



Current Affairs of the Day

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Myanmar Internet a virtual battlefield: report

Myanmar's military rulers are seeking to limit access to the Internet to an internal network of only "whitelisted" sites to quash opposition to their seizure of power, according to a report by the International Crisis Group.

Highlighted:

1. It likened the Internet to a "virtual battlefield" where the military is struggling to gain an edge because it lacks technological capacity, while social media companies such as Facebook have banned military officials and many government agencies.
2. The report released noted a narrowing of the leeway for online dissent and abuses of social media to spread hatred toward minority Muslim people in western Myanmar's Rakhine under Aung San Suu Kyi's elected government, which was ousted in a February 1 coup.
3. Since then, authorities have imposed nightly Internet outages and sought to limit access to social media platforms.
4. International telecoms companies such as Norway's Telenor and other businesses have protested the moves, which they say are crippling business activity.
5. Many tech-savvy young people are involved in the civil disobedience movement against the coup and the military lacks the sort of capabilities that China has developed over the past several decades, enabling it to police the Internet and ban access to certain sites, the International Crisis Group report said.
6. So instead the military, also known as the Tatmadaw, is developing an "intranet" for inside the country that allows mobile access only to approved, or "whitelisted" applications.



'The U.S. against the militarisation of the Arctic'

The U.S. said that Washington wanted to avoid a military build-up in the Arctic, a day after Russia defended its military activities in the strategic region.

Highlights:

1. There are concerns about some of the increased military activities in the Arctic. That increases the dangers or prospects of accidents and undermines the shared goal of a peaceful and sustainable future for the region, the USA said.
2. What we need to avoid is a militarisation of the region the USA said on the eve of an Arctic Council meeting.

The U.S. to send 80 mn vaccines abroad

The U.S. will send at least an additional 20 million COVID-19 vaccine doses, in addition to the 60 million AstraZeneca vaccine it has already committed. The additional doses will include not just AstraZeneca but also Pfizer-BioNTech, Moderna and Johnson & Johnson's vaccines.

Highlights:

1. Rampant disease and death in other countries can destabilise them — those countries — and pose a risk to the USA as well Mr Biden said.
2. New variants could arise overseas that could put us at greater risk and we need to help fight the disease around the world to keep us safe here at home, and to do the right thing of helping other people. It's the right thing to do. It's the smart thing to do. It's the strong thing to do," he added.
3. While the Pfizer, Moderna and Johnson & Johnson vaccines are being used in the U.S., the AstraZeneca vaccine has not been approved. A stockpile of 60 million doses is awaiting safety clearance by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). If received, it will be shipped abroad in its entirety.
4. Although the Biden administration has not released a plan on how it will apportion the vaccines across countries, India is expected to receive a significant share of these.



Vaccine geopolitics:

1. Mr Biden said the 80 million doses represent 13% of the country's vaccine production (by June end) and that the U.S. will be donating more than Russia and China, which had donated 15 million doses, according to him.
2. Mr Biden also announced a new milestone in the U.S.'s fight against COVID: a decline in COVID-19 cases in all 50 States for the first time since the pandemic started. Mr Biden also said those who do not get vaccinated would end up "paying the price".

Vaccination lag in rural India points to a looming crisis

Only about 15% have been immunised outside urban areas.

Highlights:

1. Even as the second COVID-19 wave shows signs of easing, the spread of cases in rural areas and the relatively lower vaccination numbers there points to a burgeoning crisis.
2. During the first wave (which peaked in September 2020), the COVID-19

Cases and doses | While more than 60% of cases were from the rural and semi-rural districts, only an estimated 12%-15% of the inhabitants had received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine by May 14



% OF CASES IN DISTRICTS

	Urban	Semi-urban	Semi-rural	Rural
Apr. 2020	51%	19%	20%	10%
Sept. 2020	12%	22%	32%	33%
Feb. 2021	11%	39%	30%	21%
May 2021	13%	22%	30%	35%

DOSES ADMINISTERED PER 100 PERSONS

	Urban	Semi-urban	Semi-rural	Rural
Jan. 2021	0.5	0.3	0.3	0.2
Feb. 2021	2.1	1.3	1.1	1.0
Mar. 2021	9.4	5.6	5.1	4.6
Apr. 2021	25.5	16.4	12.7	10.9
May 2021	30.3	19.2	15.1	12.7

SOURCE: DEVELOPMENT DATA LAB | FULL TABLE : [HTTPS://BIT.LY/2S23PMO](https://bit.ly/2S23PMO)

cases started piling up in urban areas initially and spread to rural areas (including semi-rural ones) constituting 65% of all cases.



3. The second wave also followed a similar pattern. The split was 52% -48% in urban/semi-urban vs rural/semi-rural areas in March 2021 and by mid-May, the estimated caseload split was 65% in rural/semi-rural areas vs 35% in urban/semi-urban areas.
4. These percentages are also skewed due to the lack of adequate testing facilities in many parts of rural India.
5. Adding more cause for concern is the fact that the rise in registered cases has not seen a concomitant increase in vaccination in rural areas. While more than 60% of cases were from the rural and semi-rural districts, only an estimated 12%-15% of inhabitants have received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine by mid-May.
6. In contrast, an estimated 30% of residents in urban and 19% in semi-urban areas have received at least one shot. In terms of being fully vaccinated (both doses), only an estimated 2.6% of rural residents received them by May 14, even as an estimated 7.7% of urban dwellers had received both doses.

Vaccination helps

1. Data from some States show that the daily confirmed cases have decreased among the vaccinated higher age groups, while the infections among the non-vaccinated continue to rise during the second wave.
2. Experts have also said that vaccines effectively prevent severe disease even if a vaccinated individual gets infected.
3. The lower vaccination numbers in semi-rural and rural areas suggest that the impact of the pandemic will be more severe there, as is being reported anecdotally from ground reports in several parts of north India, in particular.
4. Even the reported cases from rural India are underestimated because of the lack of adequate testing facilities.

Electoral bonds worth ₹695 cr. sold during the recent elections

The State Bank of India (SBI) sold electoral bonds worth ₹695.34 crores from April 1 to 10, when the Tamil Nadu, Puducherry, West Bengal, Assam and Kerala polls were in full swing, says an RTI reply by the bank.



Highlights:

1. The amount sold was the highest-ever for any Assembly elections since the scheme started in 2018, according to the numbers provided in the reply.
2. All but ₹2,000 of the bonds sold in the 16th phase of the scheme were encashed. Predictably, the sale shot up during the elections in comparison to the previous tranche in January when bonds worth ₹42.1 crores were sold, it said.
3. The highest amounts were sold at the Kolkata branch (₹176.1 crores), followed by New Delhi (₹167.5 crores) and Chennai (₹141.5 crores).
4. In its May 14 reply to a query filed by Bihar-based RTI activist Kanhaiya Kumar on April 16, the SBI declined to name the political parties that encashed the bonds, saying it was “third party personal information” that was exempted under the RTI Act.
5. The bank also declined to share the details of how much commission it had earned from the sale of bonds since the scheme started in 2018, saying the information was of “commercial confidence in nature” and its disclosure would “harm the competitive position of the bank”. However, the SBI was the only bank authorised to sell electoral bonds by the government.
6. The scheme allows any Indian citizen or company to purchase the bonds sold by the SBI in denominations of ₹1,000, ₹10,000, ₹1 lakh, ₹10 lakh and ₹1 crore and give them to political parties anonymously.

The new naming system for virus variants

The World Health Organization (WHO) would unveil a system of the naming of coronavirus variants drawn from the way tropical storms are named.

Highlights:

1. The new naming system should go live soon — yes, it will be named like hurricanes. This is so as not to stigmatise and disincentivise countries from making their sequencing results public.
2. It will also be easier for the lay public to remember rather than these complicated lineage numbers.



3. The WHO and health and science agencies across the world, for instance, the Indian Council of Medical Research, the United States' Centres for Disease Control and the Public Health England refer to viruses and their variants by formal lineage names, which are a combination of letters and names that point to the relationships between different variants.
4. To the trained eye, variants such as B.1.1.7 and B.1.617 suggest that they have certain mutations in common and as well clues to their evolutionary history.

Geographical tag

1. However, because virus names and their associated diseases have frequently been named after geographical places where outbreaks were first reported or samples first isolated — such as the West Nile virus or Ebola.
2. B.1.1.7 started to be known as the 'U.K. variant' and B.1.351 as the 'South African' variant.
3. India's Health Ministry, in the aftermath of B.1.617 that was popularly called the 'Indian variant', issued a press release decrying the media's use of the name.
4. The dilemma of having names that don't stigmatise places but also are amenable to popular use has to an extent been solved by the system of naming hurricanes, or tropical cyclones. The World Meteorological Organisation leaves it to countries that surround a particular ocean basin to come up with names.

GST Council to mull COVID relief: Govt.

Requests for relief from the Goods and Services Tax (GST) on critical COVID-19 materials will be placed before the GST Council meeting, the Centre told the Delhi High Court, which had asked it to consider exempting the GST levied on oxygen concentrators imported for personal use.

Highlights:

Since GST rates and general exemptions are prescribed on the recommendation of the GST Council, all the representations seeking GST relief shall be placed before the Council at its next meeting.



13 dead as Tauktae batters Gujarat; 90 missing from a barge

The severe cyclonic storm Tauktae that entered Saurashtra early on Tuesday, whipping up winds close to 180 kmph, has reduced in intensity and lay about 35 km west of Ahmedabad late in the evening, according to the India Meteorological Department (IMD).

Highlights:

1. Rain is expected to continue in Gujarat and Rajasthan for the next 24 hours as the storm further weakens into a “depression” near Jodhpur by Wednesday.
2. The Army has activated six rescue and relief teams for operations in Diu. Working overnight, the road between Gir and Diu, which was blocked at many places due to fallen trees, debris and damaged electrical wires, along with poles, was cleared by Army teams. This restored movement of essential supplies, medical support and civil traffic to aid cyclone relief in the Union Territory, the Army said.
3. Tauktae was the first 'Extremely Severe Cyclone' (characterised as with winds over 220 kmph) to reach close to Mumbai in 130 years and to impact all the five states on India's west coast.

