

National Current Affairs

Cabinet approves MoU between India and UK in transport

The Union Cabinet has approved signing and implementation of Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Ministry of Road Transport & Highways (MoRTH) and 'Transport for London'. Transport for London is a statutory body established under the Greater London Authority Act, 1999 (UK) to improve Public Transport in India.

- The MoU will help to improve the overall public transport system in country, improve passenger services and promote use of high capacity buses in India.
- It will go long way in strengthening ties and promoting bilateral relations between India and UK.
- It will also help in strengthening integrated public transport for all. This will help people from poorer strata of society to have access to a quality public transport system.

Govt apprised of MoU btw India & Italy on renewable energy cooperation

The Government on Jan 3rd was apprised of Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on India-Italy Cooperation in Renewable Energy between both the nations. The MoU was signed on October 30, 2017 in Delhi.

- India and Italy aimed to establish the basis for a cooperative institutional relationship to encourage and promote technical bilateral cooperation on new and renewable issues on the basis of mutual benefit equality and reciprocity.
- The MoU envisages establishing a Joint Working Committee to review, monitor and discuss matters relation to areas of cooperation.
- It also aimed at exchange of expertise and networking of information and helped in strengthening bilateral cooperation between the two countries.

Cabinet approves MoU between India and Israel for cooperation in Oil and Gas Sector

Union Cabinet chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi approved the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between India and Israel on cooperation in the oil and gas sector.

- The signing of the MoU assumes importance as it comes close on the heels of Israel's announcement of granting oil exploration license to a consortium led by ONGC Videsh (OVL) with Bharat PetroResources, Indian Oil and Oil India as other partners.

- The MoU is expected to provide impetus to India - Israel ties in the energy sector.
- The cooperation envisaged under the agreement will facilitate promotion of investments in each other's countries, technology transfer, R&D, conducting joint studies, capacity building of human resources and collaboration in the area of Start-ups.

Cabinet approves MoU between India and Belgium on Cooperation in the field of ICT&E

The Union Cabinet chaired by Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi has been apprised of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between India and Belgium on Cooperation in the field of Information Communication Technology and Electronics (ICT&E).

- The MoU was signed during the State Visit of King Philippe of the Belgium to India on November 7, 2017.
- The MoU intends cooperation between India and Belgium including sharing of best practices in the area of ICT&E policy; Digital agenda technology and research with special emphasis on developing ICT&E manufacturing and services; e-Governance and e-Public Service Delivery, participation in conferences, study visits and exchange of experts, cyber security and to resolve issues of data adequacy, market access, trade and services.

Cabinet approves Indo-Myanmar agreement on land border crossing

The Union Cabinet has approved Agreement between India and Myanmar on Land Border Crossing. It is an enabling arrangement for movement of people across border of both countries.

- The agreement is expected to provide connectivity and enhance interaction of people of North Eastern States of India with the people of Myanmar.
- The agreement will facilitate movement of people on basis of valid passports and visas which will enhance economic and social interaction between two countries. It will facilitate regulation and harmonization of already existing free movement rights for people ordinarily residing in border areas of both countries.
- It will also give boost to economy of North East and leverage geographical connections with Myanmar to boost trade and people to people ties.
- It will also safeguard traditional rights of largely tribal communities residing along border which are accustomed to free movement across land border.

CCEA approves construction of bi-directional Zojila Tunnel in J&K

The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA) approved construction, operation and maintenance of 2-lane bi-directional Zojila Tunnel on Srinagar-Leh section connecting NH-1A in Jammu and Kashmir.

- The strategic tunnel will provide all-weather connectivity to strategically important Leh region. On completion, it will be Asia's largest 2-lane bi-directional tunnel.
- The Project aims at construction of 14.150 km long 2-lane bidirectional single tube tunnel with a parallel 14.200 km long egress (escape) tunnel excluding approaches between Baltal & Minamarg in J&K at estimated cost of Rs 6,089 crore.
- The main objective of the project is to provide all weather connectivity to strategically important Leh region in J&K which at moment is limited to at best 6 months because of snow on the mountainous passes and threat of avalanches.
- Ladakh region remains cut off from rest of the country during winter months due to heavy snowfall. The construction of this tunnel will provide all weather safe, fast and cheap connectivity between Srinagar, Kargil and Leh.
- It will bring about all round economic and socio-cultural integration of these regions.
- It also has strategic and socio-economic importance and it will be instrument for development of economically backward districts in J&K.
- The project, on completion, will also lead to enormous boost in employment as local businesses get linked to National market and beautiful region is able to receive round the year tourist traffic.

CCEA approves implementation of Jal Marg Vikas Project on NW-1

The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA) has approved implementation of Jal Marg Vikas Project (JMVP) for capacity augmentation of navigation on 1,380-km Haldia-Varanasi stretch of National Waterway-1 (NW1) on Ganga River.

- The project will be implemented at a cost of over Rs. 5,370 crore rupees with the technical assistance and investment support of the World Bank. It is expected to be completed by March, 2023.
- JMVP was announced by Government in 2014-15 Budget to enable commercial navigation of at least 1500 tonne vessels on the Ganga river.
- The project envisages the development of waterway between Allahabad and Haldia on Ganga River that will cover a distance of 1620 km.
- The project aims to develop a fairway with three metres depth to enable commercial navigation of at least 1500 tonne vessels on the river.
- It also includes the development of fairway, multi-modal terminals, strengthening of open river navigation technique, conservancy works, modern River Information System (RIS) etc.

Cabinet approves establishment of new AIIMS at Bilaspur

The Union Cabinet approved establishment of new All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) at Bilaspur in Himachal Pradesh under Pradhan Mantri Swasthya Suraksha Yojana (PMSSY). The new AIIMS will be completed in a period of 48 months.

- It will consist of a hospital with a capacity of 750 beds and trauma centre facilities and have 20 Speciality and Super-Speciality Departments including 15 Operation Theatres.
- It will also have Medical college with an intake of 100 MBBS students per year and Nursing College with an intake of 60 B.Sc. (Nursing) students per year.
- PMSSY was announced in 2003. Its objectives are correcting regional imbalances in the availability of affordable/reliable tertiary healthcare services and augment facilities for quality medical education in the country. It establishes AIIMS in various regions of India apart from different government colleges.

Govt to introduce smart solutions in 7 cantonments

Delhi and six other cantonments have been identified for introducing "smart solutions" and upgrading civic amenities.

- The other cantonments identified for the project include Ambala, Deolali, Ferozepur, Meerut, Pune and Secunderabad.
- Online services will be introduced in the cantonments besides monitoring various amenities and facilities through use of information technology.
- Last year, the Army finalised a plan to develop various cantonments in line with the governments' smart city initiative.

Centre approves ₹5,369 cr. for waterway project

The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs on Wednesday approved the more than ₹5,369 crore Jal Marg Vikas Project for development of fairway on National Waterway-1 with the technical and investment support of the World Bank.

- The project will extend over Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal. It will cover major districts, including Varanasi, Ghazipur, Ballia, Buxar, Chhapra, Vaishali, Patna, Begusarai, Khagaria, Munger, Bhagalpur, Sahibganj, Musrhidabad, Pakur, Hoogly and Kolkata.
- The project, which is expected to be completed by March 2023, will provide alternative mode of transport that will be environment friendly and cost effective, the government said, adding that the project would contribute in bringing down the logistics cost in the country while providing a boost to infrastructure development.

Rs 372.51 crore sanctioned by NABARD to Odisha

The NABARD has sanctioned Rs 372.51 crore loan assistance under the Rural Infrastructure Development Fund (RIDF) to Odisha towards irrigation and rural bridge projects for the last quarter of this fiscal.

- A total number of 17,322 lift irrigation projects including bore wells, shallow tube wells, digging wells, micro river lifts shall be taken up with Rs 130.17 crore from the assistance.
- This will provide assured irrigation to about 36,440 hectares of agricultural land directly benefiting about 40,000 farmers of our state.
- This apart, NABARD has also sanctioned 14 Rural Bridge Projects under Biju Setu Yojana with RIDF loan assistance of Rs 242.34 crore which would add 6222.89 metres of bridge length, benefiting about 4.56 lakh population in 322 villages of the state.

Government launches MyGov platform, seeks suggestions to make living easier for common man

The government has launched MyGov platform where it invites citizens, members of civil society, journalists, students, teachers, police officers, government employees, Parliamentarians, academics experts, bureaucrats, social media influencers, think tanks and all other interested people to give their considered view on the subject.

- The main purpose is to make citizen-government interface, in matters of daily routine, as seamless and citizen friendly as possible.

Cruise tourists with e-visa exempted from biometric enrolment till 2020

With a view to promote cruise tourism in India, cruise tourists with e-visas will now be exempted from the requirement of biometric enrolment till December 31, 2020.

- This will make immigration clearance of such passengers faster, leaving them with more time to spend on shore, it said, adding that, this is also an important factor that helps cruise lines decide whether or not to include a destination in their itinerary.
- The step assumes significance based on the schedule of arrivals of cruise ships for season 2017-18 and 2019-20. Many of the cruise ships coming to India are mega ships with 2,000-4,000 passengers on board.

Madhya Pradesh imposes 50 paise cess on petrol and diesel to fund road infrastructure

The Shivraj Singh Chouhan government decided on Wednesday to impose 50 paisa cess on petrol and diesel. The state cabinet chaired by the chief minister decided to levy 50 paisa cess on per liter of petrol and diesel.

- According to state government spokesperson Narottam Mishra the cess has been levied for financing infrastructure development and traffic improvement in the state.
- The cabinet has assigned approval to an ordinance MP Motor Speed Bill 2018 which enabled government to levy petrol and diesel by 50 paisa per litre and the funds would be invested into infrastructure development and improvement of traffic.
- The ordinance has now been sent to Commercial Tax Department and the levy would take time and isn't immediate.

New Telangana State Minorities Commission

The Telangana government has reconstituted the State Minorities Commission with Mohammed Qamaruddin as its chairman.

- The nine member panel comprises S. Rajarapu Pratap as its vice-chairman and other members include Mohammed Arshad Ali Khan, Vidya Sravanti, Gusti Noria, Bommala Kattaiah and Surender Singh. Mr. Qamaruddin retired as the Department of Social Welfare Department's engineer-in-chief in 2011.
- The term of the Chairman, Vice-Chairman and members of the Commission will be for a period of three years from the date of taking over charge.
- One of the key issues that would be taken up is the implementation of the existing 4% reservations in government departments.

Finance Minister Arun Jaitley chaired body to look into stalled Rs 20K crore port projects

A high-powered committee chaired by Finance Minister Arun Jaitley will look into the issues plaguing stuck shipping projects worth up to Rs 20,000 crore.

- About 12 shipping projects, including in Kandla and Visakhapatnam ports, have been stuck for long on account of various problems that include contractors abandoning the same.
- The projects entail an estimated investment of Rs 10,000-20,000 crore. The committee, headed by Jaitley, will comprise the law minister, shipping minister and a Niti Aayog representative.
- The new model concession agreement (MCA), revised after 2008 and approved by the Cabinet, will attract much more investments in the shipping sector. The new MCA is more investor-friendly and has several new features like change in revenue model as well as replacing the "actual project cost" with "approved project cost".

- Also, payment of royalty for the ports will be now on basis of per million tonne of cargo handled instead of percentage of gross revenue based on tariff determined by the Tariff Authority for Major Ports (TAMP).

Open defecation in Maharashtra to invite spot fine of Rs 500

Open defecation in Maharashtra will now invite a spot fine of Rs 500, according to rules framed by the state government. The government has also fixed 'spot fine' rates for littering, spitting and urinating in public places.

- In a Government Resolution (GR) issued by the urban development department recently, the government has empowered municipal corporations and councils to levy spot fines on people and institutions under the provisions of the Solid Waste Management Act, 2016 with immediate effect.
- The spot fines for A, B, C and D category of civic bodies are identical. From now on, any person or institutions found guilty of throwing garbage, dirt or waste material on roads and highways shall have to pay spot fines ranging from Rs 150 to Rs 180.
- The word "dirt" includes all waste products. Anyone found spitting in public places will have to pay spot fines ranging from Rs 100 to Rs 150.
- Urinating in public will attract spot fines ranging from Rs 100 to Rs 200, while defecating in the open will attract a spot fine of Rs 500.

Hyderabad becomes second major city to be declared open defecation free

Greater Hyderabad was declared an open defecation free (ODF) city by the Centre. The Swachh Bharat Mission Directorate of the Ministry of Urban Development has also declared six other ULBs — Warangal Municipal Corporation (GWMC), Miryalguda, Jangoan, Bellampally, Mancherla and Sadashivpet — as ODF.

- The Centre issues Swachh certificates to the cities based on recommendations by a third party — Quality Council of India, which conducted an inspection last week.
- The tag, however, is valid only for six months after which a recertification process happens to ensure there is no slippage in maintenance of hygiene.

Bharat Biotech's Typbar-TCV: WHO approves Indian typhoid vaccine for global use

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has given its pre-qualification to Typbar Typhoid Conjugate Vaccine (TVC) developed by Hyderabad based Bharat Biotech for global use.

- Typhbar TCV is world's first typhoid vaccine clinically proven to be administered to children from six months of age to adults, and confers long-term protection against typhoid fever.
- It has been evaluated in Human Challenge Studies at Oxford University.
- The WHO pre-qualification enables procurement and supplies of this life-saving vaccine to UNICEF, Pan-American Health Organisation (PAHO) and GAVI (vaccine alliance) supported countries.
- This also paves the way for WHO member countries to introduce the Typhbar TCV into their immunization programs.

International Current Affairs

India excludes Pakistan from a Saarc initiative

India has excluded Pakistan from the list of Saarc member countries with which it will be connecting its state-of-the art National Knowledge Network (NKN) for sharing scientific databases and remote access to advanced research facilities.

- The government has kicked off the process of appointing a telecom company that will connect and extend the NKN to research and education networks in six South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation member states — Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka. Pakistan is the only Saarc nation that has been left out of this initiative.
- India has for long suspended official talks with Pakistan due to continuing terrorist attacks launched by groups from across the border and chill in the relations is now evident in sphere of research cooperation too.

Banking & Finance

RBI puts Allahabad Bank under prompt corrective action

The Reserve Bank has put the lender under prompt corrective action framework post an on-site inspection of high NPAs and negative return of assets for fiscal 2016-17.

- The RBI inspection has revealed high net NPAs (non performing assets) and negative ROA (return on assets) for two consecutive years.

- The action will contribute to the overall improvement in risk management, asset quality, profitability, efficiency of the bank.
- For the fiscal 2016-17, the bank had trimmed its net losses to Rs 313.51 crore against Rs 743.31 crore in 2015-16.
- The RBI has initiated similar action against other public sector banks, including IDBI Bank, Indian Overseas Bank and UCO Bank.

Indiabulls Housing Finance Issues India's 1st Social Affordable Housing Bond

Indiabulls Housing Finance Limited (IBHFL) has issued India's 1st Social Affordable Housing Bond of INR 1,000 crores, with the proceeds being used towards financing the Affordable Housing sector.

- This landmark issue was solely arranged and subscribed by YES BANK, India's 5th largest private sector Bank. The Bond issue is for a tenor of 5 years and is rated 'CRISIL AAA' by CRISIL and 'ICRA AAA' by ICRA. The Bond will be listed on the National Stock Exchange Limited (NSE) and Bombay Stock Exchange Limited (BSE).
- The Social Affordable Housing Bond will conform to the Social Bond Principles 2017 issued by the International Capital Market Association (ICMA). KPMG in India will be providing the Assurance Services annually, on the use of proceeds, in-line with the Social Bond Principles.
- The proceeds from the issue will be used towards financing and refinancing requirements in the 'Affordable Housing' sector in line with applicable laws including lending to individuals and developers under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana.

Awards & Recognition

JNPT wins 'Samudra Manthan – Caring Organisation of the Year' award

The Jawaharlal Nehru Port Trust, India's Premier Container Port, has won the 'Samudra Manthan – Caring Organisation of the Year' award.

- The award was instituted by Bhandarkar Shipping, which is a leading publication in the maritime industry.
- Among the total 14 categories of Samudra Manthan award, JNPT was the winner in the Caring Organisation of the Year' award.
- JNPT is India's top container port in terms of volume and efficiency parameters.

Appointments & Resigns

Kookhyun Shim appointed as MD, CEO of Kia Motors India

South Korean auto maker Kia Motors today said it has appointed Kookhyun Shim as the Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer of India operations.

- Shim will be responsible for driving Kia Motors' expansion in the Indian market, Kia Motors India said in a statement.
- He will also oversee the construction of Kia Motor's first manufacturing facility, which is coming up in Andhra Pradesh.
- Kia expects to start production in India in the second half of 2019. Local sales of cars produced at the new facility will start towards the end of 2019.

Tata Motors appoints Hanne Sorensen as independent director

Tata Motors announced appointment of Hanne Birgitte Sorensen, former CEO of Netherlands-based supply chain firm Damco, as an additional and independent director for a tenure of five years.

- Currently, a member of board of Ferrovia SA and LafargeHolcim Ltd among others, Sorensen's appointment is effective from January 3, 2018.
- A Danish national, she was also the CEO of Maersk Tankers, Copenhagen from 2012-13.

Science & Technology

Pakistan test-fires naval cruise missile 'Harba'

The Pakistan Navy on Wednesday said it successfully test-fired the indigenously developed 'Harba' naval cruise missile after launching it from a newly commissioned fast attack vessel.

- The missile is capable of hitting its target from surface to surface and ground assault.
- The indigenously-built missile was launched from PNS Himmat and it successfully hit the target.

- The successful live weapon firing has once again demonstrated the credible firepower of Pakistan Navy and the impeccable level of indigenisation in high tech weaponry achieved by Pakistan's defence industry.

Sports

Colin Munro first to smash 3 T20 international centuries

Colin Munro became the first batsman to score three hundreds in T20 internationals.

- The left-handed New Zealand opener achieved this feat by making 104 off 53 balls with three fours and 10 sixes in the third and final T20 match against West Indies at Mount Maunganui.
- It was Colin Munro's second century at this venue. He also scored 101 against Bangladesh on January 6, 2017.
- Munro's highest score is an unbeaten 109 against India at Rajkot on November 4, 2017.

Environment

Scientists discover four new balsam species in Arunachal Pradesh

Scientists have discovered four new balsam species from various locations in Eastern Himalayas in north eastern state of Arunachal Pradesh.

- They are *Impatiens haridasanii*, *Impatiens pseudocitrina*, *Impatiens nilalohitae* and *Impatiens roingensis*.
- Infrastructure project like road widening works, deforestation and other development activities are posing a threat to the natural habitat of the new species.
- Balsams are commonly known as jewel weeds because of diverse colour of their flowers.
- They are distributed throughout the Eastern Himalayas and the Western Ghats, Sri Lanka, South East Asia, Africa and Madagascar.

New endangered plant species discovered in China

Scientists have discovered a new endangered species of flowering plants in China. It was discovered in southwest China's Yunnan Province during a field survey.

- The species, Primula Zhui, known in Chinese as Zhu Hua Baochun, was named after Zhu Hua, a researcher from the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS).
- It belongs to the Primulaceae family, woody flowering plants often known as the primrose family.
- There are about 500 Primula species in the world. They are native to the temperate northern hemisphere and high altitude areas.

Important Days

January 4: World Braille Day

The World Braille Day is observed every year across the world on 4 January to mark the birth anniversary of Louis Braille, inventor of Braille script or Braille code.

- Observance of the day helps people to spread the importance of Braille language and also help people to produce works in this language to allow visually impaired people to read the works.
- To commemorate this day several NGOs as well as other organizations come together to raise awareness about the apathy towards blind people and to help them be equal among rest of the people.

Obituary

Radha Vishwanathan, daughter of M.S. Subbulakshmi, dies at 83

Carnatic vocalist Radha Vishwanathan, 83, daughter of M.S. Subbulakshmi, who accompanied the legendary musician for nearly five decades on stage, died in Bengaluru.

- A trained Bharatanatyam dancer and vocalist, Radha accompanied MS in her concerts. She gave up dancing for the sake of accompanying MS.