



Current Affairs of the Day

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New IT rules are empowering and will protect users: Minister

Highlights:

1. Information Technology and Communications Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw said the new information technology rules were empowering and protecting users. The new IT rules will ensure a safer and more responsible social media ecosystem in India, the Minister said.
2. The new rules, which came into effect on May 25, mandate social media companies to establish a grievance redress mechanism for resolving complaints from the users or victims.
3. All significant social media companies with a user base of over 50 lakh shall appoint a grievance officer to deal with such complaints and share the name and contact details of such officers.
4. The big social media companies are mandated to appoint a chief compliance officer, a nodal contact person and a resident grievance officer. All of them should be residents of India.
5. However, Facebook-owned Whatsapp has challenged the new IT rules for social media intermediaries requiring the messaging app to trace chats and make provisions to identify the first originator of the information, saying they violate the right to privacy and are unconstitutional.
6. WhatsApp further alleged the requirement of intermediaries enabling the identification of the first originator of information in India upon government or court order puts end-to-end encryption and its benefits "at-risk".
7. Some of the media houses have also challenged the new IT rules and the matter is sub judice.

Kandahar evacuation is temporary, says MEA

Highlights:

1. India has evacuated personnel from the Consulate-General in Kandahar as a temporary measure in view of the fighting between the Taliban and Afghan security forces.



2. The Consulate-General of India in Kandahar has not been closed. However, due to the intense fighting near Kandahar city, India-based personnel have been brought back for the time being.
3. Indian missions in Afghanistan were targeted by terrorists in the past and Saturday's evacuation is, therefore, be interpreted as a measure to ensure the safety and security of the people employed at the Indian Consulate-General.

Richard Branson takes off first in space tourism race

Highlights:

1. Swashbuckling entrepreneur Richard Branson hurtled into space aboard his own winged rocket ship in his boldest adventure yet, beating out fellow billionaire Jeff Bezos.
2. The nearly 71-year-old Mr Branson and five crewmates from his Virgin Galactic space tourism company, including Indian-origin aeronautical engineer Sirisha Bandla, reached an altitude of about 88 kilometres over the New Mexico desert — enough to experience three to four minutes of weightlessness and see the curvature of the earth — and then safely glided back home to a runway landing.
3. The brief, up-and-down flight — the rocket ship's portion took only about 15 minutes, or about as long as Alan Shepard's first U.S. spaceflight in 1961 — was intended as a confidence-boosting plug for Virgin Galactic, which plans to start taking paying customers on joyrides next year.
4. Mr Bezos' Blue Origin company intends to send tourists past the so-called Karman line 100 kilometres above the earth, which is recognised by international aviation and aerospace federations as the threshold of space. But NASA, the Air Force, the Federal Aviation Administration and some astrophysicists consider the boundary between the atmosphere and space to begin 80 kilometres up.
5. Virgin Galactic already has more than 600 reservations from would-be space tourists, with tickets initially costing \$250,000 apiece. Blue Origin is waiting for Mr Bezos' flight before announcing its ticket prices.



Sikkim blossoms: State home to 27% of India's flowering plants

Highlights:

1. Sikkim, the smallest State with less than 1% of India's landmass, is home to 27% of all flowering plants found in the country, reveals a recent publication by the Botanical Survey of India (BSI).
2. Flora of Sikkim – A Pictorial Guide, released earlier this week, lists 4,912 naturally occurring flowering plants in the tiny Himalayan State.
3. The total number of naturally occurring flowering plants in the country is about 18,004 species, and with 4,912 species, the diversity of flowering plants in Sikkim, spread over an area of 7,096 sq. km, is very unique.
4. The State, which is a part of the Kanchenjunga biosphere landscape, has different altitudinal ecosystems, which provide opportunities for herbs and trees to grow and thrive.
5. From subalpine vegetation to the temperate to the tropical, the State has different kinds of vegetation, and that is the reason for such a diversity of flora. The elevation also varies between 300 metres and 8,598 metres above mean sea level, the apex being the top of Mt. Kanchenjunga (8,586 metres).

Orchids galore

The publication details 532 species of wild orchids (which is more than 40% of all orchid species found in India), 36 species of rhododendron and 20 species of oak, and more than 30 species of high-value medicinal plants, among other species.

Cauvery and the row over Mekedatu project

The story so far: Karnataka Chief Minister said that his government would go ahead with the long-pending Mekedatu dam project in the Cauvery Basin to cater to the drinking water needs of the Bengaluru Metropolitan City and surrounding areas. On the same day, Tamil Nadu's Water Resources Minister met Union Minister for Jal Shakti, Gajendra Singh Shekhawat, and impressed upon him not to grant Centre's clearance for the project.

What do the Cauvery Water Disputes Tribunal and the Supreme Court say?



1. The Cauvery Water Disputes Tribunal, in its final order on February 2007, made allocations to all the riparian States — Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu, apart from the Union Territory of Puducherry.
2. It also stipulated “tentative monthly deliveries during a normal year” to be made available by Karnataka to Tamil Nadu.
3. Aggrieved over the final order for different reasons, the States had appealed to the Supreme Court.
4. In February 2018, the court, in its judgment, revised the water allocation and increased the share of Karnataka by 14.75 thousand million cubic feet (tmc ft) at the cost of Tamil Nadu. The enhanced quantum comprised 4.75 tmc ft for meeting drinking water and domestic requirements of Bengaluru and surrounding areas.

What is Karnataka planning?

1. Encouraged by the Supreme Court verdict, Karnataka, which sees the order as an endorsement of its stand, has set out to pursue the Mekedatu project. Originally proposed as a hydropower project, the revised Mekedatu dam project has more than one purpose to serve.
2. Estimated to cost ₹9,000 crores, the project envisages the construction of a reservoir of 67.16-tmc ft capacity, which will come up about 4 km away from the Karnataka-Tamil Nadu border. A hydropower plant of nearly 400 MW has also been proposed.
3. The Karnataka government has argued that the proposed reservoir will regulate the flow to Tamil Nadu on a monthly basis, as stipulated by the Tribunal and the Supreme Court.

What happens next?

Tamil Nadu’s petitions against the project are pending with the Supreme Court. The project is yet to get environmental clearance from the Centre. A way out can be found if the two parties agree to the idea of a joint execution, operation and maintenance of the project or a third party’s participation.



What makes the UAPA so stringent?

The story so far:

1. The death of Father Stan Swamy, a Jesuit priest and tribal rights activist, while in judicial custody, has brought to focus the law under which he was imprisoned.
2. The stringent nature of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), which renders it difficult for one held under it to obtain bail, is being seen as one of the principal reasons for Fr. Swamy's death as a prisoner in a hospital.
3. This has raised questions about the liberty of many others, including 15 others arrested in the Elgar Parishad case and incarcerated under the same law, which is also India's main anti-terrorism legislation.

What is the origin of the UAPA?

1. The Union government was considering a stringent law against calls for secession in the mid-1960s. In March 1967, a peasant uprising in Naxalbari imparted a sense of urgency.
2. On June 17, 1966, the President had promulgated the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Ordinance "to provide for the more effective prevention of unlawful activities of individuals and associations".
3. Its stringency created a furore in Parliament when it was tabled, leading to the government dropping it. Instead, the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967, which was not identical to the ordinance, was passed.

What is its scope and how has it been expanded over the years?

1. The Act provided for declaring an association or a body of individuals "unlawful" if they indulged in any activity that included acts and words, spoken or written, or any sign or representation, that supported any claim to bring about "the cession of a part of the territory of India", or its "secession", or which questions or disclaims the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity.
2. Prior to the UAPA's enactment, associations were being declared unlawful under the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 1952. However, the Supreme Court held that the provision on bans was unlawful because there was no judicial mechanism to scrutinise the validity of any ban.



3. Therefore, the UAPA included provisions for a Tribunal which has to confirm within six months the notification declaring an outfit unlawful.
4. In its present form, the Act, after the amendments in 2004 and 2013, covers the declaration of associations as unlawful, punishment for terrorist acts and activities, acts threatening the country's security, including its economic security (a term that covers fiscal and monetary security, food, livelihood, energy ecological and environmental security), and provisions to prevent the use of funds for terrorist purposes, including money laundering.
5. The ban on organisations was initially for two years, but from 2013, the period of proscription has been extended to five years.
6. After the Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA), 2002, was repealed, the UAPA was expanded to include what would have been terrorist acts in earlier laws. The 2004 amendments were also aimed at giving effect to various anti-terrorism resolutions of the United Nations Security Council.
7. In 2012, there was a set of amendments, which was notified from early 2013, seeking to bring the UAPA in line with various requirements of the Financial Action Task Force, an inter-governmental body, to combat money laundering and terrorism financing.
8. In 2019, the Act was amended to empower the government to designate individuals as terrorists.

How do UAPA provisions differ from regular criminal law?

1. Just like other special laws dealing with narcotic drugs and the now-defunct laws on terrorism, the UAPA also modifies the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC) to give it more teeth.
2. A remand order can be for 30 days instead of the usual 15, and the maximum period of judicial custody before the filing of a charge sheet is extendable from the usual 90 days to 180 days.
3. This extension, however, depends on the Public Prosecutor filing a report on the progress in the investigation and giving reasons for seeking another 90 days to complete it. The law also makes it more difficult to obtain bail.



What is the controversy about its bail provisions?

1. Under Section 43D(5) of the Act, bail cannot be granted to a suspect if the court is of the opinion that there are reasonable grounds to believe that the charges are prima facie true.
2. A Supreme Court judgment on this has clarified that this meant that the court considering bail should not examine the evidence too deeply, but must go by the prosecution version based on broad probabilities.
3. This means that the onus is on the accused to show that the case is false but without inviting the court to evaluate the available evidence.
4. This is why human rights defenders feel that the provision is draconian, virtually rendering it impossible for anyone to obtain bail until the completion of the trial.