

March 20th news:

International:

WFP warns of famine threat in northeast Nigeria

Despite security challenges ravaging the north eastern states of Nigeria, the World Food Programme (WFP) says new data shows that the situation for extremely vulnerable families, has improved further in the past six months due to sustained humanitarian assistance.

WFP and its partners under the leadership of the Nigerian government says it has managed to stave off famine in three conflict affected northeastern states by helping displaced families and host communities access plots of land, irrigation and training.

The United Nations estimates that almost 1 million people are in hard-to-reach parts of the northeast, where Islamist group Boko Haram has waged an insurgency for the past nine years.

The Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWSNET) recently said there was "an elevated risk of famine" in that area.

The insurgency has killed tens of thousands of people and displaced more than 2 million others, many of whom are almost entirely dependent on international aid.

Fatmata Ahmad, a widow with six children whose husband was killed 18 months ago by Boko Haram suspects says she looks better than she was months ago.

This new report is coming about two weeks after Boko Haram suspects raided a military barracks in Rann, in Borno state killing 11 people including three aid workers.

However, the WFP says it urgently needs US\$ 94 million to continue life-saving food and nutrition assistance to families until the end of 2018, especially for remote places which will be cut-off during the rainy season from June through September.

National:

Lalu Prasad convicted in fourth fodder scam case

For the fourth time in the fodder scam as former Bihar chief minister Lalu Prasad was convicted by a special CBI court in the fourth fodder scam case while another ex-chief minister Jagannath Mishra was acquitted.

CBI judge Shiv Pal Singh held Lalu guilty in the case RC 38 A/96 pertaining to fraudulent withdrawal of Rs 3.13 crore from Dumka treasury in the early 1990s. The judge will hear arguments on the quantum of sentence from March 21

Earlier, the RJD supremo was convicted on September 30, 2013 in the RC 20A/96 case of Chaibasa pertaining to illegal withdrawal of Rs 37.7 crore in the 1990s. He got five years prison term in the case

following which he was disqualified from the Lok Sabha and barred from contesting elections for six years after completion of jail term.

In the second case, Prasad was convicted in the RC64A/96 in connection with fraudulent withdrawal of Rs 89.27 lakh from Deoghar Treasury in the 1990s. He was awarded 3.5 years sentence in the case on December 23 last year.

In another Chaibasa case, RC 68A/96 pertaining to Rs 37.62 crore Prasad got five years prison term on January 24 this year. The fifth case relating to fraudulent withdrawal of Rs 139 crore from the Doranda treasury in Ranchi is pending with the court.

Bilateral:

India, EU agrees on sharing earth observation data

India and the European Union (EU) have signed an agreement that will enable them to share earth observation data from each other's satellites.

The pact was inked in Bengaluru on 18th March by Philippe Brunet, Director for Space Policy, Copernicus and Defence, on behalf of the European Commission, and by Scientific Secretary, PG Diwakar.

The Copernicus programme provides a wide range of applications like climate change, land, ocean and atmosphere monitoring as well as support in forecasting, management and mitigation of natural disasters.

Under this arrangement, Indian Space Research Organisation ISRO will share data from its earth observation satellites.

The European Commission will provide India with free, full and open access to the data from the Copernicus Sentinel family of satellites using high bandwidth connections from data hub to data hub. This will provide both the sides, the data on climate change, weather forecasting and natural disasters.

India hands over last diesel railway locomotive engine to Myanmar

India on 19th March handed over the 18th and last diesel railway locomotive engine to Myanmar, thus executing a key project ahead of time as part of efforts to boost ties with the neighbour.

These 18 locomotives are fitted with microprocessor control-based system, attaining a maximum speed of 100 km per hour and are customised for Myanmar Railways. The locos have been built by the Diesel Locomotive Works in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh.

A Railway Ministry official said as per the agreement schedule, all locomotives were to be delivered by September, 2018. They have been delivered six months ahead of the schedule.

Economy:

Two-day ministerial meeting of WTO begins in New Delhi

A 2-day informal World Trade Organisation Ministerial meet began in the national capital on on 19th March with the intent to forge cooperation. Representatives from 50 countries are participating in the meet.

The meet will provide an opportunity for free and frank discussions to representatives from several developed and developing countries. The meet is also expected to help resolve several complex issues. Addressing the meet, WTO Director General said discussions are on with the US for reforming the institution.

The meet in Delhi has also gained significance because of the absence of ministerial guidance at previous ministerial meet which took place in Argentina's Buenos Aires in December last year.

The meet also gains significance as Union Commerce Minister Suresh Prabhu has met several global representatives who are in Delhi.

In the backdrop of the meet WTO Director General also called on Prime Minister Narendra Modi during the day. It is hoped that the mini-ministerial meet will pave the way for resolving several pending issues in the global trading body by bringing members together.

50 nations to take up global trade issues: Representatives from 50 countries will gather in New Delhi on 19th March for a two-day informal World Trade Organisation (WTO) ministerial meeting. The meeting will provide an opportunity to engage in free and frank discussions with the hope that it will lead to political guidance on some major issues.

It will look at the issues both at the negotiating table and also in other areas.

Commerce Secretary Rita Teotia had said recently that the meeting would be more of an “ice-breaker” as it is being held after the collapse of talks at the Buenos Aires WTO Ministerial in December.

The ministry's statement further said: “In the absence of ministerial guidance at the Eleventh Ministerial Conference (MC 11) that took place from 10 to 13 December 2017 in Buenos Aires, Argentina, it is hoped that the New Delhi meeting will provide an opportunity for ministers to explore in greater detail the options on different issues for re-invigorating the WTO.”

It further said that safeguarding and strengthening the multilateral trading system was never as important as it is now, and the WTO is also facing systemic challenges, particularly its dispute settlement arm.

President Kovind inaugurates Festival of Innovation and Entrepreneurship

Indian President Ram Nath Kovind on 19th March inaugurated a Festival of Innovation and Entrepreneurship and presented the Gandhian Young Technological Innovation awards at Rashtrapati Bhavan.

The five day festival is an initiative to recognise, respect, showcase, reward innovations and to foster a supportive ecosystem for innovators.

It is being organised by Rashtrapati Bhavan in association with the Department of Science and Technology and the National Innovation Foundation-India.

The festival is a platform for innovators to build linkages with potential stakeholders whose support can improve their prospects in coming years to develop their ideas into implementable projects for the larger social good.

Speaking on the occasion, President Kovind said that it was imperative to create an environment to transform innovation into entrepreneurship. The number of innovators participating in the festival this year has considerably increased. 250 innovators are participating in it.

The innovations showcased can positively impact fields such as agriculture, rural development, sanitation, health, women and child development, biotechnology and medicine. Platforms like this can provide opportunities for young innovators to present their work not only within the country but worldwide.

CAD likely at 1.7% this fiscal: Report

India's current account deficit is expected to be around 1.7 per cent of GDP in this financial year, largely owing to higher oil prices, says a report.

With the December quarter current account deficit worsening to 2 per cent of GDP, Bank of America Merrill Lynch (BofAML) raised its current account deficit (CAD) forecast for this financial year and for the next fiscal.

The global financial services major has raised its CAD forecast by 10 bps to 1.7 per cent of GDP in 2017-18 and by 20 bps to 1.9 per cent of GDP in 2018-19. According to data released by the Reserve Bank, the CAD rose to 2 per cent of GDP at \$13.5 billion in the December quarter, up from \$8 billion or 1.4 per cent in the year-ago period, on the back of a higher trade deficit. On a cumulative basis, CAD more than doubled to 1.9 per cent of GDP in the April-December 2017 period.

Persons in news:

Kedarnath Singh: Jnanpith awardee and renowned Hindi poet Kedarnath Singh passed away in New Delhi on 18th March after a prolonged illness. He won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1989 for his poetry collection Akaal Mein Saras and the Jnanpith Award in 2013.

Kedarnath had been a professor and head of the Department of Hindi Language at Jawaharlal Nehru University's Indian Languages Centre. His works include collections of poems such as Zameen Pak Rahi Hai, Baagh, Tolstoy aur Cycle, Yahan se Dekho and Abhi Bilkul Abhi.

Among his essays and stories are Kalpana aur Chhayavad, Kabristan Mein Panchayat, Hindi Kavita Mein Bimb Vidhan and Mere Samay ke Shabd.

