



PLUTUS IAS

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1. Joe Biden announces 12-member COVID-19 Task Force under Vivek Murthy

On November 8, 2020, the US President Joe Biden announced a 12-member Task Force to deal with COVID-19 in the United States of America.

Key Highlights

The task force is to be headed by a former General Surgeon Vivek Murthy and other officials from Food and Drug Administration and universities. It also included former Obama administration health advisers.

About Vivek Murthy

Vivek was born in England to immigrants from Karnataka. The family moved to Florida, US when Vivek was three years old. Both parents of Vivek are into the medical field.

Vivek served as the nineteenth Surgeon General of the United States. He co founded VISIONS. The organisation focused on HIV/AIDS education. He also co-founded the Swasthya community health partnership to train women as community health workers in rural India.

While he took charge as the US surgeon General, he was the youngest to get qualified to the post.

In 2011, he was appointed as the Presidential Advisory Council on Prevention, Health Promotion and Integrative and Public Health by President Obama. The council advises on measures to advance the nation's health through prevention.

Surgeon General of United States

The Surgeon General of the United States is appointed by the President and is confirmed by the Senate. He serves for a period of four years. He is the head of the

Commissioned Corps, that holds 6,500 member cadre of uniformed health professionals.

He also issues health warnings. Since 1966, a surgeon health warning is present in all cigarette packets sold in America.

Background

The US has become the first country in the world to cross 10 million COVID-19 cases. In the last seven days, the numbers have grown by four times. Joe Biden spent much of his election campaign in criticising Trump's handling of the pandemic. He also pledged that tackling the pandemic will be the top priority for his government.

2.4th India-Philippines Joint Commission on Bilateral Cooperation

The 4th India- Philippines Joint Commission on Bilateral Cooperation was held virtually on November 6. The meeting was co- chaired by India's External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar and Teodoro Locsin Jr, Secretary, Department of Foreign Affairs of Republic of Philippines.

Key Points of 4th India-Philippines Joint Commission on Bilateral Cooperation

The major points and areas on which discussions were done under the meeting were-

- Discussions were done on various topics of mutual interest. Both the sides reviewed the latest developments in India-Philippines bilateral relations and also on the future trajectory of the relations. Both the country's reiterated their commitment to fight against shared challenges, majorly in health sector because of the prevailing conditions due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Both the co-chairs agreed to make the defence engagement and maritime cooperation between the two countries stronger with major focus in areas of capacity building, military training and education, procurement of defence equipment and goodwill visits.
- Both the countries agreed to increase cooperation to counter-terrorism through information exchange between respective agencies and specialized training requirements.
- Both the co-chairs agreed on expanding the trade and investment links between both the counties. They further agreed to strengthen cooperation in the areas of tourism, agriculture, energy, health and pharmaceuticals, science & technology, space, cyber-security, traditional medicine and ICT.
- While appreciating the educational opportunities provided to Indian students in the Philippines, Jaishankar reaffirmed India's capacity building and development assistance to the Philippines. He also invited Filipino students for availing the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) and e-ITEC

initiatives, and to use integrated PhD Fellowships offered at IITs to ASEAN students.

- Both the countries agreed to work on making the visa process between India and Philippines more simplified in order to expand student exchange, tourism, trade and investment.
- Both the co-chairs re-confirmed that they are committed to a multifaceted partnership in line with India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) and the ASEAN's Outlook on Indo-Pacific with an aim to achieve shared security, growth and prosperity in the region.

Jaishankar tweeted about the meeting and its focus. This meeting will take forward the cooperation between the two countries in the areas like trade, investment, education, information technology, defence, etc.

3.PM Modi inaugurates development projects in Varanasi

Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated various development projects in Varanasi through video conferencing. The total cost of these projects is Rs 614 crores.

Key Highlights

The projects inaugurated includes sound show, Sarnath Light, Sewerage related works, infrastructure protection for conservation of cows, agriculture produce warehouse, multipurpose seed storehouse, Varanasi city smart lighting works, 102 Gau Ashray Kendras, 105 Anganwadi Kendras.

Aero Bridges

The LBS International Airport is to receive two more passenger boarding bridges. These bridges are commonly known as the Aero-bridge. These two bridges were constructed at a cost of Rs 9 crores. These bridges will enhance the safety of the passengers and reduce their walking distances.

IPDS Scheme

Under the scheme, underground power cable at a cost of Rs 118 crores is to be laid.

Smart City Scheme

Under the smart city scheme, high tech surveillance cameras are to be installed, parking facilities in Bedinabag, road widening and development of new Ghats. Also drinking water supply facilities are to be inaugurated at Rs 19 crores.

Under the Smart City Mission, Varanasi was the top performer in 2020. It was positioned at rank 7. However, only 50% of its allocated funds were utilized. More than 25 projects are underway in Varanasi under the mission. The projects are to be completed at a cost of Rs 261 crores.

Background

The key developments in the city in the last six years were highlighted by the Prime Minister during his address. The road, rail and air connectivity to the city has been improved to great extent that people in the region need not go to big metropolitans like Delhi and Mumbai. The city is now becoming a model to waterways as well. There are 48 flights operating from the Babatpur Airport. Apart from urban developments, the rural region of the city has also been developed. The city is now exporting fruits and vegetables for the first time in its history.

4.First Hyperloop Passenger ride successful

The Virgin Hyperloop that plans to connect Mumbai and Pune in 25 minutes has conducted its first successful passenger ride. The test was conducted in Las Vegas.

Hyperloop

The Hyperloop is a new mode of transport that speeds up to 1000 kilometres per hour. The idea was conceived by Tesla and SpaceX in 2012. There are several companies that are working on the technology. However, Virgin Hyperloop is the only one that is developing transport in India.

About the Technology

In the technology, the capsules or pods are to be zipped in to a continuous steel tubes that are held at partial vacuum. The pod is supported between an air compressor in the front and a battery compartment in the back. The skis of the hyperloop eliminates rolling resistance of the hyperloop. IT allows movement of pods at high speeds. They are driverless vehicles. They are electronically assisted to accelerated.

Concerns

The small-scale experiments have been giving success news. However, in the real world there are tens of thousands of kilograms of atmospheric pressure that threatens to crush the chamber. Also, there are problems of thermal expansion that threaten to buckle large structures without proper thermal expansion capabilities. Hyperloop technology is highly expensive.

However, it is cheaper as compared to the high-speed rail technology. The operational and capital costs of Hyperloop is two-thirds of high-speed rail.

Advantages

The technology is completely autonomous and sealed. The vehicle is noiseless as the motion does not involve any contact. The tunnels of hyperloop are to be built either below or above the ground. Thus, this transport technology will take smaller ground footprints as compared to the traditional road and rail transports.

The IIT Madras recently conducted a Hyperloop contest to encourage young engineers of the country in developing the technology.

5.Himachal Pradesh anti-conversion law: Key Facts

The recent murder in Faridabad's Ballabgarh has again ignited discussions over the forced religious conversions. In the last few years, it is a topic of major debate that girls of a particular community are forced to convert their religion and there is a need to curb it. After the murder of a girl in broad daylight, Haryana's Home Minister Anil Vij has highlighted that the state government is looking over the possibility of making a new law for forced conversions. Not only this, but Vij has also sought information about a similar law already in place in Himachal Pradesh- Anti Conversion Law.

What is the Anti-Conversion Law?

The Himachal Pradesh government enacted the Anti-Conversion Law in 2007 after passing Freedom of Religion Bill, 2006. This law prohibits religious conversions through force or fraud. The state government has also passed a new Freedom of Religion Bill in 2019 with an aim to repeal the 2006 bill. Himachal Pradesh CM Jai Ram Thakur says that more stringent law is required on forced religious conversions.

What are the Key Features of the law?

The key features of Anti-Conversion Law of Himachal Pradesh are-

- No person should convert or attempt to convert the religion of any other person through fraud, deception or for the sole purpose of marriage.
- This law does not cover conversion to parent religion.
- Freedom of Religion Bill, 2019 states that a person needs to notify the district magistrate at least 1 month prior to converting his/her religion. The magistrate will then conduct an inquiry to find out the reason for conversion.
- A person involved in forceful conversions can be jailed for a term upto 5 years. In case the victim is minor, SC/ST or woman; the punishment can be extended upto 7 years.
- All the offences under this act will be non-bailable. Also, failure of prior information about conversion can lead to imprisonment of 2 years.

Religious Conversions in other states

The religious conversions are not limited to one or two states; its impact can be seen in many states of the country. Details related to the conversions in some states are- Gujarat- As per the available data, in the last 5 years, 1,895 applications have been registered in the state seeking religious conversion. Out of these applications, 54% were from Surat. 94 percent of the applications were filed by Hindus; 4% by Muslims

and a little more than 1% by Christians. Maximum Hindus in Surat wish to convert to Buddhism and come from the Scheduled Castes.

Kerala- Most of the Dalits, Christians who converted to these religions from Hinduism are converting back to Hindus. As per Vishva Hindu Parishad secretary-general Milind Parande, around 25,000 Muslims and Christians were reconverted to Hindus in 2018. In Kerala also it is mandatory to get conversion notified in the gazette to make it legal.

6.Fifteenth Finance Commission Report: Key Highlights

The Fifteenth Finance Commission headed by N K Singh is to submit its report the President of India.

Key Recommendations

The recommendations made by the commission are as follows

- The Commission has recommended that the states shall get 41% of central tax revenues. Earlier, the fourteenth Finance Commission had recommended 42%.
- 4.3 lakh crores for the local governments
- Rs 1 lakh grant to health care
- Rs 2.9 lakh crores of revenue deficit grants to 17 states.
- The commission has recommended the states to keep aside at least 8% of their budget for building health care capacities.

Modernisation of Defence and Internal Security Fund

The Finance Commission had recommended to set up Modernisation of Defence and Internal Security Fund. The fund is to be called Rashtriya Suraksha Naivedya Kosh. The fund is to add up to Rs 2.4 lakh crores by 2021-26. Of this, Rs 1.5 lakh crore is to be directly transferred to Consolidated Fund of India.

The fund is to be used for capital investment for defence, state police forces and paramilitary forces. The Defence Ministry will have exclusive rights over the funds.

7.Wildlife Institute of India: High Biodiversity in 49% of Ganges

The Wildlife Institute of India recently released a survey on the Ganges river.

According to the survey, 49% of the river is high on biodiversity. These are results of phase I of the survey. The second survey is to be conducted shortly.

Key Highlights

The Gangetic Dolphins and Otters in the river have increased in numbers. This indicates that the pollution level in the river has decreased and the river is in a healthy state.

The study was conducted by the WII on behalf of National Mission for Clean Ganga undertaken by the Ministry of Jal Shakti. The first phase of the survey was held in 2017-19.

The study is first of its kind that is conducted on the entire river and also first of all its biodiversity.

Key findings

Earlier, there were beliefs and findings that certain areas of Ganga had no biodiversity. However, this has been proved wrong by the study. According to the study, the entire river has some biodiversity. 10% of high biodiversity areas are Rajaji National Park in Uttarakhand, Vikramshila Gangetic Dolphin Sanctuary in Bihar, Hastinapur wildlife sanctuary.

The study has found key semi-aquatic and aquatic species such as Gharials, Gangetic Dolphins, Otters, Turtles and several species of water birds. Also nesting colonies of Indian Skimmer. Several species that had disappeared 80 years ago have now resurfaced.

High Biodiversity Zones

The high Biodiversity zone of the Ganges has been divided into six zones. They are Makdumpur to Narora, Devprayag to Rishikesh, Bhitaura to Ghazipur, Sahibganj to Rajmahal, Chhapra to Kahalgaon and Baharampur to Barrackpore.

Major threats

According to the study the major threats of biodiversity of river Ganges are sand mining, construction of dams and barrages, bank alteration loss of suitable habitat conditions.

The United Nations Environment Programme says that the decline of biodiversity of freshwater species is the highest of all the other species. The highest loss of biodiversity was reported in the Indian subcontinent.