to the three fiscal stimulus packages given by the Government to prop up the economy, the Central Statistical Organisation (CSO) has estimated economic growth at 7.2 per cent in the current fiscal. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh cautioned that return to faster economic growth should not be taken for granted in view of global challenges, even as the Planning Commission lowered the 11th Plan growth target by about one percentage point to 8.1 per cent per annum. Infrastructure sector would be the demand booster and revive the economy at a time when exports are susceptible to global pressures, he told the Planning Commission during the mid-term appraisal of the plan that had targeted an average annual growth of nine per cent in the five years ending 2012. The country needs high investment in infrastructure in the next two years of the 11th Plan for returning to faster growth which remains a challenge in difficult global environment, Singh said. Presiding over the full Planning Commission meeting for reviewing the current five year Plan, Singh said restoration of high growth "should not be taken for granted" as exports are likely to grow more slowly than it did before the global crisis. Against the target of USD 200 billion in 2008-09, the country ended that year with USD 185 billion in exports. This fiscal, exports may aggregate USD 160-165 billion. "We will need another source of demand to offset slower exports growth and that demand should ideally come from an expansion in investment in infrastructure...," he said. The economy grew

by an average growth rate of 9 per cent in the pre-crisis period, but slowed to 6.7 per cent in 2008-09 in the midst of global meltdown. (The Indian Express)

Government for 100% FDI in defence

In a potential policy shift of enormous significance, the Manmohan Singh-led government is considering a proposal to open up the defence manufacturing sector for 100 per cent Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) by allowing big global players to set up production facilities in the country. According to a note circulated within the Commerce Ministry and sent on to the Cabinet Secretariat for discussion, “established players” in the armament industry should be encouraged to set up their manufacturing facilities and integration of systems in the country by permitting 100 per cent equity through the FDI route. “There need not be any commitment on procurement and these enterprises would have to participate in the RFP [request for proposal] to technologically qualify and also succeed in financial bidding. In case of such firms, we should permit 100 per cent FDI under the FIPB/CCEA approval route,” the proposal says. With the stated intent of cutting down the role of “touts and middlemen” in weapons deals, the note says: “For future RPFs by the Ministry of Defence, the country could impose a condition that the successful bidder would have to set up the system integration in India with a minimum percentage of value addition. The successful bidder should be allowed to bring equity fully through the FDI route without any restriction.” Taking note of concern over availability or reliability of supply during war, the note says that conditions could be imposed that the Government of India has the right to expropriate a manufacturing facility in case of need for reasons of national security by paying suitable compensation. “There can be concerns about passing of the equipment, designs or source code to enemy countries. Such a possibility exists even in the case of imported equipment. In fact, in the case of indigenous equipment, we can control the production mechanism in a much better manner. The government could also reserve the right to inspect or control the production and dispatches in these facilities through deployment of necessary security agencies. Export to enemy countries could be banned through a negative list,” it states. (The Hindu)

Foreign Relations/Geostrategic developments:

India can question Headley in U.S.

Indian authorities will be able to question David Coleman Headley, accused in the 2008 Mumbai attacks and facing 12 terror charges in a Chicago court, but within the United States, only, as per a plea agreement that he struck with the court on Thursday. As per the agreement, based on a change of Headley's plea from not guilty to guilty on all charges, he is currently facing life imprisonment, instead of the death penalty, and is also mandated to continuously cooperate with authorities in providing information for terror investigations. In a conversation with The Hindu, shortly after the agreement was struck, his attorney, John Theis, said that Headley had provided important information to the authorities, which had already “helped save lives.” He said that while he had no information from law enforcement agencies about what they did with any information provided by Headley, “My understanding is that the United States government has shared information with the Indian government on a regular basis.” The 35-page plea agreement clearly leaves room for Indian authorities to have access to Headley in the context of terror-

related investigations in the future. Mr. Theis, however, emphasized that would have to be on U.S. soil as per the agreement. The relevant section reads: "Defendant further agrees that, when directed by the United States Attorney's Office, he will fully and truthfully testify in any foreign judicial proceedings held in the United States by way of deposition, videoconferencing or letters rogatory." The agreement effectively rules out the possibility of extradition, stating that pursuant to the U.S.'s extradition treaties with India, Denmark and Pakistan, the "defendant shall not be extradited to the Republic of India, the Kingdom of Denmark, or the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, respectively, for any offences for which he has been convicted in accordance with this plea." In terms of the possible future course of Headley's sentencing, Mr. Theis said that as per his plea agreement he might be eligible for "downward departure" which is essentially a lighter sentence than life imprisonment, again conditional upon his continued cooperation. He was, however, unable to confirm how many years in prison Headley might face in such circumstances, saying that that would be pure "speculation." Headley has "agreed not to be sentenced until the case is over," Mr. Theis said, confirming that sentencing would depend on the arrest and trial of co-defendants, including Tahawwur Rana, Illyas Kashmiri and Abdur Rehman Hashim Syed. Mr. Theis said at this point it was unclear how long that might take or if indeed they would all be brought before the U.S. justice system. In any case, Headley would likely remain in custody until such time, Mr. Theis added. (The Hindu)

Chidambaram: no setback, we will continue to seek extradition of Headley

Though Pakistani-American David Coleman Headley, alleged to have done the groundwork for the 26/11 Mumbai terror attacks, struck a plea bargain in a U.S. court, India on Friday maintained that it was not a "setback" and hoped to get access to him. Talking to journalists after Headley, suspected to be an operative of the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) terrorist group, pleaded guilty to all 12 terror-related charges against him before a Chicago court on Thursday, Home Minister P. Chidambaram said that India would continue to seek his extradition but admitted that the task was not going to be easy. He said that Headley would be charged in the 26/11 case at an "appropriate time." "It is not a setback," he said when asked to comment on the plea bargain between Headley and the U.S. government under which Headley could escape the death penalty but would be imprisoned for life. "I have seen a copy of the plea agreement. In return, the prosecutors have agreed that they will not seek the death penalty and he will not be extradited to India or Denmark or Pakistan," Mr. Chidambaram said. He pointed out that Headley was charged with crimes across different countries. "If Headley had committed the crime only in India, extradition would have been easy. He has committed the crime in both countries. We must remember there were six Americans who died in the Mumbai attacks. The American authorities have the jurisdiction to prosecute him. Since he was apprehended in the U.S., I always knew there would be a problem in his extradition. We will continue to maintain our plea for extradition," the Home Minister said. Mr. Chidambaram said India had already got enough information from the U.S. regarding Headley's involvement in terror-related activities. "Access is one thing, information is another. We have been given a significant amount of information about their investigation. We want access to get more information. In any judicial proceedings in the U.S. the Indian authorities have the right to question either through videoconferencing or through letters rogatory. So, there is a good chance that he will testify in a U.S. court where Indian authorities will have a chance to ask questions," he said. Mr. Chidambaram, however, added that the fate of the plea bargain would depend on the court, which is not a party to it,

although the court was “by and large bound” by it. The Home Minister said the plea agreement did not rule out either information or testimony. “If he [Headley] agrees to testify through a judicial proceeding, then we will have the right to question him. Headley has agreed that he will fully testify in any foreign judicial proceedings held in the U.S. I don’t know how long the process of testimony will take in the U.S. We have to see how things move forward. We have to be patient. I am a very patient man,” he added. (The Hindu)

India has not been 'squeezed out' of Afghanistan

Refuting reports that it has been ‘squeezed out’ of Afghanistan, External Affairs Minister S M Krishna has said India was playing a “stellar role” in rebuilding the war-torn country which was acknowledged by the people and the legitimate government there. He also said India has taken note of Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai’s statement that it was a friend and Pakistan a conjoined twin. “I do not think that India has been squeezed out. I think India is playing a stellar role in rebuilding Afghanistan which has been acknowledged by the people of Afghanistan and by the legitimate Government of Afghanistan, and that is what matters,” Krishna said in an interview. He was asked about the media reports that whilst Pakistan’s influence was growing, India was either left out of the loop or is being squeezed out. On Karzai’s statement, the minister said “In President Karzai’s assessment, I think that is the scheme of things.” “We take note of that”, was his reply when asked if it worried India. About attacks on Indians, Krishna noted that those who have gone there on humanitarian purposes are unarmed which makes them “easy and soft targets” but he said Afghanistan government has assured that they will be able to protect the Indian personnel who have gone there on call of duty. He said “apart from what the Afghanistan government is doing, India will have to take some additional measures ourselves.” The minister also rejected the reports that the US Administration was trying to minimise India’s presence in Afghanistan. “We have in our interactions with the US Administration at various levels not got the impression that the United States is trying to convey directly or indirectly to the Indian Government that our presence in Afghanistan should be minimized. That is not my impression,” he said. (The Indian Express)

Ignore Pak, ask Iran for gas via sea: MEA

In light of the dip in ties with Islamabad, the Ministry of External Affairs has advised the government to walk out of the proposed Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) gas pipeline but continue talks with Tehran for a deep-sea pipeline that avoids Pakistan. “In view of the complicated relationship between India and Pakistan, the Ministry of External Affairs does not advise meeting between India and Pakistan for further discussions on the project... the deep-sea pipeline option may not involve Pakistan and, therefore, the same can be pursued,” MEA officials said at a meeting last week to decide India’s position on the IPI pipeline. Endorsing MEA’s position, officials from the National Security Council Secretariat cautioned that the IPI pipeline would be a potential target of India-centric terror groups in Pakistan. Last Tuesday, Pakistan signed two pacts with Iran that deems India’s participation in the project at a later date. The pipeline through Pakistan is envisaged to carry 60 million standard cubic metres of gas per day of which half would be for India. The inter-ministerial group of bureaucrats, who met on March 9, decided that India continue its talks with Iran on upstream gas exploration/development and assured gas supply. While the meeting was told that “Iran is internationally isolated due to continuing sanctions, any wholehearted engagement in Iran may emerge as an area of friction between India and the West”, “there was unanimity that in view of the energy security of the country, India

does need to continue to engage with Iran”. Besides providing “first-mover advantage” on exploration and LNG projects there, the panel agreed that India’s engagement with Iran, an important oil and gas player, would open the option of laying another onland pipeline up to Iran-Pakistan border from where a sub-sea pipe would be laid to India. Delhi will approach Tehran for meetings of the Indo-Iran Joint Working Group on Oil & Gas and the Joint Working Group on IPI Project in May, said a GAIL India official. The pipelines combination will be shorter than the proposed IPI pipeline, result in lower pipeline cost and transport tariff, he said. (The Indian Express)

Pakistan questions India's concerns over nuclear deal

Pakistan on Thursday questioned the concerns expressed by India over the possibility of a United States-Pakistan civil nuclear deal and referred to a 2008 statement by the former External Affairs Minister, Pranab Mukherjee, to expose the frequent shifts in the Indian position. Amid reports of the U.S. being open to hearing out Pakistan's case for a civil nuclear deal, official sources in India said on Monday: “We hope the international community would strike the right balance between meeting energy needs of any country while taking on board its track record with regard to proliferation of nuclear technology and weapons of mass destruction.” Responding to questions on this stance taken by India on a possible Pakistan-U.S. civil nuclear deal — similar to the one America has with India — Foreign Office spokesman Abdul Basit said every sovereign country had a right to strengthen its bilateral relations. Further, Mr. Basit noted that Mr. Mukherjee had in 2008 said that India was in favour of Washington cooperating with Islamabad in the civil nuclear area. “In respect of civil nuclear cooperation between Pakistan and the U.S., we would like to encourage civil nuclear cooperation its full use of nuclear energy as we believe every country has its right to use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes,” Mr. Mukherjee had said in Washington. Though the U.S. has been non-committal on such a deal with Pakistan, Mr. Basit said it would be unfair to see the latest round of strategic dialogue solely through the prism of a civil nuclear agreement. “This dialogue has many dimensions and energy is one of the areas where the two countries are exploring the scope for cooperation,” he said. Describing the strategic dialogue — the fourth in a series that began in 2006 after then U.S. President George W. Bush's visit to Pakistan — as “unprecedented,” Mr. Basit was optimistic about the outcome. This is the first time the dialogue is being held at the ministerial level and Mr. Basit pointed out that both countries have a mutual desire to take the existing relations to a higher level. (The Hindu)

Indian Occupied Kashmir:

Mirwaiz makes first China contact

Making his first contact with a senior Chinese functionary on his trips abroad, Hurriyat chairman Mirwaiz Umar Farooq has met Director Foreign Affairs Ying Gang and discussed a possible Chinese role in resolving the Kashmir issue. The Mirwaiz met Gang in Geneva where he had gone to attend the 13th session of the UN Human Rights Council. He will be visiting China at the invitation of the NGO Han Foundation. The Mirwaiz said Gang expressed support for the settlement of Kashmir “as per the wishes and aspirations of Kashmiris”. “Our country supports resumption of composite dialogue between India and Pakistan. China wants the two countries to take steps towards the resolution of Kashmir,” the Mirwaiz quoted Gang as saying. “I urged him

(Gang) to start academic research projects on Kashmir in Chinese universities to create awareness about this long-running conflict,” the Mirwaiz said. The Mirwaiz, who returned to Delhi today, will be attending the Pakistan Day function being hosted by High Commissioner Shahid Malik on Tuesday. Hurriyat hardliner Syed Ali Shah Geelani too will be present. (The Indian Express)

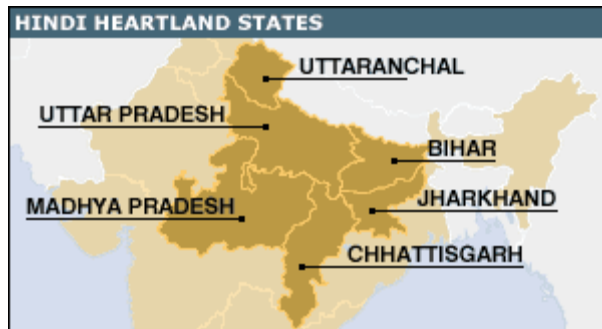
Social front:

Women in panchayat councils seek quota within quota

Impressing upon political parties to take note of discrimination against women from the Dalit and backward communities, scores of women panchayat council representatives on Friday demanded quota within quota in the Women's Reservation Bill. Over 50 of them were from Bihar, West Bengal, Karnataka, Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh. “Yes, in theory women are equal to men. But even stepping out of home can lead to reactions and barbs. I got elected on a reserved seat and that revealed the power this gives one to work for the community,” said Raunaq Khatoon from Bihar. The conclave focused on sharing testimonies about challenges of patriarchy and caste discrimination each woman faced when she decided to become a member of the village council. Most ranked the struggle to exercise power independently as the most difficult in their journey in grassroots democracy. “Being a woman from the Dalit community proved a great challenge in finding support within the panchayat. But I did not give up,” said Sarvati Devi, panchayat pradhan of Jamlapur village in Uttar Pradesh. “Our engagement with community women informs us that this achievement would just be the first step towards effective participation,” said Professor Babu Mathew, country director, ActionAid India. “Looking at how women's participation in Panchayati Raj institutions has unfolded over the years, there is a need for the blanket 33 per cent to be broken down.” A member of the Gramin Vikas Samiti, an ActionAid partner in Bihar, said “the struggle against patriarchy and poverty will be a much harder and longer one.” (The Hindu)

Regional Report

Central India (Hindi Heartland)

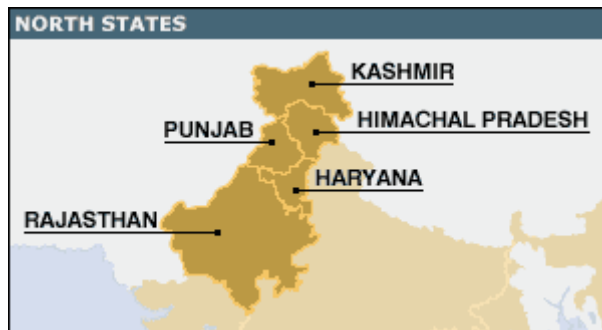


Politics:

Social front:

Economic Front:

The North



Politics:

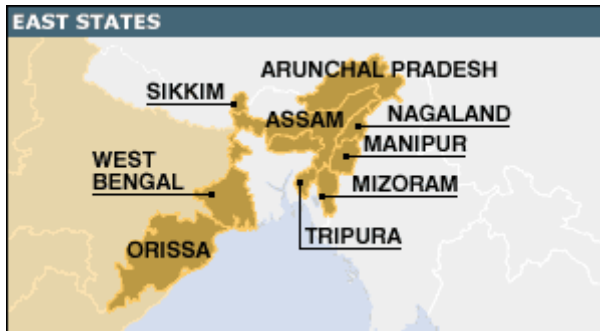
New urban development programme for Haryana

Haryana Chief Minister Bhupinder Singh Hooda announced on Friday that his regime would launch a State-wide urban infrastructure development programme called Rajiv Gandhi Urban Development Mission, Haryana. Talking to media persons shortly after presiding over a meeting of the scrutiny committee of the Haryana Pradesh Congress Committee, Mr. Hooda said the Government had already earmarked Rs.2,500 crore for implementation of the programme over the next five years. He said it would focus on providing affordable housing for the urban poor, water supply, sewerage, integrated solid waste management and other civic amenities. It would be implemented in all cities of the State, excluding those covered under the Jawaharal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission. Mr. Hooda justified the setting up of seven new Municipal Corporations in the State as the population of these towns had increased. The Corporations would help in speedy development of these towns, he said. (The Hindu)

Social front:

Economic Front:

The East



Politics:

Will never compromise with CPM: Mamata

Trinamool Congress chief Mamata Banerjee on Saturday called for preserving the unity of her party and the Congress to oust the Left Front from power in the 2011 Assembly elections. "It is a difficult fight and is nothing short of a war. The people of Bengal have suffered a lot in the past 33 years under the Left Front rule. People want a change. We must preserve our unity," Banerjee said, while addressing a party rally in Domurjola. (The Indian Express)

Social front:

West Bengal to set up counter-insurgency force

The West Bengal government is raising a counter-insurgency force to be trained by the elite Greyhounds force based in Andhra Pradesh for specialising in counter-guerrilla activities of Maoists active in certain parts of the State. The matter was discussed at a meeting, where Inspector General of the Greyhound Force Anjani Kumar and State's Director-General of Police, Bhupinder Singh, were present earlier this week. Personnel selected from the State Armed Police will receive training at the Greyhounds Academy in Andhra Pradesh that specialises in preparing special commandoes to tackle anti-extremist activity. The first batch is expected to complete the training process by the end of this year, official sources said. The Greyhounds force is an elite anti-naxal force that specializes in conducting jungle warfare applying guerrilla tactics to counter those of the Maoists. It has been highly successful in demolition of Maoists' stronghold in Andhra Pradesh. The need for a specialised troop adept in jungle warfare and matching up to the guerrilla tactics adopted of the Maoists has been talked about repeatedly for taking on the ultras in the region since the police as well as the Central paramilitary forces are not trained for operating under such extreme conditions. Meanwhile, Mr. Singh met high-ranked police officials from Jharkhand and the Central Reserve Police Force on Friday at an undisclosed location in the State's Paschim Medinipur district to discuss the outcomes of the first phase of the inter-State anti-Maoist joint operations and chalk out the strategy for the next phase of offensive. Mr. Singh

also hinted that the next phase might witness operations on the Orissa front too and with the recent deployment of Central forces in Orissa, the possibility of launching a coordinated joint security operation along the borders of West Bengal, Jharkhand and Orissa is high. Though the first phase of operation, which was based on specific intelligence inputs, at the West Bengal-Jharkhand border yielded positive results like reclamation of many hitherto liberated zones and razing down of several Maoist camps, there had been no significant arrests or recovery. Meanwhile, the Maoists have called a 48-hour-bandh in West Bengal, Jharkhand, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and in three districts of Maharashtra from March 22 in protest against the joint operations against them. In a press statement on Thursday, Maoist Polit Bureau member Kishanji has warned of a counter-attack in an attempt to thwart the State offensive but added that the path for dialogue was still open if the Centre suspended operations. (The Hindu)

50% women quota in panchayats soon: CM

Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee announced that the state government is in the process of amending the existing laws and ensuring 50 per cent reservation for women in panchayats and municipal bodies. The CM said: "The Women's Reservation Bill should be immediately passed in the Lok Sabha. It is a very good initiative." "I have asked the panchayat and Urban Development department to take immediate initiative to amend the existing laws and pave way for 50 per cent reservation for women in panchayats and local bodies," said Bhattacharjee. The CM lauded the state government's initiative of Self Help Groups. "There are 8 lakh women in Bengal who are being benefited by the SHG's. Their deposits are to the tune of Rs 800 crore and bank transaction amounts to Rs 2,500 crore. There is 90 per cent loan repayment," said Bhattacharjee. According to him, through such development measures, women in Bengal are now raising their voice against social issues like dowry and child marriage. "A change of outlook is being witnessed among the marginalised women. They are standing up against social evils like dowry and child marriage," said the CM. (The Indian Express)

Kolkata fire death toll goes up to 24

The death toll in the fire at Stephen Court, a building on Park Street here, rose to 24 on Wednesday with firemen coming across the remains of 19 persons on the premises. Ten persons are still reported missing. Firemen found the charred remains of 17 persons on the staircase early in the day when they finally managed to enter the building, portions of which collapsed in Tuesday's devastating fire. "These people must have attempted to escape by trying to climb onto the roof of the building, but the door to the terrace was locked and so they were trapped," said Gopal Krishna Bhattacharya, Director-General of the West Bengal Fire and Emergency Services. Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee visited the site. "We have done our best," Minister for Fire Services Pratim Chatterjee said shortly after the Opposition walked out of the Assembly demanding a discussion on the incident and calling for his resignation. Chaos reigned at the SSKM hospital as distraught relatives searched for their loved ones. While 20 victims were identified, nine families claimed the other four bodies. A DNA examination will be conducted to resolve the dispute over the identity of those victims. It seems that the fire broke out in the elevator shaft of the building and spread to the upper floors because there were gas cylinders and a direct gas-line there, a Fire Services official said. Two persons, the caretakers of the building, have been arrested. (The Hindu)

Economic Front:

The South



Politics:

Assembly adopts anti-cow slaughter Bill

The controversial Bill to bring about a blanket ban on slaughter of milch animals and draught cattle received approval of the Legislative Assembly amidst stiff resistance put up by the Opposition. The Bill was passed by voice vote in the House after a five-hour discussion when members of the Opposition suggested that it be withdrawn, while members of the ruling party appreciated it in the interest of preserving the rich cattle wealth of the State. Mr. Yeddyurappa said the State Government had not brought forth the legislation to put down the interests of any community or section of the people. Severe penalties have been incorporated in the legislation only to ensure an effective enforcement". (The Hindu)

Succession war resurfaces in DMK

The fight for succession in the ruling DMK resurfaced on Wednesday with party chief M Karunanidhi's elder son and Union minister M K Alagiri refusing to accept anyone other than his father as his leader. Alagiri's remarks reignited the succession war that appeared to have been settled with the promotion of his younger sibling M K Stalin as deputy chief minister last year by Karunanidhi, with Alagiri himself being promoted to national politics after being inducted into the Union Cabinet. In an interview to a Tamil magazine, Alagiri said none other than Karunanidhi was acceptable to him as leader and that barring the 86-year-old party chief, no other leader had the capacity to lead the Dravidian party. Asked for his comments on his son's remarks, Karunanidhi said 'I myself do not know from which year my post retirement era starts'. Karunanidhi, who had last year undergone a major spinal cord surgery, announced in December that he planned to quit politics at the end of the World Classical Tamil conference at Coimbatore this June, as he wanted to devote more time to writing, which has been close to his heart. The succession war was triggered by a survey in 2007 by a Tamil daily Dinakaran, owned by the grand nephews of Karunanidhi, Maran brothers Kalanidhi and Dayanidhi, which had put Stalin ahead of Alagiri as the political successor to Karunanidhi. Irate supporters of Alagiri had then allegedly set the office of Dinakaran at Madurai on fire, killing three persons. Stalin, who build up the youth brigade of the party, one of the main pillars of the DMK, was first rewarded with

local administration portfolio in 2006 when the party came back to power. A day after Alagiri was sworn in as Union minister, Stalin was promoted as deputy chief minister and was also entrusted with the important portfolio of industry, held by his father. Alagiri, the second son of Karunanidhi, is said to have been instrumental in not only broadening DMK's base in south Tamil Nadu once considered to be bastion of the AIADMK but also ensured that his party won all the Lok Sabha seats from that part of the state last year. (The Indian Express)

Social front:

Supreme Court lifts stay on Muslim quota in Andhra Pradesh

In a significant judgment, the Supreme Court on Thursday permitted Andhra Pradesh to provide four per cent reservation in jobs and education for backward members of the Muslim community, but referred to a special bench the issue of its constitutional validity. Lifting the stay on the State government's decision, a three-judge bench of Chief Justice K.G. Balakrishnan and Justices J.M. Panchal and B.S. Chauhan said, "since it involves important questions of Constitution, we are referring the matter to a Constitution bench" for hearing in the second week of August. As many as 14 Muslim groups, identified as socially and educationally backward sections by the State Backward Commission, will now be eligible for the benefit. "The government is of the view that certain sections of the Muslim community are socially and educationally backward. What is wrong in it? It is only a question as to how you identify them. It is not a question as to whether they are Hindus or Muslims but the question is social and educational backwardness. Merely because they are Muslims they cannot be denied," the Bench observed while passing the order. The decision came on a special leave petition filed by the State government, challenging the ruling of a seven-judge bench of the Andhra Pradesh High Court, which had quashed the impugned policy as being unconstitutional on the ground that reservation cannot be extended on the basis of religion. Attorney General G.E. Vahanvati argued that the High Court did not properly apply its mind while passing the judgment as it failed to consider the fact that identification of the most backward groups among the Muslims was done by the State Backward Commission. Appearing on behalf of some pro-reservationists, senior counsel K. Parasaran argued that while hairdressers, dhobis and those working in cremation grounds in the Hindu community were extended reservation benefits under the backward class, similarly placed groups in the Muslim community were deprived of the benefits. However, senior counsel Harish Salve, appearing on behalf of Muralidhar Rao and other anti-reservationists, cautioned that extending "religion-centric" reservation posed a grave "danger of fissiparous tendencies developing in the country." The State had moved a Bill in the Assembly on the basis of a report submitted to it by Andhra Pradesh Commission for Backward Classes (APBC). The Bill was later passed by the Assembly. (The Hindu)

Economic Front:

West India



Politics:

Social front:

Anti-Naxal operations in Maharashtra to be intensified

The Anti-Naxal Task Force will soon intensify its operations in the Maoist hotbed of Gadchiroli in Maharashtra, drawing an additional 9,000 security personnel. Official sources said that about nine battalions (9,000 personnel) of the CRPF are on their way to the South Gadchiroli as part of a strategy being planned for the area which has witnessed heightened Naxal activities in the last one year. The district witnessed a number of ambushes by naxals which claimed the lives of more than 20 security personnel last year. The most gruesome incident was in October last year when 17 policemen were killed in an ambush by Naxals allegedly led by a woman at Laheri police outpost in the district. While the operations in the area were undertaken by five BSF battalions initially, the sources said additional paramilitary forces including the Special Action Force of the CRPF are being brought in. The state police forces along with central forces had been conducting operations in the area and have also been able to achieve some successes in terms of arrest and surrenders, they said. The sources attribute the success to the joint operations carried out by Chhattisgarh and Maharashtra along the border areas. The operations in Maharashtra are being carried out jointly by the central forces, regular Gadchiroli police and the Special Action Group (SAG) created for anti-Naxal operations in Maharashtra. They said police forces have been able to go deep into forests, which were once considered to be Naxal dens. In Maharashtra, Naxals have been active in Gadchiroli, Bhandara and Gondia districts. (The Indian Express)

Economic Front: