

The Indian Express

Front Page

Stand with Lankan people as they seek aspirations: India (Page no. 1)

(GS Paper 2, International Relations)

In its first reaction to the developments in Sri Lanka — a day after thousands of protesters stormed Sri Lanka President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's residence — India said that it “stands with the people of Sri Lanka” as they seek to realise their aspirations for prosperity and progress through “democratic means and values, established institutions and constitutional framework.

This underlining of democratic processes, institutions and Constitution was in reference to the popular anger that had exploded on the streets. Sunday was calmer in Colombo, according to Sri Lankan media reports.

The Ministry of External Affairs' official spokesperson Arindam Bagchi said, “India is Sri Lanka's closest neighbour and our two countries share deep civilizational bonds.” We are aware of the many challenges that Sri Lanka and its people have been facing, and we have stood with the Sri Lankan people as they have tried to overcome this difficult period.

In pursuance of the central place that Sri Lanka occupies in our Neighbourhood First policy, India has extended this year itself an unprecedented support of over US\$ 3.8 billion for ameliorating the serious economic situation in Sri Lanka.

We continue to closely follow the recent developments in Sri Lanka. India stands with the people of Sri Lanka as they seek to realize their aspirations for prosperity and progress through democratic means and values, established institutions and constitutional framework.

The Indian High Commission in Colombo said that High Commissioner Gopal Baglay met the Sri Lankan Agriculture minister. Various sections, diverse demands: one partner -#India!!!! High Commissioner met the Hon'ble Agriculture Minister and informed him about the arrival of more than 44,000 MT of urea supplied under a credit line extended by India to Sri Lanka. High Commissioner stressed that this latest assistance by India symbolises it's continued commitment to support the people of Sri Lanka, including Lanka's farmers, and bolster the efforts for food security of the country's citizens,” the Indian High Commission said, as it tweeted some pictures.

Editorial Page

It happened in Colombo (Page no. 8)

(GS Paper 2, International Relations)

July, as a month in the modern history of Sri Lanka, had a different meaning altogether until July 9, 2022. Previously, it either brought back dark memories of the 1983 July pogrom against Tamils or the ethnically and politically divided sentiments of the blood-stained end of the civil war between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE in July 2009.

However, July 9, 2022, now appears as a moment that victoriously marked a new civic beginning of the history of the island nation. I must say it was not an exaggeration to name it the republic day of Sri Lanka as many have done in the social media.

As far as the unbelievable number of people who occupied the streets of Colombo are concerned, it is reasonable to raise the recurring question again, how did this happen.

To my knowledge, answers to this question would inevitably contain ideologically biased perspectives, but the incidents unfolding since March 2022 tell the story themselves.

Only a small number of urban people, mainly from the middle and lower-middle class, gathered in their localities to silently protest, against the shortage of fuel, gas, milk powder and power cuts, in general, against the government for making their quotidian lives miserable.

Most of the time, the protests were self-declared with no organisational structure. People simply gathered at the site when a random person posted on social media that he or she would stand in a specific place and time.

Soon, it turned out to be a trend, though not very popular, on the way back after work, some people stopped at those protests in solidarity and vehicles passing by honked to show their support.

The numbers of people, as well as demonstrations, gradually increased, and on March 31, a silent protest near the president's private residence quickly changed into wild yelling.

Angry crowds attempted breaking barricades, and the clash between riot police and the people clearly indicated the latter's frustration. The slogans on gas, fuel and power cuts now noticeably altered not only to mark the failure of the president and the government but also to demand that President Gotabaya Rajapaksa “go home”.

Transition and Uncertainty (Page no. 8)

(GS Paper 3, Economy)

The five-year transition period after the adoption of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) on July 1, 2017, came to an end on June 30, 2022. With this, the era of GST compensation that the state governments were entitled to has ended.

While many state governments have asked for the compensation period to be extended by a few years, the actual fallout from the end of this critical revenue stream for states is unclear.

To tangibly assess the near-term outlook for state finances, we have to rely on the states' own estimates for their market borrowing requirements for the second quarter of 2022-23.

The indicative calendar of market borrowings by 23 state governments and two Union territories for the second quarter has pegged their total state development loan issuance — the primary source of financing state government deficits — at Rs 2.1 trillion.

This projected issuance is 29 per cent higher than the same period last year, and at an eight-quarter high. This high level of issuance projected by states reflects concerns that some of them might rightfully have regarding the uncertainty of their cash flows in the post-GST compensation era.

Of these 23 states, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Haryana, Punjab and Gujarat have indicated large increases in borrowings. Most of these states have an above-average dependence on GST compensation.

However, the state issuances this year (in the first quarter only Rs 1.1 trillion was raised by 18 states), will also be impacted by the changes initiated by the central government in determining the net borrowing ceiling of the state governments for 2022-23.

At the time of communicating to states their annual borrowing limits for the ongoing year, we understand that the Centre had informed state governments that their off-budget borrowings for the past two years (2020-21 and 2021-22) would be adjusted from their borrowing ceiling this year.

It appears that the calculation of the adjusted borrowing limit required the submission of detailed data by the state governments related to their off-budget borrowings for the last two fiscal years, followed by a thorough assessment of the same by the Centre.

Idea Page

Diary from a deluge (Page no. 9)

(GS Paper 3, Disaster Management)

Night was falling on the skyline of Silchar. The mighty Barak had by then made its detour through the second-largest urban conglomeration of Assam.

Turbid waters were gushing through the breached portion of an important embankment. Three-fourths of the 27 square-kilometre landmass that makes Silchar had been completely submerged.

The Barak was flowing with gusto at more than 1.5 meters above the danger level. And waters were rising thick and fast to make things even more horrific in the engulfing doom and despair.

In the heart of the town, euphemistically known as the “posh” enclave, where the real estate prices are perhaps some of the highest in the country, 18 families including ours were huddled in a five-storey housing complex to see before our disbelieving eyes how ravaging the river could be.

But the day started on an otherwise normal note for us, even as reports of waters sneaking into the low-lying areas of the town had been pouring in since the previous evening. There were incessant rains over the past few days.

Old-timers of the town were trying to recall if they had ever experienced downpours of such lethal intensity in the Barak Valley.

Weather offices confirmed that Assam and Meghalaya had by then recorded the highest June rainfall in 121 years with 858.1 mm, breaking the earlier record of 789.5 mm in 1966.

Not to miss the matter of fact statistics, flash flood had lashed Silchar in 1966 as well. To put things in perspective, the government initiative to build embankments along the Barak to save Silchar from frequent floods was first seen in the aftermath of the devastating inundation of 1966.

Various dykes along the town-side of the course of the river continued to be constructed in intervals from the Sixties till the Eighties.

The entire Barak Valley in general and its headquarters, Silchar, have always been vulnerable to recurring floods due to the Barak going in spate resulting from heavy rains upstream, around Manipur and Mizoram.

The recorded history provides information on the mammoth flooding in 1916, 1929, 1966, 1985, 1986, 1989, 1990, 1991 and 2004. On other occasions too, the Valley went through minor floods. Partial accounts of the deluge of 1929 are available in two important individual memoirs.

Explained

Uber in India (Page no. 13)

(GS Paper 2, Governance)

The Uber Files are a leak of 182 gigabytes of data that were obtained by The Guardian newspaper from an anonymous source and shared with the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) and its media partners from 30 countries, including The Indian Express.

The dump comprises 124,000 records from the 2013-17 period — mainly internal company emails (83,000), and memos, presentations, and WhatsApp messages.

The Uber Files show how the ride-hailing start-up begun by Travis Kalanick in San Francisco in 2010 became a global behemoth by harnessing technology, working around laws, and using aggressive lobbying tactics to curry favour with governments during the period of its dramatic expansion.

Over the years, Uber has faced intense media scrutiny. In 2017, Uber's investors forced Kalanick out amid a series of sexual harassment and privacy scandals, causing huge reputational damage to the company.

The Uber Files show the cavalier manner in which the company's top executives reacted to the allegation of rape by an Uber driver in New Delhi in December 2014.

While officially expressing shock and empathy, the executives in internal communications tried to put the blame on faulty background checks on drivers carried out by Indian government officials.

After Uber services were banned in the capital, the company's managers tried to douse fires they feared might start in other countries.

The data also reveal the manner in which Uber tackled tax and regulation issues that arose frequently in India, and used it as an example in other countries.

India being a key market, Uber used its lobbying tactics to the hilt here. Among the steps the company took was to prepare a list of "stakeholders" from among the bureaucracy and political class to influence policy, and to sign around a dozen Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) in different states — agreements that remained mostly on paper.

Uber launched in India on August 29, 2013 as a ride-hailing platform in Bengaluru. It had phenomenal success around the country, and on November 18, 2021, launched the service in India's 100th city, Warangal in Telangana.

Global edible oil prices crash; will other food commodities follow? (Page no. 13)

(GS Paper 3, Economy)

The present prolonged bout of global food inflation from around end-2020 began with edible oils. Could it end with edible oils?

As far as overall food inflation goes, these are still early days. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization's (FAO) food price index hit an all-time high of 159.7 points in March, the month immediately following the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Since then, the index — a weighted average of world prices of a basket of food commodities over a base period value, taken at 100 for 2014-15 — has eased a tad, by 3.4%, to 154.2 points in June.

The picture is clearer in vegetable oils, where the FAO's sub-index has fallen by 15.9%, from 251.8 to 211.8 points, between March and June.

The rise during April 2020 to March 2022 was sharper for vegetable oils (from 81.2 to 251.8 points) than for the general index (from 92.5 to 159.7 points). But so has been the subsequent dip from March to June (See chart).

A better idea of the price decline can be had by looking at individual oils. Crude palm oil (CPO) traded at a record 7,268 ringgit per tonne at the Bursa Malaysia derivatives exchange on March 9. On Friday, the most-active two-month futures contract settled at 4,157 ringgits. That's 42.8% down from the peak.

Four months ago, the landed price (cost plus freight) of CPO in India was about \$2,000 per tonne, while it was \$1,960 for RBD (refined, bleached and deodorised) palmolein, \$1,925 for crude degummed soyabean oil and \$2,100 for crude sunflower oil. Those prices have since retreated to \$1,185 (CPO), \$1,160 (RBD palmolein), \$1,460 (soyabean) and \$1,700 (sunflower) per tonne.

The accompanying table shows much of this price collapse to have taken place in just over the last one month, with the fall more in palm than for so-called soft oils, namely soyabean and sunflower.

It is also reflected in the data from the Department of Consumer Affairs. Between June 8 and July 8, the all-India modal (most quoted) retail price of packed palm oil has come down from Rs 160 to Rs 145 per kg; it has been less for soyabean (Rs 170 to Rs 160/kg) and sunflower (Rs 190 to Rs 182.5), and non-existent for groundnut (Rs 180).

Digital nomads visas (Page no. 13) (GS Paper 2, International Relations)

As Indonesia deals with the economic impacts of Covid-19, the country has announced “Digital Nomad Visas” for travellers, to attract more foreign tourists.

While Bali is one of the most famous locations in the country for beaches and bars, Indonesia is looking to promote another element through these visas — the spiritual element.

Digital Nomads are people who work remotely while travelling to different places and spending their earned income in the country they are travelling to.

As the pandemic took place most of the workspaces were shifted online, while some offices have begun to open, most organisations have declared remote work.

Now as the world has moved towards getting vaccinated and international borders have opened up, people can continue doing their regular jobs remotely from anywhere in the world.

According to the 2020 State of Independence in America Report by MBO Partners, “Digital nomads are defined as people who choose to embrace a location-independent, technology-enabled lifestyle that allows them to travel and work remotely, anywhere in the Internet-connected world. Unlike regular remote workers, who tend to stay in one geographic area, digital nomads travel and explore while working.”

The study also found that 10.9 million American workers described themselves as digital nomads in 2020, which was an increase of 49 per cent from 2019.

The Digital Nomad Visa would allow remote workers to stay in Indonesia, including Bali, tax-free. Announced by Indonesia’s Tourism Minister Sandiaga Uno to boost tourism in the country, the visa will be applicable for five years.

This would make Indonesia’s visa one of the longest digital nomad visas compared to other countries. Through the visa, Indonesia aims to bring in over 3.6 million overseas travellers into the country over the next year to explore spiritual retreats as well as the eco-tourism of Indonesia.

Economy

Content blocking orders by govt and courts to Twitter soar 48,000% (Page no. 14) (GS Paper 2, Polity and Governance)

There has been a rise of more than 48,000 per cent in legal demands being made by India — from various courts and the government — to remove content from Twitter between 2014 and 2020, an analysis of Twitter’s global transparency reports show.

Incidentally, in the same time period, the number of content blocking orders issued to social media companies by the government has also increased by almost 2,000 per cent, data shared with Parliament showed, highlighting the growing trend of online censorship in India.

According to the data shared in the Lok Sabha by former Minister of State for Electronics and IT Sanjay Dhotre, the government ordered social media companies to take down 9,849 links from their platforms under Section 69 (A) of the Information Technology Act, 2000, in 2020, compared to 471 such requests made in 2014, an increase of 1,991 per cent. According to Twitter’s global transparency reports, between the same time period, India has made legal requests to remove 12,373 pieces of content from the microblogging platform, of which more than 9,000 requests were made in 2020 alone.

This places India in the fourth spot to issue blocking orders between 2014 and 2020, after Japan, which made more than 55,000 such requests; Turkey which made close to 50,000 requests; and Russia which ordered removal of more than 36,000 tweets.

Outside of that time frame, in the first six months of 2021, Twitter was asked by various Indian courts and the government to block a little more than 4,900 tweets — this coincided with the company blocking more than 250 accounts in relation to sharing “provocative” tweets over the then ongoing farmers’ protests and the company receiving orders from the government to take down some tweets critical of the government’s handling of Covid-19.