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1. India–US Interim Trade Agreement Talks

The next round of negotiations to finalize all aspects of the India–US interim trade agreement will begin in New Delhi on Monday and continue for four days.

(i) The Indian delegation will be led by Chief Negotiator Darpan Jain, while the US delegation will be headed by Chief Negotiator Brendan Lynch.

(ii) Besides finalizing the interim trade agreement, both sides also plan to advance discussions on a comprehensive trade agreement covering market access, tariff concessions, customs duties, trade benefits, investment promotion, and economic security.

(iii) Under the interim trade agreement framework finalized in February, the United States withdrew additional tariffs imposed on India and reduced reciprocal tariffs from 25% to 18%. India agreed to provide tariff concessions for American goods. India also expressed its intention to purchase goods worth $500 billion from the US over the next five years, including fuel, aircraft and aircraft components, and technology products.

2. General N.S. Raja Subramani Assumes Office as Chief of Defence Staff (CDS)

General N.S. Raja Subramani, who hails from Tamil Nadu, has assumed office as India's Chief of Defence Staff (CDS).

(i) He succeeds General Anil Chauhan, who retired from the post.

(ii) Third CDS of India

- India's first CDS was General Bipin Rawat, who assumed office on January 1, 2020.
- He died in a helicopter crash in Tamil Nadu in December 2021.
- General Anil Chauhan became the second CDS on September 30, 2022.
- With the completion of Chauhan's tenure, Raja Subramani has become the third CDS.
- He is regarded in defence circles as an expert on matters relating to Pakistan and China.

3. Toll Plazas and the 60-km Distance Rule

According to rules framed by the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways in 2008, the minimum distance between two toll plazas should be 60 kilometres. However, this requirement is often not followed in practice.

(i) Although the Ministry argues that the rule does not apply to highways established before the 2008 amendments, it has frequently used various exemptions even for newer highways, often citing revenue generation and project viability.

(ii) Many highways continue to operate under 30-year Build-Operate-Transfer (BOT) agreements signed before 2008. Even after these periods expire, toll collection often continues, frequently at higher rates. The National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) justifies this by citing contractual and legal obligations.

(iii) The 2008 rules contain a provision allowing exceptions where closely located toll plazas are necessary to improve revenue potential or make highway expansion projects financially viable. Toll plazas may also be permitted within 60 km for permanent bridges, mountain tunnels, or urban bypass roads.

(iv) Similarly, when national highways cross state borders, different taxation systems and administrative boundaries may result in toll plazas being located very close to one another.

(v) Recently, Union Road Transport and Highways Minister Nitin Gadkari acknowledged that having multiple toll plazas within a 60-km stretch is fundamentally unfair.

(vi) Along the approximately 2,200-km route between Delhi and Chennai, there are 37 toll plazas, including those operated by state highway authorities and private companies. Of these, 20 reportedly do not comply with the 60-km distance rule.

(vii) In Tamil Nadu, on the 700-km Chennai–Kanyakumari highway, 8 of the 10 toll-plaza gaps violate the mandatory 60-km rule. Examples include:

- Athur–Vikravandi: 43 km
- Etturvattam–Salaipudur: 45 km

(viii) Once private operators recover their construction costs, toll plazas are generally not shut down permanently. After the concession period ends, ownership returns to the Central Government. NHAI then assumes control and continues collecting user charges—usually at around 40% of the original toll rate—to fund maintenance and future expansion.

(ix) Continued toll collection for highway maintenance and expansion may be understandable. However, concerns arise when toll rates keep increasing and eventually approach the rates charged on newly built roads. If maintenance standards are poor, toll collection should arguably be suspended, but such issues rarely receive serious attention.

(x) Politicians, political parties, and even the judiciary have largely remained silent on the matter. Ordinary citizens bear the toll burden, while vehicles displaying political party flags often enjoy exemptions. As a result, there is little political pressure to address the issue, and the concerns raised by social activists and journalists frequently go unheard.

4. Israel Captures the Historic Beaufort Castle in Lebanon

Israel has captured the strategically important historic Beaufort Castle, located in a mountainous region of Lebanon.

(i) Since the creation of Israel in 1948, tensions have existed between Israel and Lebanon. The conflict intensified following Hamas's surprise attack on Israel and subsequent attacks by the Iran-backed Hezbollah movement.

(ii) After a ceasefire was reached between Iran and the United States, a separate ceasefire between Israel and the Lebanese Government was negotiated with US mediation in Washington. However, Hezbollah did not accept the agreement. Fighting therefore continued between Israeli forces and Hezbollah militants.

Israel had previously considered the Litani River as a security boundary with Lebanon. Following the recent conflict, Israeli forces crossed the river and gradually advanced deeper into Lebanese territory while engaging Hezbollah fighters.

(iii) Heavy fighting took place around the city of Nabatieh. Eventually, Israeli forces drove Hezbollah fighters from the area and captured the strategically significant hilltop fortress, raising the Israeli flag there.

(iv) Second Capture

- Israeli forces had previously captured Beaufort Castle during the 1982 Lebanon War.
- Israel maintained control of the site until withdrawing from Lebanon in 2000.
- After 26 years, Israeli forces have once again advanced deep into Lebanon and taken control of the fortress.

5. Fuel Prices Increased Again in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka has once again increased petrol and diesel prices, according to an announcement by the Ceylon Petroleum Corporation.

(i) The increase has been attributed to disruptions in crude oil supplies caused by tensions in West Asia.

(ii) President Anura Kumara Dissanayake has repeatedly urged citizens to use fuel more efficiently. This marks the fifth fuel-price increase in the country.

(iii) Revised prices:

- Petrol: Increased by 24 Sri Lankan rupees to LKR 434 per litre.
- Diesel: Increased by 15 Sri Lankan rupees to LKR 407 per litre.
- Kerosene: Increased by 20 Sri Lankan rupees to LKR 285 per litre.

(iv) Fuel prices have been raised five times between March 1 and May 31. The Sri Lankan rupee has also weakened against the US dollar since May.

6. Drone Attack on Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant

A drone attack was reported on the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant, Europe's largest nuclear power station, which is currently under Russian control.

(i) The Russia–Ukraine war has continued for more than four years. During the conflict, Russia has taken control of several Ukrainian territories, including the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant, one of the largest nuclear facilities in Europe.

Russia accused Ukraine of carrying out the drone attack, while Ukraine denied involvement.

7. PM SVANidhi Scheme Completes Six Years

The Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs has announced that more than ₹17,800 crore in loans has been disbursed under the PM SVANidhi Scheme scheme.

Key points:

- The scheme has completed six years.
- It aims to empower street vendors through:
    - Collateral-free loans
    - Social security support
    - Financial inclusion through digital technologies
- The programme is administered by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs and focuses on improving the economic resilience of street vendors.

8. India Reduces Windfall Tax on Fuel Exports

The Government of India has reduced the windfall tax imposed on exports of petrol, diesel, and aviation turbine fuel (ATF).

(i) Revised tax rates:

- Petrol export tax reduced to ₹1.50 per litre.
- Diesel export tax reduced to ₹13.50 per litre.
- Aviation fuel export tax reduced to ₹9.50 per litre.

(ii) The revised rates came into effect on June 1.

(iii) Following military action by the United States and Israel against Iran on February 28, Iran responded by closing the Strait of Hormuz. This disrupted the movement of ships carrying crude oil and liquefied petroleum gas.

(iv) As a result of tensions in West Asia, crude oil prices rose from around $73 per barrel to above $100 per barrel. To prevent domestic shortages of petroleum products, the Indian Government imposed windfall taxes aimed at discouraging excessive exports.

(v) Tax changes over time:

- March 26:
  - Diesel: ₹21.50/litre
  - ATF: ₹29.50/litre
- April 11:
  - Diesel: ₹55/litre
  - ATF: ₹42/litre
- April 30:
  - Diesel reduced to ₹23/litre
  - ATF reduced to ₹33/litre
- May 16:
  - Diesel reduced to ₹16.50/litre
  - ATF reduced to ₹16/litre

(vi) From June 1:

- Diesel: ₹13.50/litre
- ATF: ₹9.50/litre
- Petrol: ₹1.50/litre

(vii) Taxes on petrol and diesel meant for domestic consumption remain unchanged.

(viii) The Finance Ministry also clarified that no road and infrastructure cess is being imposed on petrol and diesel exports.

(ix) Earlier, a special additional customs duty of ₹3 per litre had been imposed on petrol on May 16. This has now been reduced to ₹1.50 per litre.

9. Analysis of the proposed Mekedatu reservoir project and its potential consequences for both Karnataka and Tamil Nadu.

(i) Overview of the Mekedatu Dam Project

- The Karnataka Government is moving forward with plans to construct a massive reservoir at Mekedatu with a storage capacity exceeding 67 TMC.
- Karnataka has allocated ₹9,000 crore for the project and has recently released ₹1,000 crore to expedite the construction work.
- The project is significantly larger than Karnataka's existing dams on the Cauvery, such as Hemavathi, Harangi, and Kabini.

(ii) Impact on Karnataka (Aims and Justification)

- Karnataka justifies the project as a necessary measure to meet the increasing drinking water demands of Bengaluru.
- The primary goal for Karnataka is to capture and store surplus (overflow) water during high-rainfall years, which currently flows downstream into Tamil Nadu when Karnataka's other reservoirs are full.

(iii) Impact on Tamil Nadu (Water Scarcity and Surplus Flow)

- Tamil Nadu typically only receives its full water allocation during heavy monsoon years through overflow. The Mekedatu dam would effectively block all remaining natural surplus flow to Tamil Nadu.
- While the Supreme Court mandated an allocation of 177.25 TMC for Tamil Nadu, the state often struggles to receive even this amount during deficit years.
- In recent years, the flow to Tamil Nadu was less than 100 TMC, leading to severe droughts; the new dam would exacerbate this vulnerability.
- The project endangers the drinking water supply for 22 districts in Tamil Nadu that are fundamentally dependent on the Cauvery River.

(iv) Agricultural and Social Consequences in Tamil Nadu

- Approximately 26 lakh acres of fertile agricultural land across 12 districts would lose their source of irrigation if the dam is built.
- Loss of consistent water flow will turn the Cauvery delta into a barren waste, potentially forcing millions of farmers and laborers to become "economic refugees" as their livelihoods disappear.
- The dam would prevent the Mettur reservoir from reaching its capacity, disrupting the traditional irrigation schedules essential for the state’s food security.

The Union Government must intervene to stop the project, asserting that it should not grant environmental or technical clearance for a project that lacks the consent of the lower riparian state.

10. Role of milk in human nutrition and the importance of the dairy industry.

(i) History of the White Revolution in India

- The "White Revolution" was launched by the National Dairy Development Board in 1970 to increase milk production through a cooperative system.
- This initiative, also known as "Operation Flood," originally achieved significant success in Anand, Gujarat, through cooperative societies managed by milk producers.
- By converting surplus milk into various products, the project helped manage seasonal fluctuations in supply and shared profits directly with farmers.

(ii) India's Milk Production Profile

- Uttar Pradesh leads India in milk production with a 16.3% share, followed by Rajasthan at 12.6%.
- Per capita milk availability in India has grown significantly, rising from 176 grams per day in 1991 to 322 grams in 2015.
- India possesses 37 pure native cattle breeds, such as Sahiwal, Gir, and Red Sindhi, which are utilized for high-yield milk production.

(iii) Nutritional Importance and Daily Requirements

- Milk is considered a fundamental food that links environmental health with human health, supporting child growth and providing bone protection for the elderly.
- Recommended Daily Intake:
  - Children (1–10 years): At least 100 ml.
  - Youth (under 18 years): 250 ml.
  - Adults (over 18 years): 200 ml.
- While pure milk is a "divine food," adulterated milk can pose serious health hazards.

(iv) For Increasing Natural Milk Yield and

To ensure high-quality milk, the following specific cattle care and feeding practices are suggested :-

- Adding pumpkin (200–500g) and jaggery (50–100g) to cattle feed can naturally increase milk secretion.
- Feeding cows soaked grains like maize, pearl millet, or moong dal enhances yield.
- Using Azolla as a feed supplement can increase the protein and fat content in the milk.
- Cows should undergo deworming 35 to 45 days after calving to maintain healthy production levels.

(v) Global Recognition

- The United Nations designated June 1 as World Milk Day to raise awareness about the nutritional importance of milk and the sustainability of the dairy sector.