

### NEWSPAPER HIGHLIGHT

Forest and tree cover in the country has increased by 2,261 square kilometres since the last assessment in 2019, according to the India State of Forest Report 2021 released. Releasing the report, Environment and Forest Minister Bhupender Yadav said the total forest and tree cover was 80.9 million hectares, which accounted for 24.62% of the geographical area of the country. The report said 17 States and Union Territories had more than 33% of their area under forest cover. The report found that there had been a 1,540 sq. km increase in forest cover and 721 sq. km increase in tree cover since the last report in 2019. "Increase in forest cover has been observed in open forest followed by very dense forest. Top three States showing increase in forest cover are Andhra Pradesh (647 sq. km) followed by Telangana (632 sq. km) and Odisha (537 sq. km).

India on Thursday confirmed a \$400 million currency swap with Sri Lanka while deferring another \$500 million due for settlement to the Asian Clearing Union (ACU), in a move aimed at helping the island nation witnessing an unprecedented economic crisis. Significantly, India's confirmation of the swap comes a week after the two countries signed a long pending agreement on jointly developing the strategically located Trincomalee oil tank farm along the north eastern coast of the island.

Minister of Commerce and Industry Piyush Goyal and U.K. Trade Secretary AnneMarie Trevelyan kicked off talks for an ambitious, comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (FTA). Mr. Goyal said the negotiations are expected to be completed within a year. "India stands to gain from this multi-dimensional economic partnership with exports growth in leather, textiles, jewellery, processed agri-products," said Mr. Goyal after the start of the negotiation that would cover both goods and services. Sources said bilateral trade of \$50 billion is expected to double to \$100 billion in 10 years. Mr. Goyal had earlier said such discussions were under way with the UAE, Australia, Canada and Israel.

Fresh investments announced in the country grew 88% year on year to ₹12.76 lakh crore between April and December 2021, with the private sector accounting for about two

### RECASTING THE SELECTION PROCESS OF THE ECs

1. Issue-Reports of the CEC and the ECs attending an informal meeting with the Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister last year has brought the focus on the independence and the impartiality of the ECI.

2. Constitutional provisions regarding the ECI? The Election Commission of India is an autonomous constitutional authority responsible for administering Union and State election processes in India. The body administers elections to the Lok Sabha, Rajya Sabha, State Legislative Assemblies in India, and the offices of the President and Vice President in the country.

**Part XV (Article 324-329) of the Indian Constitution deals with elections, and establishes a commission for these matters.** At present, the Election Commission of India (ECI) is a three-member body, with one Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) and two Election Commissioners (EC). Under Article 324(2) of the Constitution of India, the President of India is empowered to appoint the CEC and the ECs.

3. The president may also appoint after consultation with the election commission such regional commissioners as he may consider necessary to assist the election commission. Article 324(2) also empowers the President of India to fix from time to time the number of Election Commissioners other than the CEC. They draw salaries and allowances at par with those of the Judges of the Supreme Court of India. The CEC or an EC holds office for a term of six years from the date on which he assumes his office or until he attains the age of 65 years before the expiry of six years term. They can resign anytime or can be removed before the expiry of their term.

4. What can be done to strengthen the ECI? **Changes in the appointment process for Election Commissioners can strengthen the ECI's independence, neutrality and transparency. Appointments- In 1975, the Justice Tarkunde Committee** recommended that Election Commissioners be appointed on the advice of a committee comprising the Prime Minister, the Lok Sabha Opposition Leader and the Chief Justice of India. This was reiterated by the Dinesh Goswami Committee in 1990 and the Law Commission in 2015.

5. The Fourth Report of the 2nd Administrative Reforms Commission additionally recommended that the Law Minister and the Deputy Chairman of the Rajya Sabha be included in such a Collegium. Establishing a multi-institutional, bipartisan committee for the fair and transparent selection of Election Commissioners similar to the appointment of CIC, Lokpal, CVC, and the Director of the CBI is the need of the hour. Separation of powers is the gold standard for governments across the world.

### GENEVA TALKS

1. The Geneva talks that was held recently between the United States and Russia were inconclusive. What is the issue? Ukraine crisis- Russia has mounted troops near Ukraine's border. It has demanded the U.S.-led NATO alliance rule out admitting the former Soviet state or expanding further into what Moscow sees as its back yard. The U.S. accuses that Russia could be preparing a new invasion, eight years after it seized the Crimean peninsula from its neighbour. Russia denies any such plans and says it is responding to the aggressive behaviour from the NATO and Ukraine which has tilted toward the West.

2. Expansion of NATO- Russia repeated a set of demands including a ban on further NATO expansion and an end to its activity in the central and eastern European countries that joined after 1997. Russia responded militarily in 2008 when Georgia was considering joining NATO.

3. INF treaty-**Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF Treaty) is a nuclear arms-control accord reached by the U.S. and the Soviet Union in 1987.** The two countries agreed to eliminate their stocks of intermediate and shorter-range (between 500 and 5,500 km) land based missiles which could carry nuclear warheads.

4. The NATO was created in 1949 by the U.S, Canada, and several Western European nations to provide collective security

thirds of these commitments, according to a new report. About 7,764 new projects were announced in the first three quarters of the current fiscal. This accounted for growth of almost 47% compared with the same period in 2019-20 (pre COVID year) indicating recovery in capital expenditure. In April-December 2021, the private sector announced 3,357 new projects worth ₹8.70 lakh crore accounting for 174% growth from a year earlier and almost double the investment of ₹4.28 lakh crore announced in April-December 2019-20, according to a survey by Projects Today.

Doctors at the University of Maryland Medical School in the U.S. made news when they transplanted a genetically modified pig heart into a 57 year old man. Few remember now that Dhaniram Baruah, a cardiothoracic surgeon based in Sonapur near Guwahati, transplanted the organs of a pig into a human body in 1997. However, Dr. Baruah's xenotransplantation procedure ended badly. Xenotransplantation is the process of grafting or transplanting organs or tissues between members of different species.

The U.S. laid out its most detailed case yet against Beijing's "unlawful" claims in the South China Sea, rejecting both the geographic and historic bases for its vast, divisive map. In a 47page research paper, the State Department's Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs said China had no basis under international law for claims that have put Beijing on a collision course with the Philippines, Vietnam and other Southeast Asian nations.

The Kremlin gave a bleak assessment of Russia's security talks with the United States and NATO this week, describing them as "unsuccessful" and saying there was disagreement on fundamental issues. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov also said Moscow viewed a sweeping sanctions Bill unveiled by U.S. Senate Democrats "extremely negatively" and as pressure tactics. "Introducing sanctions against a head of state is crossing a line and comparable to a rupture of ties.

U.S.-based Tesla is working through a lot of challenges with the government to introduce its products in India, the electric car major's founder and CEO Elon Musk said." Last year, Tesla had sought a reduction in import duties on electric vehicles (EVs) in India. The government had asked Tesla to first start manufacturing its iconic EVs in India before any tax concessions can be considered.

against the Soviet Union. It is a political and military alliance comprising of 30 member countries. Under the treaty, collective defense was promulgated in which an attack against one is considered as an attack against all.

**5. Status of the recent Geneva talks- The U.S. has publicly said that it will not shut NATO's door on potential future members against the Russia's demand of banning the NATO.**

Any aggression against Ukraine might serve Russia's tactical interests but could deal a deadly blow to any plan to bring the Russia-Europe ties back on track. Finding a solution to the crisis depends on whether both sides are able to get out of their Cold War mentality and build mutual confidence in bilateral relations.

### REGIONAL COMPREHENSIVE ECONOMIC PARTNERSHIP(RCEP) AND INDIA

1. South Korea has said that it regrets India's absence from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and hopes to see New Delhi rejoin the agreement. The RCEP came into effect on January 1, 2022, marking the formation of the world's largest free trade zone in terms of trade volume.

2. India withdrew from the RCEP in 2019 largely because of concerns it would open it up to Chinese goods amid an already wide trade imbalance with China, and the failure of the agreement to adequately open up to services.

3. Need for India's presence in RCEP: India had "a crucial role" to play in helping the region build an inclusive architecture at a time of increasing global instability. **Such trade pacts will also give Indian companies a platform to showcase their strengths across even larger markets.** Besides, Rising U.S.-China tensions were "deeply worrying" for the region with the pandemic resulting in "heightened tension".

4. It is a trade deal between the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and China, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand.

### ASSAM MEGHALAYA BORDER DISPUTE

1. Home Ministry is trying to seal the final agreement to end the dispute in six areas of the Assam-Meghalaya boundary ahead of Meghalaya's 50th Statehood Day celebration on January 21. Dispute- Assam and Meghalaya share an 885-km-long border. Meghalaya was carved out of Assam under the Assam Reorganisation Act, 1971, a law that it challenged, leading to disputes. As of now, there are 12 points of dispute along their borders. These include the areas of Upper Tarabari, Gazang reserve forest, Hahim, Langpih, Borduar, Boklapara, Nongwah, Matamur, Khanapara-Pilangkata, Deshdemoreah Block I and Block II, Khanduli and Retacherra.

2. Langpih: **A major point of contention between Assam and Meghalaya is the district of Langpih in West Garo Hills bordering the Kamrup district of Assam.** Langpih was part of the Kamrup district during the British colonial period but post-Independence, it became part of the Garo Hills and Meghalaya.

3. Recently, Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma and his Meghalaya counterpart Conrad Sangma decided to set up two regional committees to resolve the border disputes in a phased manner. Sarma recently said five aspects were to be considered in resolving the border dispute. They are historical facts, ethnicity, administrative convenience, mood and sentiments of the people concerned and the contiguity of the land.

4. Assam and border issues: The states of the Northeast were largely carved out of Assam, which has border disputes with several states. **Assam's border disputes with Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland are pending in the Supreme Court. Assam's border disputes with Meghalaya and Mizoram are currently in the phase of resolution** through negotiations. The border dispute with Mizoram recently turned violent, leading to intervention from the Centre.

### HATE SPEECH AND MEASURES

1. Hate speech is an incitement to hatred against a particular group of persons marginalized by their religious belief, sexual orientation, gender, and so on. The Law Commission, in its 267th report on hate speech, said such utterances have the potential to provoke individuals and society to commit acts of terrorism, genocide, and ethnic cleansing.

2. Sections 153A and 505 of the Indian Penal Code are generally taken to be the main penal provisions that deal with inflammatory speeches and expressions that seek to punish 'hate

**The National Company Law Appellate Tribunal (NCLAT) on Thursday issued notices over the petition filed by ecommerce major Amazon, challenging a recent order passed by the fair trade regulator CCI that suspended the over twoyear old approval for its deal with Future Coupons Pvt. Ltd. (FCPL).**

**Investors in Devas Multimedia said on Thursday they had received a Paris court's permission to attach as collateral an apartment of the Indian Deputy Chief of Mission in the French capital, in connection with arbitration awards won by the telecommunications firm after India cancelled the Antrix deal. This comes close on the heels of a Canada court on January 8 allowing Devas investors to seize 50% of Air India's assets held by the International Air Transport Association (IATA).**

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**3.Hate Speech Must be curbed due to Internal Security:** The Muzaffarnagar riots of 2013 was triggered by a fake video that incited communal passions. Igniting extremist sentiments. Mob lynching. Misinformation and disinformation: Delhi Riots.

**4.Measures: The world's biggest social media companies, including Facebook, Google, Twitter and ByteDance, are exploring an industry-wide alliance to curb fake news on their platforms in India.** The Election Commission of India must tie up with tech companies to identify the creator of such news.

**5.Educating the end-users.** The government should bring out a policy framework on the possible harm due to the internet messaging platforms to engage at a deeper level. Imposing hefty fines, like in Germany the Social media companies face fines of up to 50m if they persistently fail to remove illegal content from their sites.