

Business and Politics in Muslim World

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National Summary:

The Bharatiya Janata Party has opposed reservation for Scheduled Caste Muslims and Christians recommended in the Ranganath Mishra Commission on reservation for minorities, party said this would be contrary to the religious teachings of the minorities. According to party stance, the Christian and Islamic faiths do not recognise the existence of caste in their communities. Party leaders described the move as a “conspiracy” to divide the country. Sushma Swaraj on Tuesday formally took over as the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, replacing senior BJP leader L K Advani. The Union Cabinet on Thursday cleared the women's reservation bill after a long wait of 14 years, according to which 33% of all seats in Parliament and state assemblies being reserved for women. All major parties in Parliament as the Congress, BJP and the Left have pledged support to it so it is now possible to make amendment in constitution to reserved women' 33% share in legislature.

The Indian Election Commission informed the Supreme Court that wearing a burqa by a Muslim woman was a mere religious custom, and not an integral part of Islam. In its response to a special leave petition to restrain it from publishing photographs of veil clad Muslim women in the electoral rolls, the Commission said: “Article 25 of the Constitution does not confer unfettered rights to religious practice, but merely protects the essential or integral practice of any religion.”

The Shiv Sena has criticised new BJP chief Nitin Gadkari for asking Muslims to give the disputed plot of land for the Ram temple and promising to help build a mosque elsewhere. According to Sena seeking permission from Muslims is an insult to the hundreds of karsevaks who laid down their lives during the Ram Mandir agitation”.

Union Home Minister P. Chidambaram said Intellectual support to Maoists and Naxals along with lack of trained policemen cause difficulties in encountering insurgency. He said government wants 72 days ceasefire to negotiate with insurgents' demands. Responding to Chidambaram's proposal the Maoists offered a conditional ceasefire, asking the government to halt its offensive for 72 days and involve mediators for talks. Maoist leader Kishenji, in a statement to some regional TV channels in West Bengal, said if state and central police forces ceased operations against them, his group would reciprocate.

The pre-budget Economic Survey (2009-10), presented by finance minister Pranab Mukherjee in Parliament predicted that India would be able to attain a high nine per cent growth in 2011-12 on the way to becoming world's fastest growing economy in four years. The document, which assesses the state of the economy, warned that high food prices would rise further over next few months.

Army Chief General Deepak Kapoor denied the media reports of occupation" of Indian territory by Chinese troops. India and China will conduct their first-ever joint Air Force exercise in 2012. Air Chief Marshal P V Naik has said that initial planning for the war game has started but the venue for the exercise as well as its scope is yet undecided.

Indo-Pak foreign secretaries' talks proved a failure as both countries did not show any leniency on their respective stands. India wanted to focus on terrorism while Pakistan was willing to bring Kashmir and water dispute on table. Pakistan wants to resume composite dialogue but India is not interested in this proposal yet. At least nine Indians were among 17 people killed as Taliban suicide bombers carried out a series of attacks in the heart of Kabul, targeting Indian interests in Afghanistan. The Indians, who died in the incident, include two army officers, government officials, an ITBP. Five other army officers were also injured in the attack.

M.F. Husain a well known Indian artist, who has been under attack from Hindu fundamentalists for his paintings of Hindu goddesses and has been living in Dubai and London, has been given Qatar nationality. The United Nations narcotics watchdog, International Narcotics Control Board (INCB), has blamed India for the rising drug abuse in its neighbourhood, particularly in Bangladesh and Bhutan. Worse, the UN agency says India is the primary source of injectible drugs such as pethidine and morphine widely abused in these countries. While India's robust growth over the past few years has helped it reduce the income gap with developed countries, the country still lags far behind in terms of its ranking in human development and gender development index. The Economic Survey has emphasised that much needs to be done to reduce disparities between men and women. Gender development index is currently at 0.594 with India ranking 114 out of 155 countries.

Regional Summary:

Punjab farmers are very enthusiastic to explore the vast barren tracts of land in Africa for agriculture prospects as some African countries opening up farming activities to Indian farmers, the peasants. The Confederation of Indian Industries (CII), Punjab Chapter, has recommended the state government for action. The report says there exist huge opportunities for farmers to adopt agriculture in Africa. It says Chinese farmers have been already showing interest in rice cultivation in that continent and India should also grab the opportunities. "Though Africa is considered politically volatile, there are nations like Tanzania, Ghana and Zimbabwe that are desperately looking for enterprising farmers who can help them cultivate their land for the rising demand of food.

Unresolved Telangana issue is a cause of continues tension in the region. Osmania University is now the epicenter of clashes and demonstrations. University Students are furious over delaying tactics of centre to resolve the issue.

Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) chief Raj Thackeray says land under irrigation in the state should be given only to Marathi people. Raj, who had been in the forefront of a campaign against North Indians last year, wants an Ordinance which will deny a non-Maharashtrian possession of any land under irrigation in the state. Citing example of neighbouring Karnataka, Raj said, "My party members would pursue the matter with the state government to pass an ordinance like the one in Karnataka."

Five deaths due to swine flu were reported from Gujarat.

National Report

Politics:

I am entitled to a holiday: Advani

Bharatiya Janata Party leader L.K. Advani on Friday expressed his wish for 'chutti' (freedom) from the rough and tumble of politics, as he recalled his 67-year-long political journey, from Indore to Indore. He was giving the valedictory address to the party's National Council. Proclaiming his journey to be one of 'deshbhakti' (patriotism) and 'rashtraseva' (service to the country), Mr. Advani said he felt that he, too, was entitled to a holiday, freedom from the daily grind. Mujhe bhi chutti milni chahiye, he said, noting that he had been repeatedly told by colleagues that he must stay on as "you have the experience." He was the oldest member of the party, he said, adding a "generational change" was natural, but the BJP had set an example for all parties by the "smooth" manner in which it was done. He had the responsibility to ensure "depth" in leadership, and that he had done. In the parliamentary party, this was done by December 2009, when his younger colleague Sushma Swaraj became Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha and another colleague, Arun Jaitley, had earlier been appointed Leader of the Opposition in the Rajya Sabha. The change in the organisation leadership was effected in Indore, where Nitin Gadkari's election as party president was ratified. Mr. Advani talked about the possibility of the BJP forming a government at the Centre in 2014. "If we get a chance at the Centre, I would like to implement the 'ladli' scheme [implemented successfully for girl children in Madhya Pradesh] throughout the country," he said. He questioned the 2009 Lok Sabha poll verdict. "Did the Congress deserve the 2009 'janadesh'? The answer lies in the current situation in the country. If there is an election today, price rise alone will ensure its defeat," he said. He said nothing hurt the party more than the picture of a divided house. Mr. Gadkari was absolutely right in saying that individual ambitions must always be subservient to the party's best interest, Mr. Advani said, though some delegates had indicated that those remarks were aimed at some senior leaders, including Mr. Advani. Some media reports had signalled the end of his 'yatra' when he quit his position as Leader of the Opposition, Mr. Advani said. But, besides the Somnath-Ayodhya 'yatra,' which in fact ended in Samastipur where he was arrested, he had embarked upon many 'yatras.' (The Hindu)

Congress ridicules BJP's "new found love" for Dalits

The Congress on Friday sought to ridicule the Bharatiya Janata Party's "new found love" for Dalits. "When our leaders go to Dalit households, it is a photo opportunity; when they do it, they say it is sincerity," said Congress spokesman Abhishek Singhvi. In a suo motu statement on BJP president Nitin Gadkari's "declaration of love for the depressed classes," Mr. Singhvi said: "Without quite admitting it, they are indulging in flattery through imitation." Senior Congress leaders added that this was a vindication of the party's inclusive politics; particularly general secretary Rahul Gandhi's bid to reach out to Dalits during his travels into rural India. Mr. Singhvi pointed out that this was the same BJP which did not take any punitive action against its then senior leader Arun Shourie,

who had poured vitriol on B.R. Ambedkar chairman of the drafting committee of the Indian Constitution and a Dalit icon in his book *Worshipping False Gods*. Further, it was pointed out that till recently the BJP had opposed reservation for converted Dalits. Without going into the merits of the issue, Mr. Singhvi cited a statement by BJP leader Murli Manohar Joshi against quota for converted Dalits to prove his point. Arguing that the BJP did not have the right to preach inclusive politics to the Congress, Mr. Singhvi said it was his party that had facilitated the elevation of Dalits to the posts of President, Chief Justice of India and Lok Sabha Speaker. "It is the Congress, which has intrinsically been a rainbow coalition with Dalits providing the backbone." (The Hindu)

BJP opposes caste-based reservation for minorities

The Bharatiya Janata Party has opposed reservation for Scheduled Caste Muslims and Christians. In a resolution decrying the recommendation of the Ranganath Mishra Commission on reservation for minorities, the party's Indore conclave said this would be contrary to the Koran and the Bible. Parliament had no jurisdiction to change the basic tenets of the Christian and Islamic faiths that do not recognise the existence of caste in their communities. Party leaders described the move as a "conspiracy" to divide the country. The BJP said the step was "not only unconstitutional but would also create bad blood between minorities and Hindu Dalits and other backward classes." "The Ranganath Mishra Commission cannot dictate or thrust its opinion on the Christian Pope or Muslim maulvis...reservation would amount to a formal introduction of a caste system in Islam and Christianity, thus changing the basic tenets of these religions, which is outside the jurisdiction of both Parliament and the judiciary and also contrary to the provisions of the Koran and the Bible," the resolution said. One party leader claimed that "70 per cent of Muslims were already covered by the 27 per cent OBC quota." The party is apparently objecting to the creation of a quota within that quota for OBC Muslims and other minorities. (The Hindu)

Sushma Swaraj takes over as Leader of Opposition in LS

Sushma Swaraj on Tuesday formally took over as the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, occupying the seat hitherto held by senior BJP leader L K Advani. Speaker Meira Kumar introduced Swaraj to the House as new Leader of the Opposition. Members, including UPA Chairperson Sonia Gandhi, welcomed Swaraj by thumping their desk. Kumar thanked Advani, who was not present in the House, for his cooperation in the conduct of the proceedings "in a healthy and fruitful manner". Swaraj succeeds Advani who has been appointed Working Chairman of NDA and BJP Parliamentary Party Chairman. (The Indian Express)

Gorkhaland talks decision deferred

The Centre on Monday deferred a decision on holding political talks with the Gorkha Janamukti Morcha. The Cabinet Committee on Political Affairs (CCPA), which met this evening to discuss the Gorkhaland talks issue, decided to convene another meeting in the next few days on the matter since the issue of price rise was more urgent. Meanwhile, on a request from West Bengal, the Centre has sent three companies of CRPF to Darjeeling.

This is the first time central paramilitary forces will be deployed in Darjeeling since the GJM began its agitation. (The Indian Express)

Road cleared for 33% reservation of all MP, MLA seats for women

The Union Cabinet on Thursday cleared the women's reservation bill which has been hanging fire for close to 14 years. And this time, the bill might go through in Parliament as the Congress, BJP and the Left have pledged support to it. The three parties put together add up to the necessary two-thirds majority in Lok Sabha for the constitutional amendment, and falls manageably short in Rajya Sabha. In short, astute floor management by the Congress in the 15th Lok Sabha could see 33% of all seats in Parliament and state assemblies being reserved for women. Such large women representation in the legislatures could not only change the emphasis in policies but also alter the very nature of politics in India. This gender-bender of a move by the Congress leadership has been aided by the absence of parties like Lalu Prasad's RJD in the UPA and the reduced relevance of Samajwadi Party chief Mulayam Singh Yadav. Both OBC chieftains have relentlessly opposed the bill demanding that one-third of the proposed women's bill be earmarked for OBCs and minorities. JD(U) leader Sharad Yadav is another opponent, but BJP, Congress and Left can help carry the day. They can also bank on the DMK which, once a backer of the 'quota-within-quota' stand, has come around to argue that the priority is to get the gender quota introduced, while other details are negotiated later. If the bill is to become reality, it will require a Constitutional amendment. For that the bill must get the vote of two thirds of the members present and voting, but not less than majority mark of the House. The government having cleared the bill is not bound by fresh recommendations or dissent notes made by the standing committee on law and justice which submitted its report in December 2009. The bill can be placed for consideration and passing in the form that it was introduced in Rajya Sabha in 2008 and for this reason is likely to be placed for consideration in the Upper House first. The government needs 158 votes to meet the two-thirds mark in Rajya Sabha. The Congress, BJP and Left add up to 137 MPs in this house, a little short of requisite figure. It is here that some clever floor management would be necessary. Once cleared by the Upper House, the bill is as good as through, because in the Lok Sabha the three blocs virtually have the requisite numbers. The government also has the option of holding a joint session of both Houses as NDA had done to pass the anti-terror POTA bill. The government managers would also be counting on the support of the DMK, some smaller groups and independents, as well as on the possibility of BJD not likely to outright oppose the bill, to get its numbers. DMK spokesman said T K Elangovan said, "Let the bill be passed first, we will see quota within quota later." Even AIADMK supports women's reservation "in principle", while Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar does not share the intensity of opposition of his JD-U colleague Sharad Yadav. MPs, other those of the Congress, BJP and the Left, who are support the bill in Rajya Sabha are, seven of AIADMK, 12 of BSP and four of DMK -- sufficient for a two-thirds majority. In Lok Sabha, the government can count on the support of 19 Trinamool MPs, 18 DMK and nine AIADMK MPs. BJP leader Arun Jaitley welcomed the move saying his party would support the proposed legislation in Parliament. Expressing her party's support for the proposed legislation, CPM leader Brinda Karat said, "We are glad the bill has got the

cabinet nod but this has happened before and the distance between the Sources said that the bill could be placed in Parliament in this session itself as suggested by President Pratibha Patil in her address to the joint sitting of Parliament. The UPA move is powered by the keen interest of Congress chief Sonia Gandhi in the bill. She has battled strongly for it and has expressed her despair over the aggressive opposition in Parliament. If it does actually become law, it will be a fitting tribute by Congress for the year-long centenary celebrations of International Women's Day this year. Given the huge political point to be scored, BJP and Left are unlikely to be found wanting. It is not clear whether smaller regional parties like BJD or DMK will oppose it outright. Even if parties like Mayawati's BSP support the bill, it will go through. (The Times of India)

Minorities' Issues:

Wearing burqa not an integral part of Islam: Election Commission

The Election Commission on Monday informed the Supreme Court that wearing a burqa by a Muslim woman was a mere religious custom, and not an integral part of Islam. In its response to a special leave petition to restrain it from publishing photographs of purdah-clad Muslim women in the electoral rolls, the Commission said: "Article 25 of the Constitution does not confer unfettered rights to religious practice, but merely protects the essential or integral practice of any religion." Counsel for the Commission Meenakshi Arora submitted before a Bench of Chief Justice K.G. Balakrishnan and Justices Deepak Verma and B.S. Chauhan, hearing a special leave petition, that the photo electoral rolls would not violate the right of Muslim women to practice their religion under Article 25. The SLP was directed against the September 7, 2006 judgment of the Madras High Court, dismissing a petition filed by M. Ajmal Khan against the use of photographs in the rolls. Senior counsel P.S. Narasimha and Counsel V. Balaji, appearing for the appellant, contended that the use of photographs in the rolls was likely to cause damage to the sentiments of Muslims as a whole, since there was a likelihood of misuse of the rolls, if they were made available to polling agents. Mr. Narasimha suggested that the photographs of Muslim women be deleted from the rolls given to polling agents as their religious belief did not permit circulation of their photographs. Ms. Arora said rolls with photographs were not given to the public, and even the soft copy "does not contain photograph." She said only the political parties and polling agents were given the rolls as it would ensure free and fair poll. The Commission, in its affidavit, said: "To maintain the sanctity of democratic process, it is necessary to prevent fraud of voter identity, and the photo electoral rolls will greatly help in identification of electors and prevention of bogus enrolment." Mr. Justice Balakrishnan said: "It is not possible to deny access of the photo electoral rolls to the polling agents. If we give privilege to one candidate, lakhs of other candidates will come, and it will create a problem. If an order is passed by this court, thousands of applications will come seeking exemptions. You come out with a better suggestion without touching the religious issue. We will consider it." (The Hindu)

Hindu Fundamentalism:

Gadkari appeal insult to Ayodhya karsevaks: Sena

The Shiv Sena has slammed new BJP chief Nitin Gadkari for his 'overtures' to Muslims on the Ayodhya dispute. The Sena party organ Saamna launched a scathing attack on Gadkari on Saturday for asking Muslims to give the disputed plot of land for the Ram temple and promising to help build a mosque elsewhere. Reiterating the Ram temple would be built at the same place in Ayodhya, 'where it rightfully belongs', the Sena stated, "To turn to Muslims for permission amounts to insulting the hundreds of karsevaks who laid down their lives during the Ram Mandir agitation". The party said that if there was a need to seek permission of Muslims, instead of launching the Ram temple movement, the better option for Hindus was 'to sit at the feet of the Imam of Jama Masjid and persuade him to give a piece of land for Ram temple'. The Sena has said that Hindus had shed blood during the agitation and Gadkari's statement was unacceptable. The Sena claimed that Ayodhya belonged to Lord Ram and there was no reason to search the land records in a government office for proof. It also questioned the antecedents of Babar and his links with Ayodhya. "There was a Ram temple in Ayodhya and it will remain (so). Muslims should show the generosity to withdraw their claim (on the land)," the editorial stated. (The Indian Express)

Insurgency Movements:

Intellectual support stands in the way of tackling Maoists: Chidambaram

Intellectual support to Maoists made the task of tackling them "very difficult" as it confused people, Union Home Minister P. Chidambaram said on Friday. The most difficult element in dealing with naxalites was lack of trained policemen. It was followed by intellectual and material support. The Maoists seduced the media as they unleashed false charges in courts and pulled all strings to activate their frontal organisations, including the unsuspecting non-government organisations, to widen their circle of influence for support. "But don't forget the bottom line the CPI(Maoists) believe in armed liberation struggle. "Accept it or reject it. There can be no half-way approach. Most people still think there could be a compromise or some kind of median approach. This is immature and foolish," he said. Mr. Chidambaram said the government was following a policy on naxalites but it would take some time for the results to become visible, and in the meantime they would continue to try every trick in the bag to garner support, he said. He admitted that the situation on the naxalite front was bad. "This is expected because as long as we did not engage them, they were happy and expanding. They will continue to expand unless we challenge them." Denying that any operation was being carried out under the name of "Operation Green Hunt" in Chhattisgarh, he said the Centre was just assisting the States in reclaiming the areas under Maoists control. "This is a careful, controlled and calibrated move with no carnage or collateral damage." The Minister admitted that there were police excesses in certain areas of Maoist dominance. He said, "I will hold the State government accountable if they commit excesses." There was need to take control of Maoist areas, establish a civil administration and ensure development. "The troops have been told you don't fire till you are fired upon. The

objective is only to reach the areas.” Explaining his offer of talks to Maoists if they abjured violence, he said he did not ask them to lay down arms or disband their organisation. “I said give up violence for 72 hours, give me 72 hours to consult everyone and respond to your giving up violence and we will find a way out.” (The Hindu)

Feeling the heat, Kishenji offers ‘72-day ceasefire’

Feeling the heat after the Silda camp attack, the Maoists offered a conditional ceasefire, asking the government to halt its offensive for 72 days and involve mediators for talks. Home Minister P Chidambaram had said last week that the government would find “a way out” if the Maoists gave up violence for 72 hours. The government said it had not received any communication from the Maoists and would only agree to an unconditional ceasefire. Maoist leader Kishenji, in a statement to some regional TV channels in West Bengal, said if state and central police forces ceased operations against them, his group would reciprocate. “The state and central governments should stop this violence for 72 days... revolutionaries will immediately stop taking revenge,” said Kishenji. He offered a ceasefire from February 25 to May 7. “It is an appeal to intellectuals, human rights organisations and mass organisations... to mediate between the two sides,” he said. There was no official reaction from the government but sources said the Maoist move appeared to be a ploy to buy time when cornered. The sources said the Maoist groups were certain that a crackdown would follow the Silda incident and were, therefore, offering a ceasefire. (The Indian Express)

Economic Front:

Gems and jewellery exports surge 62% in Jan

Gems and jewellery exports surged 61.80 per cent in January to USD 2,620.71 million compared to the same period a year ago, the Gems and Jewellery Export Promotion Council (GJEPC) said. “Exports of gems and jewellery stood at USD 2,620.71 million in January, thereby showing a growth of 61.80 per cent compared to USD 1,619.77 million in the corresponding period a year ago when (global financial) slow down was at its peak,” Chairman GJEPC Vasant Mehta said. “Surge in exports in January 2010 compared to last year should not be misconstrued for a quantum leap, because last year in January the industry was coping with downturn and there were virtually no exports,” he told PTI. He added that the industry was just gearing up, and “we expect the gem and jewellery exports to grow between five and seven per cent on a year-on-year basis as on March ending, 2010”. Exports of cut and polished diamonds also jumped by 89.02 per cent in January, compared to the corresponding period a year ago, a GJEPC statement said. Exports of polished diamonds stood at USD 1,709.68 million during the month under review against USD 9,04.48 million in the same period last year. (The Indian Express)

Economic Survey positive on economy, worried about price rise

Enthused by reforms and the strong fundamentals, the Economic Survey on Thursday predicted that India would bounce back to a high nine per cent growth in 2011-12 on the way to becoming world's fastest growing economy in four years. The document, which

assesses the state of the economy, warned that high food prices would rise further over next few months and criticized the food management policies that have led to "unacceptably" high prices of items like sugar. Food inflation is at present hovering close to 18 per cent. The pre-budget Economic Survey (2009-10), presented by finance minister Pranab Mukherjee in Parliament, also recommended a "gradual rollback" of stimulus measures after assessing the impact on each sector. Projecting the economic growth to touch up to 8.75 per cent in 2010-11 and nine per cent in the next year, the survey said: "It is entirely possible for India to move into the rarefied domain of double digit growth and even attempt to don the mantle" of the fastest growing economy in the world within the next four years. It, however, expressed concern over rising prices, saying that a major concern during 2009-10 was the emergence of high double digit food inflation. In a direct criticism of the government, particularly over the very high consumer price inflation, the survey said that the "hype" over kharif crop failure without taking into account the comfortable food stocks and rabi prospects "may have exacerbated inflationary expectations encouraging hoarding and resulting in a higher inflation in food items. "... in the case of sugar, delay in the market release of imported raw sugar may have contributed to the overall uncertainty, thereby allowing prices to rise to unacceptably high levels in recent months," it added. The survey said that "since December 2009, there have been signs of these high food prices, together with the gradual hardening of non-administered fuel product prices, getting transmitted to other non-food items, thus creating some concerns about higher than anticipated generalised inflation over the next few months." Referring to projection of 7.2 per cent growth of the economy in 2009-10, the survey said, "The fast-paced recovery of the economy underscores the effectiveness of the policy response of the government in the wake of the financial crisis." The board-based recovery, it added, "Creates scope for a gradual rollback, in due course of some of the measures undertaken over the last 15 to 18 months, as part of the policy response to the global slowdown." These initiatives, it added, were also necessary for pushing the economy back on the growth path of 9 per cent, the rate at which the economy was expanding before the global crisis hit the world. (The Times of India)

Geo-strategic developments:

No occupation of Indian territory by China: Army chief

Army Chief General Deepak Kapoor on Tuesday said there has been "no occupation" of Indian territory by Chinese troops. "Quite a large number of these reports are not correct. I am trying to assure everyone here and to the nation that there have been no major issues of Chinese transgressions so to say. They come upto certain areas. We also have our perceived Line of Control upto where we also go. There have been no occupation of Indian territory," the General told reporters. The Army chief was reacting to recent media reports about the Chinese transgression in the country. When asked about Pakistan's offer to mediate on the issue of Chinese intrusion, he said there is no such proposal and if any then the Government will take a decision on it. Referring to the infiltration bids being made from across the border he said that efforts are more from the South (Kashmir) side and from the area manned by Border Security Force (BSF). On Sukna land deal case, General Kapoor said since the matter is sub-judice it is not proper on his part to comment

on it. When asked whether India should stop talking to Pakistan in view of the terrorist attacks on the country, he said political leadership will decide on the matter. (The Indian Express)

Pak now hands China a 'blank cheque', India says no way

Rejecting any third party mediation in talks with Pakistan, India has made it clear that dialogue with Islamabad will only be at the bilateral level. Reacting to a statement by Pakistan Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi that China had been given a “blank cheque” to adopt a role in Indo-Pak affairs, Defence Minister A K Antony on Tuesday said India did not believe in third party mediation. Addressing the China Institute of International Studies in Beijing on Tuesday, Qureshi said Islamabad would welcome any role given to China to bring down tensions between India and Pakistan because of the trust and confidence it enjoyed with its close ally. “It is for the Indians to decide if they would be comfortable to have China talking as a third party to bridge the gap. As far as Pakistan is concerned, they (China) have a blank cheque,” he said at the Chinese think tank. In response to queries on Qureshi’s statements, Antony said, “We are not in favour of involvement of any third country in our talks. It is only bilateral. Our basic policy is we don't want interference from any country in our bilateral talks with Pakistan.” Reacting to Qureshi’s comments, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman said India and Pakistan were both important, friendly neighbours of China. He said China supported and welcomed the improvement in relations between India and Pakistan and backed efforts to settle their outstanding issues through dialogue. (The Indian Express)

After fatal crash, IAF grounds 100 MiG-27s

After a fatal crash near Siliguri last week, the Indian Air Force (IAF) has grounded its fleet of nearly 100 Russian-origin MiG- 27 fighters on suspicions of a major engine snag. All five squadrons of the ground attack fighter, deployed primarily in the western and eastern sectors, have been confined to the ground since the February 16 crash in which a Squadron Leader was killed. Engine trouble is a known problem in the MiG-27 fleet with crashes in the past being attributed to defects in the R 29 engines of the aircraft. More worryingly, the initial probe has pointed to a major flaw in the engine that seems to have occurred during the overhauling of the aircraft by the Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL). The entire fleet had also completed an indigenous upgrade programme last year that was executed by HAL. Raising a red flag on the serviceability of the fleet, Air Chief Marshal PV Naik said the initial probe hinted at a problem during the overhaul stage that went beyond the realm of day-to-day servicing. “It (last week’s crash) appears to be a fault in the low-pressure turbine blades of the aircraft. This is at the fourth line, at the overhaul stage,” the Air Chief said, explaining the possible cause of the MiG-27 crash. He added that the second crash last week, in which a MiG-21 went down, was due to a sudden loss of engine power but investigations on the cause were still on. With the grounding, the MiG-27 aircraft will not take part in the mega Vayushakti exercise that has been planned for this Sunday. The MiG-27s, which form the backbone of the IAF’s ground attack fleet, would otherwise had a major role in the exercise that is essentially a demonstration of air-to-ground attacks at day as well as night. Till the crash last week, the MiG-27 had been planned as one of the main attractions of the major exercise that

will witness more than 100 aircraft in the skies performing multiple operations, including precision-guided bombing and mock aerial combat. The MiG-27 will now be the only fighter in the IAF's inventory not to take part in the exercise. India had procured 120 of the fighter aircraft from Russia in the late 1980s and had started production in India at the Nashik HAL factory. The IAF has lost close to 35 of the aircraft to accidents in the past two decades. Last year, two MiG-27s crashed months after the upgrade of the fleet was completed. While the engine was not upgraded, the fighters were equipped with modern avionics and a pilot-friendly cockpit with multi-function displays and a head up display (HUD). (The Indian Express)

First India-China joint air exercise in 2012

After deciding to resume joint Army training exercises from next year, India and China will conduct their first-ever joint Air Force exercise in 2012. Air Chief Marshal P V Naik has said that initial planning for the war game has started but the venue for the exercise as well as its scope is yet undecided. "Around 2012 we hope we will also be able to do an exercise with China as the Army has already taken a lead in this. Planning has already commenced, but political acceptance, suitable dates will take some time to come," the Air Chief said. While the two countries have held Army as well as naval exercises in the past, this would be the first time that the air forces of the two Asian powers will take part in a joint war game. The only other such interaction was in 2008, when the Surya Kiran aerobatic team of the Air Force went on a weeklong tour of China. The decision to conduct a joint Air Force war game was apparently taken during the last month's defence secretary talks between the two countries in Beijing. (The Indian Express)

Pak tries to put water on table, India says no

Ahead of the Foreign Secretary-level talks, India and Pakistan are locked in a subtle diplomatic battle: Islamabad wants to send water and power officials for the talks, which New Delhi has politely declined. As India wants to focus on the issue of terrorism for the February 25 talks, it wants to keep specialist officials, dealing with other bilateral disputes, out of the table. Sources said New Delhi wants to keep the talks restricted to the Foreign Secretaries and the team of officials from the Ministry of External Affairs in India and Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Pakistan. While India wants to focus on terrorism, Pakistan is keen on raising Kashmir and the river water-sharing issue. So, last week, when Islamabad told New Delhi about the list of officials who would be coming for the FS-level talks, India said a "polite no" to the Pakistan Foreign office's list which included water and power officials. India's focus for the talks was evident from Foreign secretary Nirupama Rao's remarks at the MEA-IISS seminar in London on Monday, where she stressed that "effective action against such groups" by Pakistan is an "absolute must" if the process of normalisation that India desires with Pakistan was to happen. She said India is making "another sincere attempt" to initiate dialogue with Pakistan. "We hope we can build, in a graduated manner, better communication and a serious and responsive dialogue to address issues of concern between our two countries," she said, referring to the talks. Sources said eight officials from both sides will be participating in the talks. Pakistan Foreign secretary Salman Bashir will be accompanied by Director General (South Asia) in the Pakistan Foreign ministry, Afrasiyab, and Pakistan Foreign office spokesperson Abdul Basit. Afrasiyab, it may be noted, was the Deputy High

Commissioner to India, and has spent more than six years here in the last 11 years. From the Indian side, Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao will be accompanied by Joint Secretary (Pakistan) Y K Sinha, who took charge last year, and MEA's official spokesperson Vishnu Prakash. The High Commissioners will also be part of the official talks, as Pakistan High Commissioner Shahid Malik will be there and Indian High Commissioner to Pakistan Sharat Sabharwal will also be present. Sabharwal's inputs, sources said, are going to be key to the deliberations, since he has had first-hand knowledge of the Pakistan government. Sabharwal's presence, it may be noted, will also be crucial since he is the only diplomat from the Indian side who has had the opportunity to meet the ISI chief Shuja Pasha last year. (The Indian Express)

No progress if India adopts narrow agenda: Qureshi

Pakistan Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi warned on Tuesday that Thursday's Foreign Secretary-level talks with India would not achieve progress if its scope was limited to "a narrow agenda" of terrorism-related issues. Pakistan wanted "a meaningful dialogue" with India on a broad range of bilateral issues "that are of concern to both sides," including Kashmir, said Mr. Qureshi. Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao indicated on Monday that the talks would mostly be restricted to India's "core concerns" over cross-border terrorism. The Pakistani Foreign Minister said, "Doing so would be a very narrow way of looking at real challenges." "We want all issues that are of concern to both sides to be brought on the table so that dialogue is serious, meaningful and will be result-oriented." Mr. Qureshi was speaking at the China Institute of International Studies, an influential Beijing think-tank. "If India restricts the agenda or tries to narrow it down to its own immediate needs, then I am afraid much progress will not be achieved," he said. Pakistan sought an early resumption of the composite dialogue, which was suspended following the November 2008 terror attacks in Mumbai. Thursday's Foreign Secretary-level talks in New Delhi would serve as "an exploratory meeting". He called on both sides to adopt "a constructive approach" with a view to "taking the next step of resuming the composite dialogue." In his visit to China, Mr. Qureshi has briefed senior officials, including Premier Wen Jiabao and Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi, on Pakistan's progress in tackling terrorism. China has, in the past, expressed concern over links between some Pakistani-based terror outfits and extremist groups in its troubled Xinjiang region, which borders Pakistan. On Tuesday, Mr. Qureshi said Pakistan "had taken prominent steps" in clamping down on terror groups. He rejected suggestions that Pakistan had not done enough in bringing to justice the perpetrators of the Mumbai attacks, instead blaming "political considerations" for India's decision to suspend the dialogue. "After 14 months, India has reengaged with us and invited us for a dialogue," he said. "I think there is a growing realisation within India that [suspending the dialogue] was a negative, knee-jerk reaction that was counterproductive." Asked about concerns in India that Pakistan had not done enough to dismantle terror networks operating on its soil, he said the two countries needed "more engagement and more co-operation," irrespective of their differing views on Pakistan's actions. He said Pakistan was "as much a victim [of terror], perhaps more" than India was. He added: "For the sake of discussion, even if we agree we have not done enough [on terror], does that qualify for suspending dialogue? Or does that invite greater understanding and co-operation? I think the answer is... more

engagement, sitting across the table and making the other person understand each other's concerns. Not the policy India followed, of suspending talks." (The Hindu)

India, Pakistan head for talks, low on hope

A breakthrough is not on the menu between the Indian and Pakistani foreign secretaries on Thursday. But if the two sides are looking to pick up the threads of a frayed relationship, even in government many are not hopeful about how the engagement will pan out. Speaking at a function on Wednesday, home minister P Chidambaram said he was not very optimistic about the foreign secretary-level talks. Asked whether he was optimistic, he first said this was a state of mind. According to an agency report, the minister then said he was "not very optimistic". The home minister also made it clear that the Pakistani side could not be stopped from raising any issue it wanted to -- there had been suggestions that Islamabad might bring Balochistan to the table -- just as the Indians had the leeway to make their points. Chidambaram said India will seek access to LeT bosses like Zaki-ur-Rehman Lakhvi who have been named in the 26/11 case. The relationship continues to run the risk of coming asunder again if another Mumbai-scale terror attack is launched from Pakistan. It will not be business as usual, say sources. The Indian agenda is chock-full of terror concerns, and Chidambaram said as much, which foreign secretary Nirupama Rao will lay out when she meets her Pakistani counterpart Salman Bashir. Government sources said, "We're going in to talks with an open mind, but are fully conscious of the limitations imposed by the trust deficit after the Mumbai attacks." So, the best thing that one can expect from the talks will be that they will be the start of more dialogues, both at the official and political levels. The terror message will be re-emphasised by both the foreign minister and the NSA. But officials said, the tenor will be more cooperative and less a harangue against Pakistan. The whole idea, said sources, would be to "draw" Pakistan into a dialogue and establish an "effective" channel of communication so that Pakistan can "assist" India. The message is the same but India has also decided to nuance its approach to Pakistan to get it to "cooperate" and "work together" on terrorism rather than reading out the riot act. Rao on Monday described the Pakistan relationship as "complex", therefore, nobody, not even Bashir, who arrived on Wednesday, wants to pre-judge the outcome of the talks. But in a sign that wide divergences and the ghost of Sharm el-Sheikh keep the two sides apart, no joint statement is likely to be negotiated after the talks. What is India looking for? Well, the bottom-line continues to be that India needs satisfaction on its terror concerns for the relationship to move to the next level. Top level sources said India would ask Pakistan to put the trial of Lakhvi and six others on a fast track -- the trial has been on only in fits and starts. Hafiz Saeed, chief of Lashkar-e-Toiba, may have been banned by the UN but he continues to operate freely in Pakistan, whip up jihadist frenzy against India in full view of the authorities. Some low hanging fruit like humanitarian initiatives on fishermen may be achievable, said sources. According to official government figures, 2,302 fishermen and 437 boats have been in Pakistan custody. Pakistan released 1,909 Indian fishermen between January 2005 and 2010, but no boat has been released since 2003. Government told Parliament on Wednesday it "expects Pakistan to bring the perpetrators of the Mumbai terrorist attack to justice, unravel the full conspiracy behind the attack, fulfil its commitment to dismantle the infrastructure of terrorism and deny sanctuary to all terrorist

groups that operate from its soil". The Pakistan side is expected to raise the issues of Kashmir, Balochistan and water issues in the talks with senior officials in Pak government threatening war with India if India does not stop "stealing" Pakistan's water, this is the new hot-button issue being pushed by Pakistan. (The Times of India)

Kabul attack: 2 army men among 9 Indians dead, special plane being to bring bodies

India sent a special aircraft to Afghanistan to bring back the bodies of its nationals including army officials, who died in suicide attacks in Kabul. A team of army officers and officials from the Ministry of External Affairs will also visit Kabul to review the security situation there in the backdrop of the attacks. At least nine Indians were among 17 people killed as Taliban suicide bombers carried out a string of attacks in the heart of Kabul, targeting Indian interests in Afghanistan. The Indians, who died in the incident, include two army officers, government officials, an ITBP constable and a tabla player who was part of a cultural delegation to Afghanistan. Five other army officers were also injured in the attack. The bombers struck at a number of guest houses, particularly at Park Residence, rented out by the Indian embassy for its staffers and those linked to India's developmental work in Afghanistan. (The Times of India)

Indian Occupied Kashmir:

15 injured in Kashmir violence

At least 15 people were injured as fresh clashes broke out between protesters demanding the release of youths arrested on charges of stone-throwing and security forces in different parts of Kashmir on Sunday. (The Hindu)

Social front:

Bt brinjal: PM steps in after Pawar SOS

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has stepped in to make it clear that Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh will not have the last word on the introduction of Bt Brinjal or any GM (genetically modified) food. This comes after a strong note from Union Agriculture Minister Sharad Pawar to the Prime Minister last week suggesting that ad hoc decisions on GM foods a clear reference to the moratorium on Bt Brinjal would "set the clock back", demoralise Indian scientists and jeopardies R&D crucial to food security. Last week, the PM decided to define his government's approach to the introduction of genetically modified (GM) foods after his Economic Advisory Council (PMEAC) echoed Pawar's push for frontline technology in agriculture. Singh called a meeting of Pawar, Ramesh and Science & Technology Minister Prithviraj Chavan. Sources said the recommendations of the Genetic Engineering Approval Committee and the Review Committee of Genetic Manipulation on the safety of transgenic crops would now be considered by this new team the PM, Agriculture, S&T and Environment & Forests Ministers rather than be left to Environment & Forests to decide unilaterally, as happened this time. This meeting was fixed but had to be called off after the Opposition raised the issue of rising prices in Parliament. "A date has not been fixed but it could be this

Saturday,” said sources. Ramesh imposed an indefinite moratorium on the introduction of Bt Brinjal on the grounds that sufficient tests had not been conducted to render it safe for public consumption. The manner in which he did it, though, prompted many in the Government to say that it was ideology not science that dictated his decision. Those who disagreed with him included HRD Minister Kapil Sibal, Chavan and Pawar, and finally the PMEAC who favoured the introduction of GM food citing the success of Bt Cotton. On February 15, Pawar wrote to the PM: “Varieties which have stood the strictest scrutiny of our very elaborate regulatory regime, based purely on scientific analysis, should be vigorously encouraged... Any hesitation on our part would not only set the clock back on our endeavours at an evergreen revolution but completely demoralize our scientific community. It takes years of hard work and extraordinary scientific acumen to conduct research in these areas. Any ad hoc decisions, without adequate consultations, with the main stakeholders that is ICAR and Department of Agriculture, completely jeopardizes the sustained efforts of our agricultural scientists.” He said that his worry was that “any hesitation” could hamper research in India on transgenic variety of potato, rice, mustard, tomato, groundnut, chickpea and pigeon pea currently underway. Seeking a transparent regulatory regime, Pawar said: “Absence of clarity on some of these issues could jeopardize R&D not only by the private seed companies but also by public institutions. I have in mind the recent developments in keeping in abeyance the introduction of Bt Brinjal after approval by the GEAC.” Pawar strongly argued that the success (of Bt Cotton) “needs to be replicated in food, fruit and vegetable crops to ensure long lasting food security.” He added that while India was still taking “hesitant steps,” the world is moving ahead. “The global area under these crops has increased by more than 60-fold with 25 countries planting 125 million hectares of GM crops in 2008. Nineteen crops have so far been approved for planting in various countries out of which four namely corn, soyabean, cotton and canola are extensively grown,” he said. The PMEAC held similar views when it released its Review of the Economy (2009-10) last Saturday. “The regulatory framework should clearly assess performance in the field and the impact on environmental and food safety issues and bring the results into the public domain at the shortest possible time.” The controversy has prompted the PMO to push a bill to create a Biotechnology Regulatory Authority of India which would be later handed the charge to decide on individual crop and foods.

Supreme Court wants proof of Maoists’ presence in varsity

With the Andhra Pradesh government asserting that Maoists had infiltrated the Osmania University campus as students, the Supreme Court on Tuesday directed the State to produce reported intelligence inputs to support the claim. Senior counsel Harish Salve submitted before a Bench of Justices G.S. Singhvi and A.K. Ganguly that Maoists had infiltrated the campus and read out statements of some Maoist leaders to drive home the point that the agitation was being spearheaded by naxalites. Justice Singhvi intervened and said: “Rapid Action Force entering the campus in the garb of dealing with anti-social elements is certainly a serious matter. Where is the evidence of infiltration inside the campus? What is the proof available with the government? We would like to have it.” Mr. Salve replied: “There are intelligence inputs available, but we can’t make it public. But certainly we can make it available to the court.” Justice Singhvi said: “We can

understand the deployment of police force, but for the deployment of RAF or paramilitary forces, we would like to see the secret intelligence inputs you have. Produce them.” Earlier, Mr. Salve submitted that the government never interfered in meetings convened by students. He said that on certain occasions fiery speeches were made by speakers, declaring that their only aim was to pull down the edifice of the State government. Justice Ganguly said: “In a democracy that is the view of the speakers.” Justice Singhvi added: “You can’t change the culture of human beings. This is part of the freedom of speech and expression. We understand that the division is vertical whether it is among professors, students, lawyers or others.” Counsel Prashant Bhushan and Ramakrishna Reddy, appearing for the respondents, submitted that over 200 persons committed suicide since the agitation began. As it was an emotive issue, they said, it should be tackled politically and not as a mere law and order problem. Justice Singhvi said: “Only ordinary people commit suicide in such agitations.” Denying Maoist infiltration, Mr. Reddy traced the origin of the Telangana struggle to 1949 and, said some of the students who participated in the 1969 agitation might have become Maoist leaders and made some statements. This would not mean that there was Maoist infiltration and that the RAF could enter the campus under the garb of Maoist infiltration, he added. The Bench listed the case for further hearing to February 25. (The Hindu)

M F Hussain given Qatar nationality

India's eminent artist M.F. Husain, who has been under attack from Hindu fundamentalists for his paintings of Hindu goddesses and has been living in Dubai and London, has been given Qatar nationality, it was reported on Thursday. "I, the Indian origin painter M.F. Husain at 95, have been honoured by Qatar nationality," the celebrated artist wrote above a line sketch of a horse, the leitmotif of much of his work. The black and white drawing was carried by The Hindu newspaper. In a signed article, The Hindu editor N. Ram wrote that the artist had given him the news from Dubai "by reading out the few lines he had written on a black-and-white line drawing that he released to The Hindu". According to the report, Husain did not apply for the nationality but it was conferred on him at the instance of the emirate's ruling family. Photographer, designer and activist Ram Rahman, who is close to the Husain family, responded to the news by saying: "The citizenship has been offered by the sheikha, the wife of the sheikh of Qatar, and it has several implications. "On a personal note, I feel it is quite clear that the man who is 95 years old and cannot return to his country to die, there is no point of him remaining an Indian citizen." "It would be a tragedy. He has not given up his Indian citizenship yet but if he decides to take up the Qatari offer, he will not remain an Indian citizen anymore. It is also a reflection of our legal system because the cases against him will drag on for 20-30 years.... so it is justified if he takes up the Qatari offer," Rahman told IANS. (The Times of India)

Rising drug abuse? UN watchdog blames India

The United Nations narcotics watchdog, International Narcotics Control Board (INCB), has blamed India for the rising drug abuse in its neighbourhood, particularly in Bangladesh and Bhutan. Worse, the UN agency says India is the primary source of

injectible drugs such as pethidine and morphine widely abused in these countries. In fact, more and more addicts in these countries are shifting to injectible narcotics abuse. "The widespread abuse of pharmaceutical preparations containing narcotic drugs such as codeine is an ongoing problem in Bangladesh. Such preparations are smuggled into that country from India," the report says. The INCB report also gives details of seizure made in these countries. In 2008, drug enforcement agencies in Bangladesh seized 53,239 bottles containing codeine-based syrup and 226 ampoules containing pethidine and morphine. The same year, agencies seized 554 tablets containing codeine. But this was far less than the huge seizure of 70,000 tablets made in 2007. A record seizure of Buprenorphine, a widely abused injectible drug, of 14,782 ampoules, was made by law enforcement authorities in that country in 2008. These too were smuggled into Bangladesh from India. Pharmaceutical preparations containing benzodiazepines are among the drugs most widely abused in Bhutan. More than 1,060 tablets containing chlordiazepoxide and 240 strips of tablets containing nitrazepam were seized in 2007 in Bhutan and the trend continued in 2008. The suspected origin of the seized drugs was India, according to the INCB report. Besides smuggling drugs to neighbouring countries, the report says India has become one of the main sources of drugs sold through illegal internet pharmacies. Orders placed with such pharmacies are often dispatched to buyers in other countries through courier or postal services. The UN agency asked India to increase its vigilance in detecting the misuse of courier and postal services to smuggle controlled substances out of the country. It said the majority of clandestine shipments of controlled substances detected in India were destined for Australia and countries in North America and Europe. (The Times of India)

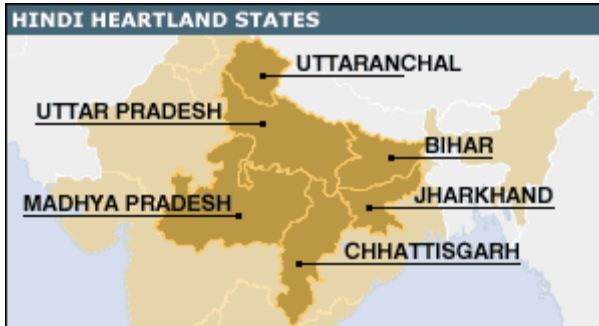
Gender disparity still wide; India ranks 114th globally

While India's robust growth over the past few years has helped it reduce the income gap with developed countries, the country still lags far behind in terms of its ranking in human development and gender development index. The Economic Survey has emphasised that much needs to be done to reduce disparities between men and women. Gender development index is currently at 0.594 with India ranking 114 out of 155 countries. This is an improvement from its score of 0.514 in 1996. The gender development index based on standard of living, life expectancy and education level has registered a dip in male-female disparity. Life expectancy at birth for females between 2002-2006 stood at 64.2 years, higher than 62.6 years for men. However, infant mortality for girls was higher at 56 per 1,000 live births compared to 55 for boys. States that have performed well include Delhi, Chandigarh, Goa, Kerala and Puducherry while Bihar has the lowest score in GDI. Experts hope that gender development indices can be used as tools to re-allocate resources for programmes and schemes designed to correct gender gaps at all level of governance through monitoring and tracking of progress regularly. (The Times of India)

Foreign Relations:

Regional Report

Central India (Hindi Heartland)

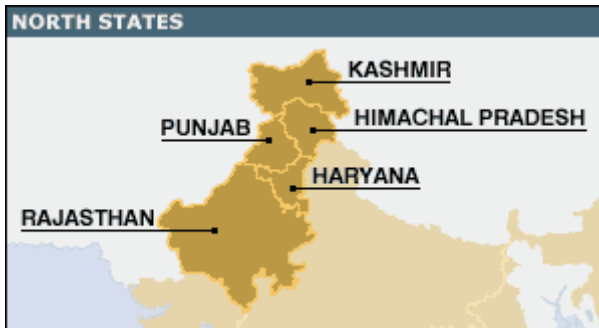


Politics:

Social front:

Economic Front:

The North



Politics:

Social front:

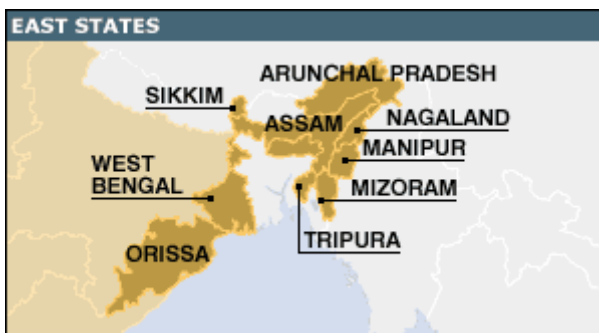
Economic Front:

Farmers to explore Africa for agriculture prospects

Ever enterprising Punjab farmers are now vying to explore the vast barren tracts of land in Africa for agriculture prospects. With a few African countries opening up farming activities to Indian farmers, the peasants here are keen to try out the 'new world'. They, however, need guidance from the state and the Centre in the form of policies regarding their safety in the socially and politically fragile cultures and governance in Africa. The Confederation of Indian Industries (CII), Punjab Chapter, has already submitted a

blueprint to the state government for action. The report says there exist huge opportunities for farmers to adopt agriculture in Africa. It says Chinese farmers have been already showing interest in rice cultivation in that continent and India should also grab the opportunities. “Though Africa is considered politically volatile, there are nations like Tanzania, Ghana and Zimbabwe that are desperately looking for enterprising farmers who can help them cultivate their land for the rising demand of food. The farmers, our studies conclude, can reap benefits apart from providing jobs and learning options to locals,” says CII state head Gunbir Singh. He has taken up the matter with Deputy Chief Minister Sukhbir Singh Badal and Minister of State for External Affairs Preneet Kaur. Both have reportedly promised to do their best for the farmers looking to plough African fields. According to Gunbir, many African countries do not have dairy or poultry base and farmers from Punjab can immensely contribute in these allied agriculture activities too. “Most countries (in Africa) get rainfall for six to nine months in a year. Some have giant rivers and superb underground aquifers. And above all, they have cultivable land holdings in thousands of acres, if not hectares,” says Gunbir, adding that the place provides a conducive climate for the farmers to thrive. Showing interest in the report, the state had already appointed former head of Punjab Agro Export Corporation R N Gupta as its nodal officer. But Gupta was recently transferred and a new person is yet to be given the charge. “I am taking up the issue afresh. We want the state government to respond to the gesture from African nations and frame policies to streamline the possible ‘exodus’ as many farmers are showing interest to reach out to the ‘forbidden lands’,” says Gunbir, adding that they would provide all assistance to the government to have tie-ups with the various countries. “MoUs with these nations will not only for manpower, but also for the export of farming technology and equipment,” states the CII report. It adds that the Punjabi youth must now focus on Africa for agriculture rather than doing menial jobs in the US or Europe. The report also discusses how the landholdings in Punjab have consistently shrunk due to uneconomic cultivation levels. Africa, it states, provides cheap labour but require framing techniques that the Punjabi farmers are well-versed with. (The Indian Express)

The East



Politics:

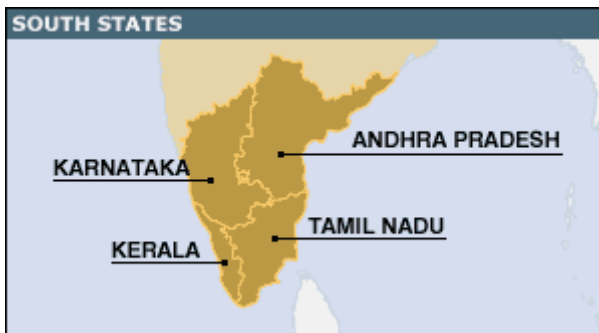
Social front:

Hailstorm destroys 2000 houses in West Bengal

A hailstorm destroyed more than 2,000 mud houses, damaged crops and uprooted trees in about 25 villages under Debra police station in West Midnapore district on 24th Feb. Police said the hailstorm, lasting about 30 minutes, razed to ground over 2000 houses, mostly of mud with asbestos roof. It also damaged vast fields of crops and uprooted trees. Several electric poles were also uprooted plunging the entire area into darkness. The district administration is gearing up to extend relief material to the victims. (The Times of India)

Economic Front:

The South



Politics:

Telangana: Hyderabad on the boil again, student attempts self-immolation

The premises of the Andhra Pradesh Assembly turned into a fortress on Saturday. While a large contingent of police and paramilitary forces guarded the building, barricades all over the area prevented the agitating students from Osmania University and the Telangana Students Joint Action Committee from taking their rallies to the Assembly. A number of students, who violated prohibitory orders and tried to march towards the Assembly to disrupt the ongoing Budget Session in support of separate Telangana state, were taken into preventive custody. Protests followed all over the city after the agitating students failed to break through the police cordons and barricades. S Yadavaiah, a class XII student of Noble City College, tried to immolate himself outside the Osmania University in protest against the delay in formation of Telangana state. The boy suffered serious burn injuries and was admitted to Gandhi hospital. The incident triggered more protests as hundreds of students tried to break the police barricades around the campus and clashed with them. When the students could not go out of the campus, they took out protest rallies inside. To spread panic, some students allegedly called up police control room and informed of a bomb in a train. Several long-distance trains were stopped at Warangal and were allowed to leave only after the Railway Police and Bomb Disposal Squad checked the trains thoroughly. However, officials later clarified that they wanted

to prevent students of Kakatiya University, Warangal, from coming to Hyderabad and that is why they stopped all the trains. For the first time since the agitation started, protesting students turned against the Osmania University on Saturday. Students pelted stones at the official car of OU Vice-Chancellor Tirupathi Rao when he tried to talk to them. Till now, students had not damaged anything on the university campus. Leaving nothing to chance, the security forces had on Friday midnight itself turned the Assembly premises and 3 km radius area around it into a fortress. All access points to the Assembly were blocked and traffic restrictions were imposed in the area. This resulted in massive traffic jams in the morning. Over 12,000 personnel were deployed to keep the situation under control. Local train services were also suspended as two stations were shut down for the day as a precautionary measure. (The Indian Express)

Social front:

Economic Front:

West India



Politics:

Raj Thackeray's new line: Irrigated land only for Marathis

Giving a new dimension to his son-of-the-soil campaign, Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) chief Raj Thackeray says land under irrigation in the state should be given only to Marathi people. "Irrigated land in the state should only be given to Marathi people," Raj said in a letter written to Marathi people in connection with "Marathi Bhasha Divas" (language day). Raj, who had been in the forefront of a campaign against North Indians last year, said his party would push for an Ordinance which will deny a non-Maharashtrian possession of any land under irrigation in the state. Citing example of neighbouring Karnataka, Raj said, "My party members would pursue the matter with the state government to pass an ordinance like the one in Karnataka." Pressing the demand further, Raj said the decision about the irrigated lands should also apply to land acquired earlier. "Non-Marathis holding land under irrigation should share it with Marathis, else we will fight for it," he said. Responding to criticism for not coming out with any development programme, Raj said the development has been stalled due to "influx of migrants from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar." "The norths Indians have stopped the growth of

Marathi youths by grabbing jobs from farming to industry sector," he said. (The Times of India)

Social front:

Five die of swine flu in Gujarat

Five deaths due to swine flu were reported from Gujarat in the last 48 hours, taking the death toll in the State to 285, officials said on Sunday. (The Hindu)

Economic Front: