

May 8, 2026 – Dinamani Newspaper – Tit bits

1. Several passengers from the cruise ship 'MV Hondius', where a Hantavirus infection was detected, have returned to various countries without proper medical monitoring.

(i) Since the Netherlands-registered ship began its voyage from Argentina, authorities suspect that the passengers may have contracted the infection there. The World Health Organization is investigating the matter. So far, three people – a Dutch couple and a German woman – have died, while eight others have been infected.

(ii) After the first death occurred on April 24, more than 40 passengers from around 12 countries disembarked at Saint Helena, a British Overseas Territory in the South Atlantic Ocean, and traveled back to their respective countries. This alarming information has come to light only about two weeks later.

(iii) The virus, which can spread through rodent droppings, has been confirmed to be the "Andes" strain found in South America. This is the only known type of Hantavirus capable of human-to-human transmission. As a result, many countries have intensified efforts to trace and isolate passengers who returned from the voyage.

(iv) In Singapore, two elderly individuals have been isolated and are under close observation. Similarly, one infection has been confirmed in Switzerland. In the United Kingdom, two passengers from the ship have voluntarily isolated themselves.

(v) At present, the MV Hondius is sailing toward Spain's Canary Islands. More than 140 passengers and crew members are still on board the vessel.

(vi) The body of the German woman who died on May 2 remains on the ship. Recently, three people, including the ship's doctor, were airlifted by helicopter near Cape Verde Islands for emergency treatment and transported to hospitals in Europe. Meanwhile, a female flight attendant who had contact with an infected passenger, despite not traveling on the ship, has been isolated in a hospital in Amsterdam. If she tests positive, she would become the first known case outside the ship. The World Health Organization stated that it is closely monitoring the situation.

2. The Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways has extended by another five years, until 2030–31, the subsidy scheme provided to Indian companies registering merchant ships in India. In a statement issued on Thursday, the Ministry said:

(i) The Central Government had introduced a five-year scheme with an allocation of ₹1,624 crore to provide subsidies to Indian shipping companies participating in global tenders floated by Central ministries and public sector enterprises for importing Government cargo. The Union Cabinet approved the scheme in July 2021.

(ii) The scheme was launched with the objective of strengthening India's maritime transport and global shipping presence, while also encouraging the registration of merchant ships under the Indian flag.

(iii) Under the scheme, ships registered in India (flying the Indian national flag) after February 1, 2021, and less than 10 years old, are eligible for a subsidy equal to either 15% of the lowest bid quoted by a foreign company or the difference between the bid quoted by the Indian-flagged ship and the foreign company's bid – whichever is lower.

(iv) For Indian-flagged ships registered before February 1, 2021, the subsidy was fixed at 10%. The Ministry stated that this subsidy scheme has now been extended for another five years until 2030–31.

3. Union Labour and Employment Minister Mansukh Mandaviya launched a free annual health check-up scheme for all workers aged 40 years and above across the country. Speaking at the launch event held at the ESIC Medical College and Hospital in Delhi, he said:

(i) The Central Government recently implemented four new labour codes to ensure the welfare, social security, and dignity of workers across the country. The Government remains committed to strengthening social security for all workers. Measures are also being taken to empower the workforce and youth through employment generation and welfare schemes.

(ii) Ten years ago, the number of beneficiaries covered under the Central Government's social security schemes stood at 30 crore. It has now increased to 94 crore. In percentage terms, beneficiary coverage has risen from 19% to 64%.

(iii) Similarly, the number of beneficiaries under the Employees' State Insurance Corporation (ESIC) scheme has increased from 7 crore a decade ago to 15 crore at present.

(iv) The annual health check-up scheme for workers has now been introduced. Under this initiative, all workers aged 40 years and above across the country will receive a comprehensive medical examination once every year.

(v) These health check-ups will be conducted through camps organized at ESIC hospitals nationwide. He said that early detection of health problems through regular screening would help prevent serious illnesses.

4. Analysis of a controversial Government order (G.O.) dated February 24, 2026, which reportedly dilutes environmental protections for hill areas in Tamil Nadu.

(i) Origin and Purpose of HACA (Hill Area Conservation Authority)

- HACA was created in 1990 by the Tamil Nadu Government to protect fragile mountain ecosystems from unregulated growth and mineral theft.
- Under Government Order No. 44, HACA's role is to ensure that "developmental" projects do not prioritize economic gain over the ecological stability of the Western Ghats.
- Mandatory approval from HACA is required for converting land for agriculture, creating housing layouts, mining, tourism projects, and constructing dams, power plants, or roads in protected zones.

(ii) Context of Global and National Reports

- Gadgil Report (2011): Recommended a total ban on mining, dams, and construction in the Western Ghats, but was rejected by the Central and five State Governments.
- Kasturirangan Report (2013): Modified Gadgil's suggestions to satisfy Governmental demands, which the article argues began the era of rapid environmental degradation under the guise of "development".

(iii) Analysis of the "Danger of the Decree" (G.O. dated 24.02.2026)

- The previous Government issued this decree claiming it would "simplify approval procedures for housing layouts" to encourage urban expansion.
- The order effectively dismantles HACA's power by removing vast tracts of land from its protective jurisdiction.
- In areas removed from HACA's oversight, agricultural lands can now be converted to housing plots, and mining, road building, and resort construction can proceed without environmental clearance.

(iv) State-wide Impact and Geographic Exclusions

- Coimbatore: The order reportedly classifies only Valparai as a hill area, excluding ecologically sensitive spots like Velliangiri.
- Erode: The entire district has been removed from HACA's jurisdiction, ignoring major ranges like Thalaimalai.
- Tirunelveli: Protections for Agasthyamalai have been weakened.
- Selective Protection: Only Nilgiris and Kodaikanal have been largely retained under the Authority's scope.

(v) Impact on Wildlife and Human-Animal Conflict

- Elephant Corridors: Herd migration paths from Karnataka through Sathyamangalam to Coimbatore (Thadagam Valley) and Mudumalai are threatened by new, unregulated resorts and brick kilns.
- Migration Blockage: Since elephants cannot "jump" over mountains, they rely on valley paths at the foothills. Encroachment in these areas forces wildlife into human settlements, multiplying human-animal conflicts.
- Food Chain Disruption: Habitat loss for smaller animals like foxes and leopards leads to an increase in wild boars and peacocks, which subsequently causes massive crop damage for farmers.

(vi) Environmental and Social Consequences

- Water Scarcity: The destruction of hills leads to the loss of forests, which causes rainfall to fail. This could turn Tamil Nadu into a desert.
- Irreversible Loss: Mountain ranges that took millions of years to form are being endangered by short-term policies that could destroy them in a single month.

5. Analysis of the current power crisis in Tamil Nadu

(i) Current Electricity Demand Scenario

- On April 21, 2026, Tamil Nadu's electricity demand reached a new historic peak of 21,060 MW.
- Intense heat waves, with temperatures exceeding 100 degrees Fahrenheit in many districts, have led to a massive surge in the use of air conditioners and coolers.
- Daily demand in Southern states has risen from 69,934 MW to 73,805 MW. Tamil Nadu currently has the highest power demand among Southern states.
- While the average daily demand is typically 16,000 MW, it is expected to remain exceptionally high during the peak summer period from May 4 to May 28.

(ii) Causes of Shortages and Local Disruptions

- Simultaneous use of high-power cooling devices in residential and commercial areas causes local transformers to face excessive loads, resulting in power failures.
- Ongoing shortages are also attributed to deficits in gas supply.

(iii) Steps Taken by the Government

- To manage the summer peak, the Tamil Nadu Electricity Board (Tangedco) received approval to purchase 500 MW of power from Greenko Company in Andhra Pradesh.
- This agreement is set for four years, with an annual payment of ₹1.50 crore per megawatt. The supply is specifically intended for peak hours between 6:00 PM and midnight.
- The Government is also planning to buy additional power from the open market to bridge the gap caused by the heatwave.

(iv) Renewable Energy Status

- Wind Power Leadership: Tamil Nadu leads India in wind energy production, with over 20,000 wind turbines generating approximately 8,923 MW.
- Seasonal Advantage: Windmills in districts like Thoothukudi, Kanyakumari, Tiruppur, and Coimbatore produce maximum electricity between April and September.

(v) Proposed Solutions for Conservation

Producing electricity is not enough; it must be used efficiently to avoid waste.

- Efficient Lighting: Households are encouraged to switch to LED bulbs and completely avoid old incandescent or tube lights.
- Natural Design: Homes should be designed with proper ventilation and windows to utilize natural sunlight during the day, reducing the need for artificial lighting.
- Appliance Maintenance: Regular cleaning of fan blades and light fixtures ensures they operate at peak efficiency.
- Smart AC Usage: When using air conditioning, doors and windows must be tightly sealed, and painting walls with light colors can help keep rooms cooler.
- Kitchen Efficiency: Using wide-bottomed vessels on induction stoves reduces cooking time and saves energy.
- Solar Expansion: The Government should provide more subsidies to encourage the installation of rooftop solar panels.

Through a combination of strategic Government purchases and disciplined individual conservation, the State can successfully navigate the current electricity shortage.