

## **February 24<sup>th</sup> news:**

### **International:**

#### **New H1B visa policy declared in US**

A new policy announced by US President Donald Trump's administration is expected to hit the third-party supplier base of Indian information technology (IT) companies in the US.

According to the policy, companies would now have to go the extra mile to prove that its H1B employees deployed at third-party worksites have "specific and non-qualifying speculative assignments in speciality occupation".

If a petitioner is applying to extend H1B employment for a beneficiary who was placed at one or more third-party worksites during the course of past employment with the same petitioner, then the petitioner should also establish that the H1B requirements have been met for the entire prior approval period," the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) said on 23<sup>rd</sup> February through the seven-page policy guidelines.

H1B is a non-immigrant visa category, which allows employers to temporarily hire foreign workers in specialty occupations such as architecture, engineering, mathematics, physical sciences, social sciences, and biotechnology.

Currently, the US issues 85,000 H1B visas every year, including 20,000 for those with advanced degrees from US universities.

Indian and offshore-centric IT services companies are some of the biggest users of the H1B visa, which they use to depute employees at onshore locations or clients' sites to work alongside the clients' teams, and to transition work to offshore sites, which results in huge cost savings. About 40,000 of the 65,000 H1B visas available every year are availed of by Indians though top Indian IT services companies directly avail of around 15,000 and the remaining 25,000 are provided by third-party staffing agencies or 'body shoppers', who hire people with H1B visas and deploy them for their IT clients at the latter's clients places or third-party worksites.

According to the USCIS, the required documents for H1B petitions at third-party worksites include evidence of actual work assignments, which may include technical documentation, milestone tables, marketing analysis, cost-benefit analysis, brochures, and funding documents.

#### **Why the decision affects India**

- India is one of the biggest beneficiaries of H1B visas
- Of the 65,000 visas issued annually, around 40,000 go to India
- Top Indian IT firms receive around 15,000 H-1B visas every year
- Around 25,000 are provided by staffing firms or body shoppers

### **Bilateral:**

### **India offers \$1 million aid to Tonga**

India contributed \$1 million aid Tonga for rehabilitation efforts after the island was hit by Tropical Cyclone Gita which had caused massive destruction. Tonga was recently hit by worst Tropical Cyclone Gita. US's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) had reported it Category 4 cyclone. Wind gusts of the cyclone with intensity between 225 and 279 km/hr had destroyed nation's parliament and affected about 70% island's population.

Tongatapu. The fund is managed by UNOSSC. The fund prioritizes projects reducing poverty and hunger, improving health, education, and equality. It mainly focuses on transformational sustainable development projects in the least Developed Countries (LDCs) and Small Island Developing States.

### **India-bound gas pipeline breaks ground on Afghan section**

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and Turkmen counterpart Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov joined Pakistani premier Shahid Khaqan Abbasi and India's External Affairs Minister M. J. Akbar for the ceremony at gas-rich Turkmenistan's border with Afghanistan.

Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India on 23<sup>rd</sup> February ceremonially broke ground on the Afghan section of an ambitious, multi-billion dollar gas pipeline expected to help ease energy deficits in South Asia.

The quartet aims to complete the 1,840-kilometre (1,143-mile) pipeline and begin pumping natural gas from Turkmenistan's giant Galkynysh gas field by the beginning of 2020.

While the pipeline will traverse war-racked Afghanistan, raising security concerns, the bulk of the 33 billion cubic metres of gas to be pumped annually through the conduit will be purchased by South Asian rivals Pakistan and India.

### **India, Canada ink six pacts**

India and Canada on 23<sup>rd</sup> February signed six agreements, including in the area of nuclear science, energy cooperation and information communication technology.

A memorandum of understanding (MoU) was signed between India's Department of Atomic Energy and the Department of Natural Resources of Canada for co-operation in the fields of science, technology and innovation.

India and Canada have already signed an agreement on peaceful use of nuclear energy. To step up cooperation in the field of energy, terms of reference for the India-Canada Ministerial Energy Dialogue were exchanged between the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas and the Department of Natural Resources of Canada.

A joint declaration of intent between the Ministry of Electronics And Information Technology and the Department of Innovation, Science and Economic Development of Canada on cooperation in the field of

Information Communications Technology and Electronics was also signed. An MoU between the two countries for cooperation in higher education was also signed.

India sends second largest number of students to the North American country for higher education. An agreement was signed between India's Ministry of Youth Affairs & Sports and the Department of Canadian Heritage (Sport Canada) on cooperation in sports.

An MoU was also signed between India's Department of Industrial Policy and Promotion, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, and the Canadian Intellectual Property Office Concerning Cooperation on Intellectual Property Rights.

### **India, Germany sign pact for smart city cooperation**

India on 23<sup>rd</sup> February signed a MoU with Germany to develop modules for providing urban basic services and housing for smart cities.

The MoU signed between Union Ministry for Housing and Urban Affairs and the German development agency GIZ here would develop and apply concepts for sustainable urban development providing urban basic services and housing in select cities as well as smart cities in India. GIZ would contribute up to €8 million for the project which would run for a period of three years.

Technical cooperation measure will support approaches for sustainable urban development in the area of integrated planning, provision of affordable housing and basic services with particular focus on water, waste water and solid waste management and mobility

### **Exim Bank, UNDP ink pact to extend financial support to MSMEs in N-E**

Export-Import Bank of India (Exim Bank) on 23<sup>rd</sup> February said it has signed an agreement with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) for financing a project on 'Capacity Building of MSMEs in North East India for Export Competitiveness'.

The project looks at creating stronger MSMEs (micro, small and medium enterprises) in the North-East region to boost exports, generate employment and provide livelihood opportunities to the youth and women.

The key strategy would be to take advantage of the emerging opportunities under the Government of India's 'Act East Policy' that recognises the potential of the region in terms of natural resources, hydropower, close proximity to East-Asian countries, among others

The key activities of the project include cluster-based support to grassroots MSMEs in North-East India in improving their export competitiveness through Exim Bank's GRID (Grass Roots Initiative and Development) Initiative.

Through GRID, Exim Bank extends financial support to promote grassroots initiatives/ technologies, particularly the ones with export potential and help the artisans/ producer groups/ clusters/ small enterprises/ NGOs realise remunerative return on their produce and facilitate exports from these units.

## **Economy:**

### **RBI announces ombudsman scheme to address complaints against NBFCs**

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on 23<sup>rd</sup> February brought non-banking financial companies (NBFC) under an Ombudsman Scheme, by which an aggrieved person can file a complaint against an NBFC.

The scheme, for now, will cover NBFCs that take deposits and will later include those with an asset size of Rs 1 billion and above with a customer interface.

The scheme will not be applicable to infrastructure-related NBFCs and NBFCs under liquidation.

According to the RBI, there are 168 deposit-taking NBFCs out of the more than 11,500 registered with the regulator.

There can be complaints about interest payment, deposits, cheques, or “undue” charges. Complaints can also be raised for not intimating customers in regional languages they understand. The customer has to first complain to the NBFC.

## **Science and Technology:**

### **Dhanush, nuclear-capable short-range ballistic naval missile, successfully test-fired**

The Indian military successfully test-fired the Dhanush missile from a warship off the coast of Odisha on 23<sup>rd</sup> February. The Dhanush missile is also known as the Prithvi-III, and is a short-range ballistic missile capable of carrying nuclear warheads.

Dhanush is the naval variant of the surface-to-surface Prithvi missile platform. It can be used for both ship-to-ship and ship-to-surface strikes. The missile has a declared strike range of 350 km, and is capable of carrying a warhead up to 500 kg in weight. The missile may also be fitted with conventional warheads.

The test of the Dhanush was a "complete success" and that all the mission objectives had been achieved. All flight parameters were monitored and verified by the telemetry and radar facilities of the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), which developed the Dhanush missile.

The missile test was carried out by the Strategic Forces Command, the tri-services military command that controls all of India's nuclear weapons and their associated delivery systems.

The Dhanush missile made its first test flight in 2000, with the first fully operational test conducted in 2004. It has been test-fired a total of seven times so far. The last time the Dhanush was test fired was in November 2015.

The design of the Dhanush missile features customisations to the Prithvi platform to make it suitable for launch from a ship. These design modifications would include a stabilisation platform.

The Dhanush/Prithvi-III is part of the five missile platforms that have been developed by the DRDO since 1983, as part of the Integrated Guided Missile Development Programme (IGMDP). The other families of missiles developed under the IGMPD are Agni, Trishul, Akash and Nag.