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SPORTS

FROM 1 APRIL TO 30 APRIL



Classifying SUVs are used by super rich who wants to show off, SC extends ban

- Classifying powerful, high-end diesel private cars and Sports Utility Vehicles (SUVs) as “vehicles used by the super-rich who want to show-off”, the Supreme Court refused to lift the ban ordered on their fresh registration in the National Capital Region.
- The court had banned registration of diesel-run private cars of the capacity of 2000 CC and above and SUVs on December 2015, in a bid to cut down air pollution in the city. The ban was to continue till March 31, 2016.
- Lawyers pointed out that some SUVs like Toyota Innova and Tata Sumo with over 2000 CC engine capacity could hardly be described as luxury cars.
- Putting a check on this strain of argument, Chief Justice Thakur asked whether there was any study to prove that diesel caused less pollution than petrol cars.
- The court further mooted the idea of making bigger car owners pay pollution charges in case the ban on fresh registration in the NCR was lifted in the future.
- The court, however, extended till April 30 the deadline for taxis to switch to CNG.
- The court had earlier ordered that all taxis, including those operating under aggregators like Ola and Uber in Delhi, plying under city permits, shall switch to CNG not later than March 1, 2016.
- Noting that it was sensitive about the dent the ban has caused to the economy, the Bench asked the car companies to come up with possible alternatives to curb the rising air pollution in the city.

Telecom operators moves to SC against TRAI

- Cellular operators questioned the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India's (TRAI) move to penalise them with the new call drops regulations when they had never exceeded the two per cent margin for errors fixed by the telecom regulator.
- A Bench of Justices hearing a challenge posed by the COAI to TRAI's controversial Telecom Consumers Protection (9th Amendment) Regulations, 2015.
- The regulations make telcos liable to compensate consumers for call drops from January 2016.
- In the maiden hearing of the case on March 17, telco's had argued that the very fact that the TRAI gave two percent margin for errors meant it accepted the inevitability of call drops.
- TRAI, said they would in due course address the Bench on TRAI's stand to the court's query as to whether the telecom regulator would consider amending the regulations.

2.2 km long Vivekanand Flyover collapsed in north Kolkata

- At least 21 people were killed and 88 injured as two parts of an under-construction 2.2-km-long Vivekananda Flyover collapsed in a congested market area in BurraBazar, north Kolkata.
- The Army was called in to help with the rescue.
- A 100-metre (330-ft) section of the flyover came crashing down suddenly on a crowded street around lunchtime, crushing pedestrians, cars and other vehicles under huge concrete slabs and metal.

- The death toll is likely to increase as scores of people inside vehicles were trapped under the collapsed bridge.
- An FIR has been lodged against the local officials of the Hyderabad-based IVRCL, contracted to build the giant flyover.
- Prime Minister Narendra Modi called up Ms. Banerjee and offered all Central government assistance to her.
- The National Disaster Response Force deployed five of its teams. Specialist rescue teams armed with concrete and metal cutters, drilling machines, sensors and sniffer dogs reached the venue.

Indians among the shortlist for story prize

- Four authors and a translator from India are in the running for the 2016 Commonwealth Short Story Prize, which has shortlisted 26 “fresh and unexpected” stories by writers from 11 countries.
- Currently in its 5th year, the prize is awarded for the best piece of unpublished short fiction (2,000-5,000 words) in English.
- Short stories that are translated into English from other languages are eligible too.
- The stories by the 4 shortlisted Indian writers include ‘Cow and Company’ by Parashar Kulkarni, ‘Dirty White Strings’ by Kritika Pandey, ‘Girdhar’s Mansion’ by Sumit Ray and ‘Instant Karma’ by Vinayak Varma.
- Additionally, noted Indian translator Arunava Sinha is shortlisted for his translation of Bangladeshi writer Sumon Rahman’s short story ‘NiroporadhGhum’ (Innocent Sleep).
- Each year, five winning writers from five different Commonwealth regions are selected..
- Regional winners who will be announced on May 4 will receive £2,500 and the overall winner, to be announced in September, will receive prize money of £5,000.

Twenty percent adults will be obese in 2025

- One in five adults could be obese by 2025, said a major survey that warned of a looming epidemic of “severe obesity” with significant health and economic costs.
- The ratio of obese adults has more than doubled in the 40 years since 1975, and will climb further in the coming nine, the research showed.
- It used data from 1,698 studies involving 19.2 million adults from 186 countries which are home to 99 per cent of the world’s population. Children were excluded.
- Of about 5 billion adults alive in 2014, 641 million were obese, it found. The figure was set to exceed 1.1 billion by 2025.
- Obesity and especially severe and morbid obesity, affect many organs and physiological processes. We can deal with some of these, like higher cholesterol or blood pressure, through medicines. But for many others, including diabetes, we don’t have effective treatment.
- People are divided into healthy or unhealthy weight categories based on a universally-adopted measure dubbed Body Mass Index (BMI) — a ratio of weight-to-height squared. A healthy BMI ranges from 18.5 to 24.9.
- One is considered underweight below 18.5, overweight from 25 up, and obese from 30 — when the risk of diabetes, stroke, heart disease and some cancers escalates massively.
- With a BMI of 35 one is categorised as severely obese, and from 40 upward as morbidly so.
- Among men globally, obesity tripled from 3.2 per cent of the population in 1975 to 10.8 per cent in 2014 (some 266 million), and among women it rose from 6.4 per cent to 14.9 per cent (375 million), said the survey — 12.9 per cent combined.

- The ratio of underweight people in the world declined at a slower rate than obesity grew, said the authors — from about 13.8 per cent in 1975 to 8.8 per cent for men, and 14.6 per cent to 9.7 per cent for women.
- At current rates, more women will be severely obese (a BMI of 35 or more) than underweight by 2025, and world will miss its stated target of halting obesity at 2010 levels.
- Nearly a fifth of world's obese adults (118 million) lived in six high-income countries — the U.S., Britain, Ireland, Australia, Canada and New Zealand.
- The U.S. was home to one in four severely obese men and almost one in five severely obese women in the world.
- At the other extreme, Timor-Leste, Ethiopia and Eritrea had the lowest BMI numbers in the world, with averages as low as 20.1.
- More than a fifth of men in India, Bangladesh, Timor-Leste, Afghanistan, Eritrea and Ethiopia, and a quarter of women in Bangladesh and India, were underweight.

Govt. asked NHAI for status report of under construction bridges

- A day after an incomplete flyover collapsed in Kolkata killing at least 23 people, Road Transport and Highways Minister Nitin Gadkari asked the National Highways Authority of India to submit a status report on all under-construction bridges in the country and ensure that safety measures are in place for all highway projects.
- Govt is issuing instructions and Minister has also issued instructions to all our project directors and regional officers to be vigilant and ensure safety measures are taken and that no neglect takes place.
- Government is not immediately reviewing contracts of IVRCL, however they are saying if something like this happens it spoils entities reputation.

Government will launch new campaign on 125th birth anniversary of Dr. Ambedkar

- Gram Uday Se Bharat Uday Abhiyan, a Central government's campaign to strengthen Panchayati Raj in villages and ensure social harmony, empowerment of women and uplift of farmers will be launched by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.
- This will be launched at Mhow in Madhya Pradesh in April, on the occasion of 125th Birth anniversary of Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar.
- Rural Development Minister Birender Singh told that the campaign would be held all over the country from April 14 to 24.
- The campaign will be run jointly by Union Rural Development and Panchayati Raj, Agriculture, Social Justice, Labour and Information and Broadcasting Ministries along with States and will culminate on April 24 on the Panchayati Raj Day with the Prime Minister addressing villagers in Jamshedpur.

IMD predicts increase in temperature for summer 2016

- Meteorologists have said that an average rise of 1 degree Celsius in summer temperatures — as predicted by the IMD over most of India would mean more days of extreme heat as well as a higher likelihood of heat waves compared to last year.

- The Indian Meteorology Department (IMD) defines a heatwave as an excess of five to six degrees C over the maximum daily temperature (over a 30-year period) of less than 40 degree C or an excess of four to five deg. C over a normal historical maximum temperature of over 40 degree C.
- The IMD declares a heat wave when the actual maximum temperature is above 45 degree C.
- More heatwaves could mean a greater public health concern. Last year, heat waves killed over 1,500 in Andhra Pradesh alone.
- This year the IMD will be issuing a summer fortnightly forecast about the likelihood of heatwaves across the country.
- The Met Department stated that the summer months of 2016 would be warmer than normal across all meteorological sub-divisions of the country and above-normal, heat wave (HW) conditions are very likely over central and northwest India during the period.
- India experienced significantly above normal temperatures during January and February of this year with monthly anomalies of 1.5 deg. C and 2 deg. C, when compared to the thirty-year average of 1961-90.
- Moreover, 2015 was the third warmest year ever recorded since 1901.
- All the temperatures (maximum, minimum and mean) of most of the sub-divisions from northwest India, Kerala from south India and Vidharbha from Central India are likely to be above 1 deg. C.
- The IMD concurs that the frequency and duration of heat waves over the country are increasing and attributes it to increasing greenhouse gases due to anthropogenic activity and the El Niño.

US President warns India and Pak for moving in wrong direction in nuclear Arsenal

- India and Pakistan need to make progress in reducing their nuclear arsenal and ensure they do not “continually move in the wrong direction” while developing military doctrines, U.S. President Barack Obama said.
- “One of the challenges that we are going to have here is that it is very difficult to see huge reductions in our nuclear arsenal unless the U.S. and Russia, as the two largest possessors of nuclear weapons, are prepared to lead the way,” Mr. Obama said.
- “The other area where I think we need to see progress is Pakistan and India, that subcontinent, making sure that as they develop military doctrines, that they are not continually moving in the wrong direction.” He said
- At the end of the summit, world leaders were shown a classified video that Mr. Obama said focussed attention on possible scenarios that might emerge with respect to terrorist networks laying their hands on a nuclear device. U.S. officials would not term such a threat “remote or imminent,” but call it “real.”
- The fourth NSS, the last in its current format, ended with leaders from over 50 countries and four international organisations stating in a communiqué that “more work remains to be done to prevent non-state actors from obtaining nuclear and other radioactive materials, which could be used for malicious purposes.”

Unclaimed funds to be used for senior citizens welfare

- Savings that remain unclaimed in Employees’ Provident Fund and Public Provident Fund accounts and other small savings schemes for seven years, will be diverted to finance a Senior Citizens’ Welfare Fund, according to new rules notified by the Finance Ministry.

- The Senior Citizens' Welfare Fund was announced in the last Budget. Trustees of the Employees' Provident Fund Organisation termed the move as unconstitutional.
- Three officials — two from the EPFO and one from the Labour Ministry — told The Hindu that unclaimed deposits of PF contributors cannot be diverted for any other purposes, as per the EPF Scheme, 1952.
- Section 5 of the EPF Act 1952 says any decision related to EPF deposits has to be taken up with the CBT.
- The CBT is chaired by Union Labour Minister Bandaru Dattatreya and has representatives from the government, employers and employees.
- According to the rules, the concerned government office "shall try to contact" every account holder of the unclaimed deposits through written notice, e-mail or telephone at least two times in 60 days before transferring the amount to the Senior Citizens' Welfare Fund.
- The EPF board had rolled back a 2011 decision to stop interest credits on inoperative PF accounts.
- Now, while such accounts will continue to get interest credits, the entire balance could be lost to the Senior Citizens' Fund after seven years of inactivity, though it's not clear how this will be implemented.

Union in consultation with States to come up with water conservation bill

- The Central government is likely to begin consultations with the States to frame a Bill to prevent the misuse of groundwater, a rapidly diminishing resource in India.
- Water is a State subject and it is incumbent on States to protect their resources ... we will consider a model Bill to help with this.
- All groundwater is considered freshwater, which, however, can also include water from ponds, lakes and other sources of surface water.
- The India Water Week — a multidisciplinary conference, set to begin on Monday, to discuss India's challenges with freshwater management — will have a session on legal remedies to address the depleting groundwater resources and also discuss legal aspects of the issue.
- The India Water Portal says as much as 85 per cent of drinking water in rural area is drawn from wells, with 88 per cent of it used for irrigation. Up to 48 per cent of the urban population uses groundwater.
- A recent study by the Central Ground Water Board found that groundwater exploitation and contamination has affected nearly 60 per cent of Indian districts.
- Since the 1970s, says a report by the now-renamed Planning Commission, laws have been mooted to encourage States to use groundwater more judiciously these laws haven't been effectively implemented.

PM promises improvement in ease of doing business index

- Highlighting fast-evolving bilateral priorities, India and Saudi Arabia agreed to diversify more bilateral trade and investment into the non-oil sector.
- They also asked all states to dismantle terror infrastructures "where they happen to exist" and reject the use of terrorism as an instrument of state policy, seen as an oblique reference to Pakistan.
- In a bid to boost confidence of Saudi investors in India's economy, Prime Minister Narendra Modi told a select group of Saudi entrepreneurs that India will increase ease of doing business and bring in the long awaited Goods and Services Tax (GST).

- He also said that India has a stable tax regime and his government has successfully removed the retrospective taxation policy creating ease of doing business.
- “Retrospective tax is a matter of the past. My government will continue to work towards establishment of a predictable long-term taxation regime,” the Prime Minister said.

An Inspector of the National Investigation Agency shot in Bijnore

- An Inspector of the National Investigation Agency (NIA), the counter-terror investigation agency formed after the 26/11 Mumbai attacks, was shot dead by unidentified motorcycle-borne assailants in front of his wife and children in Bijnore, Uttar Pradesh.
- Mohammed Tanzil Ahmed, 45, died on the spot, while his wife Farzana, who was injured, is in a critical condition. His daughter (14) and son (12) escaped unharmed.
- Ahmed, an officer of the rank of Deputy Superintendent, who was on deputation from the Border Security Force, had been posted to the NIA as Inspector, when the agency was created in 2009.
- Because of his proficiency in Urdu, Ahmed was the key liaison officer during the visit last week of the Joint Investigation Team from Pakistan to probe the Pathankot attack.
- Ahmed joined the BSF in 1991 as a Sub-Inspector and was posted along the western and eastern borders.

“Stand up India” scheme, to provide credit to SC, ST, and women to be launched by PM

- Prime Minister Narendra Modi will launch the “Stand up India” scheme, aimed at providing credit to Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe, and women borrowers.
- The scheme is intended to promote entrepreneurship among Scheduled Castes, Schedule Tribes and women and will involve loans ranging from Rs. 10 lakh to Rs. 1 crore.
- The scheme includes a composite loan of between Rs. 10 lakh and Rs. 100 lakh for setting up any new enterprise. In addition, borrowers will be provided a RuPay debit card to enable the withdrawal of the working capital.
- The government will also develop the credit histories of these under-banked sections of society and will open a refinance window through the Small Industries Development Bank of India (SIDBI) with an initial amount of Rs. 10,000 crore.
- The scheme will also facilitate the creation of a corpus of Rs. 5,000 crore for credit guarantee via the National Credit Guarantee Trustee Company.
- The launch event will also involve distribution of 5,100 e-rickshaws by Bharatiya Micro Credit under the Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana

Nitish Kumar government in Bihar on Sunday banned the sale of toddy

- The Nitish Kumar government in Bihar banned the sale of toddy in public places.
- The State government ostensibly took the decision after reports that tipplers have turned to toddy shops following the enforcement of prohibition.
- Bihar ranks fourth in the sale of toddy after Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and Assam. In Andhra Pradesh, the average monthly expenditure on toddy is Rs. 12.10, in Kerala it is Rs. 7.50, whereas in Bihar it is Rs. 3.54.

- RJD chief and coalition partner, Lalu Prasad, had made toddy tax-free when he was the Chief Minister.
- Meanwhile, following prohibition and the State government's crackdown on hooch outlets, it has been reported that liquor addicts, particularly from border areas, are moving to neighbouring Uttar Pradesh and Nepal.

Govt ordered special agency to investigate 'Panama Papers'

- The BJP-led NDA government ordered the formation of a special agency to investigate Indians who figure in the 'Panama papers' — a set of over 11 million leaked documents that reveal how the rich used tax havens for wrong practices.
- The documents, about the clients of one of the world's biggest law firms offering such services, were leaked to a German newspaper, which in turn shared them with the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ).
- The multi-agency group that was set up following directions from Prime Minister Narendra Modi will consist of officers from the investigative units of the Central Board of Direct Taxes, the Financial Intelligence Union and Foreign Tax & Tax Research division and the Reserve Bank of India.
- The Special Investigation Team on Black Money, appointed under the Supreme Court's directions, had in its third report submitted last year to the court said that various departments were not prepared to share the information received in tax evasion cases.
- Newspapers reported that over 500 Indians, including high-profile actors and businessmen, could have links to secret firms in overseas tax havens.
- Among those are actors Amitabh Bachchan and Aishwarya Rai Bachchan, real estate firm DLF's promoter K.P. Singh and Vinod Adani, elder brother of Adani Group founder and chairman Gautam Adani.

First of its kind educational institutions ranking released by government

- In the first of its kind ranking of educational institutions released by the government, JNU and the UoH, which were recently embroiled in controversies, are among the topmost institutions in the country.
- The National Institutions Ranking Framework (NIRF), unveiled by the Human Resources and Development Ministry on Monday, declared the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT)-Madras the best institute for engineering and the Indian Institute of Management (IIM)-Bangalore the best for management.
- The NIRF covers 3,500 institutions in four categories: university, engineering, pharmacy and management.
- In the category of universities, the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, is rated the top-ranked institute followed by the Institute of Chemical Technology (ICT), Mumbai.
- Jawaharlal Nehru University, which was recently in the news for the arrest of its students' union president Kanhaiya Kumar, is ahead of all other central universities.
- Perception among students, alumni, parents, employees and the public was one of the parameters for the ranking done by a committee of experts.
- Teaching and learning resources, graduation outcomes and research were the other criteria.
- The Indian Institutes of Technology have occupied all 10 places in the engineering category of the ranking announced by the government.

- While six old IITs made it to the list, four new ones — Ropar, Gandhinagar, Patna and Hyderabad — were also among the top ten. The IIT-Madras beat the IIT-Bombay and the IIT-Kharagpur to claim the first position.
- The data used for evaluation was submitted by the institutions themselves and the National Institutes Ranking Framework (NIRF) says that the responsibility for accuracy and authenticity of the data lies with the respective institutions.

Over 90 percent adults have Aadhaar number

- Over 100 crore people, including 93 per cent of the adult population, now have an Aadhaar number, the government said on Monday and sought to allay fears about data privacy.
- “We have put in place all safeguards in the Bill to ensure privacy,” Minister for Communication and IT Ravi Shankar Prasad said.
- As per Section 29 of the law, core biometrics that are fingerprints and iris, shall not be shared with anyone for any reason whatsoever.
- The Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) had generated 100 crore Aadhaar numbers in five-and-half years since the first Aadhaar was issued in 2010.
- The direct benefit transfer scheme for LPG cylinders led to savings worth Rs. 14,672 crore, he said, adding that the government would persuade the Supreme Court to allow more avenues for using Aadhaar.
- The Supreme Court had permitted voluntary use of Aadhaar cards in welfare schemes that included MGNREGA, all pension schemes and provident fund.

India’s fastest train Gatimaan Express started

- India’s first semi-high speed train will start operations from Delhi to Agra, covering the distance between the two cities in around 100 minutes.
- Railway Minister Suresh Prabhu will flag off the train, called Gatimaan Express, from Hazrat Nizamuddin railway station.
- The train will cover the journey to Agra in around 100 minutes, as compared to the 117 minutes journey of the Shatabdi Express.
- It will run six days a week and is capable of clocking a maximum speed of 160 km per hour.
- For the first time, train hostesses will be present on board for catering services and free on-board entertainment facilities will be available for passengers, the Indian Railways said in a statement.
- The train’s fares will be higher than that of Shatabdi Express and it will have two executive air-conditioned chair car.

Bihar prohibited sale and consumption of liquor

- The Nitish Kumar government declared Bihar a dry State while imposing total prohibition on the sale and consumption of liquor, both country-made and Indian-Made Foreign Liquor, with immediate effect.
- Earlier, following an excise amendment law, the ban on country-made liquor had become effective across the State. The government will stick to the 1991 guidelines on the sale and consumption of toddy.

- No new liquor licences will be issued to for sale and consumption of alcohol in places like hotels, bars and clubs, in towns and cities too. However, Army cantonment areas would be exempt as they regulate sale and consumption of alcohol in their own way.

Environment Ministry made it necessary to treat and recycle solid waste

- The Environment Ministry has notified rules making it incumbent on a wide range of groups — hotels, bulk producers of consumer goods, ports, railway stations etc. to ensure that the solid waste generated in their facilities are treated and recycled.
- Though the onus on garbage management would continue to be the responsibility of municipal bodies, they would be allowed to charge user fees and levy spot fines for littering and non-segregation.
- Though these rules would take effect from April 6, there would be a “transition period” of two to five years, beyond which fines would be imposed.
- Over the past month, the Central Environment Ministry has notified a bunch of rules spanning the recycling and treatment of a variety of refuse, including biomedical, plastic and electronic waste among others.
- The rules on solid waste management have been amended after 16 years and a key provision is to formalise the profession of rag-picking.
- Nearly 62 million tonnes of waste are generated annually in India, of which only 11.9 million are treated and nearly half — 31 million — is dumped in landfill sites.
- According to the Central Pollution Control Board, municipal authorities, as of 2013-14, have so far set up only 553 compost and vermin-compost plants, 56 bio-methanation plants, 22 refuse derived fuel plants and 12 waste-to-energy plants.
- By 2031, municipal solid waste is expected to increase to 165 million tonnes and, if untreated, would require 1240 hectares of land.
- According to the new rules, local bodies with a population of one lakh or more were required to set up solid waste processing facilities within two years, census towns below a lakh would be given three years and old and abandoned dump sites would have to be closed or bio-remedied within five years.

J-e-M chief has been on Indian security radar for 25 years now

- Jaish-e-Mohammad chief Masood Azhar, who allegedly masterminded the attack on the Pathankot airbase, has been on the radar of the Indian security establishment since 1993 when he was a member of Harkat-ul-Mujahideen (HuM).
- India has told this to the United Nations Taliban/Al Qaeda Sanctions Committee.
- India’s draft note was sent to the Committee where China blocked New Delhi’s effort to declare Azhar a global terrorist.
- India also told the U.N. panel that Azhar (48) was one of the handlers of terrorists who attacked the airbase in January this year and that his outfit received arms training from the Taliban.
- India said that he first came to the notice of Indian authorities in 1993 when he tried to arrange money and recruits for Al-Itihaad Al-Islamiya, an Al Qaeda-aligned Somali terrorist group.
- India has conveyed to the world body that he and his terrorist group JeM have continuously engineered terror attacks against India, the latest instance being the strike at Pathankot.

NIT Srinagar still tensed

- Tensions between Kashmiri and outstation students kept the National Institute of Technology in Srinagar on the boil as outstation students — protesting the “celebrations” by some local students of India’s T-20 cricket loss to West Indies.
- A day after they were lathi-charged by the police while protesting with placards, the outstation students demanded action against those NIT officials who, they said, had indulged in “anti-national” activities.
- They insisted that they be allowed to hoist the national tricolour every day before the main gate of the institute.
- Incidentally, during the Jawaharlal Nehru University crisis, Ms. Mufti had sent emissaries to Delhi to ask the Centre to ensure the safety of Kashmiri students.
- The flare-up is now emerging as a test for the new government of the PDP and the BJP, allies who are together despite having little in common in their approach to the Kashmir issue.
- The roots of the crisis go back to alleged celebrations by Kashmiri students of India’s T20 loss, leading to a confrontation on April 1 with outstation students, who waved the tricolour.

Union Home ministry wants internet companies to set up servers in India

- The Union Home Ministry had requested Internet companies like Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and Google to maintain servers in India to help get real time information about accounts, which spread mischievous and incendiary messages.
- Almost two months after Home Minister Rajnath Singh waded into the Jawaharlal Nehru University row with terror link claims based on a fake Twitter handle of Hafiz, Twitter is yet to respond to the government’s request for details of the handle.
- In February, the Home Ministry asked Twitter India for details of the account.
- This was one of many cases, in which the government faced problems in getting real time information about such accounts. Twitter has put up a Transparency Report on removal requests at <https://transparency.twitter.com/>.

Bombay High Court asks People are more important or IPL matches?

- Rapping the BCCI and the cricket associations in Mumbai and other parts of Maharashtra over water wastage when the State is reeling under severe drought, the Bombay High Court on Wednesday said the Indian Premier League (IPL) matches should ideally be shifted elsewhere, where there is no water crisis.
- The court asked the State to spell out on April 7 the steps it plans to take.
- “How can you [the cricket associations and the BCCI] waste water like this? People are more important or your IPL matches? You know what the condition is in Maharashtra,” a Division Bench said.
- The court sought responses from the Maharashtra Cricket Association Stadium, the Vidarbha Cricket Association, the Maharashtra government and the Mumbai, Nagpur civic bodies.

One rank one pension scheme gets ex-post facto approval

- The One Rank One Pension scheme, brought in last November to benefit more than 2.5 million ex-servicemen and war widows, on Wednesday received ex-post facto approval from the Cabinet.
- Under the scheme, pension would be revised on the basis of the pension of retirees of calendar year 2013 and the benefit will be effective from July 1, 2014. In future, the pension would be revised every five years.
- The Financial implications on account of grant of OROP , including pre-matured retiree cases, would be Rs. 10,925.11 crore for payment of arrears and annual financial implication would be Rs. 7,488.7 crore.

Supreme Court ordered Vjay Mallya to declare his and his families assets

- The banks' outright rejection of the offers by Vijay Mallya to partially repay the carrier's debts led the Supreme Court to order him to disclose under oath assets existing in his name and those of his wife and children as on March 31.
- A Bench of Justices Kurian Joseph and Rohinton Nariman gave Mr. Mallya time till April 21 to file the affidavit, which should include a complete list of all their properties both in India and abroad.
- The court asked Mr. Mallya's lawyers to get instructions and indicate when the businessman would be present in court.
- The Bench agreed with the banks that Mr. Mallya's presence was "necessary" for any meaningful negotiations to start.
- It also agreed that he should pay in advance a "substantial amount" of his dues, estimated to be over Rs. 9,000 crore, to prove his bona fide.

Fees in IITs increased for general and completely waved off for SCs/STs

- Studying at the prestigious Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) is going to cost much more from the coming academic session as the Central government has decided to double the fee.
- The annual tuition fees for undergraduate courses will be increased from Rs. 90,000 to Rs. 2 lakh.
- However, there will be a total fee waiver for the differently abled and students of the Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes and the weaker sections.
- The IITs are the most- sought-after institutes in India for engineering, as per the Indian government's National Institute Ranking Framework.
- The fee was last revised in 2013 under the UPA government from Rs. 50,000 to Rs. 90,000. In 2008, the fee was increased from Rs. 25,000 to Rs. 50,000.

Some relief by railways to Latur district

- While announcing that two trains will carry 25 lakh litres of water to Latur from Miraj in the next 15 days, Revenue Minister Eknath Khadse blamed the previous governments of the Congress and the NCP for the present situation.

- Section 144 has been invoked in Latur to avoid riots over water as all sources have dried up. The city is allegedly getting water once in 20 days.
- The Revenue Minister, however, refuted the allegations of migration, and said the government is committed to supplying water to the people.

Pakistan suspends peace process with India

- Pakistan High Commissioner Abdul Basit, who accused India of suspending Foreign Secretary-level talks, also raised the recent arrest in Pakistan of a former Indian naval officer accused of spying.
- Mr. Basit told the press conference “The arrest of Kulbushan Yadav corroborates what Pakistan has been saying all along. We are aware of those who seek to create unrest in Pakistan.”
- Mr. Basit’s comments came a day after an official from the Chinese Embassy defended China’s move to stop a diplomatic campaign by India at the 1267 Committee of the U.N. to ban JeM chief Masood Azhar.
- Analysts said the sharp comments by the High Commissioner were unusual, and possibly an indicator of a growing civil-military divide in Pakistan.
- Nawaz Sharif’s government is facing increasing pressure from the military which is trying to take control of foreign policy and nuclear issues.
- The MEA said the High Commissioner had been contradicted by his own Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson who said the “countries are in contact” to work out dates for the Foreign Secretary talks.

BCCI says courts interference is violation of Fundamental rights

- The Board of Control for Cricket in India charged the Supreme Court with crossing judicial limits by interfering in its private affairs, like internal management, flow of finances, prompting the court to ask the BCCI if it is “refusing to be reformed.”
- The BCCI’s aggressiveness in court came on top of weeks of underlying tensions following sweeping changes recommended by the Supreme Court’s committee headed by former Chief Justice of India R.M. Lodha in the membership patterns of the Board, its structure, elections and bar on Ministers in cricket administration to usher in transparency and accountability in Indian cricket.
- The BCCI, represented by senior advocate K.K. Venugopal, said any interference in its basic character and functioning was a violation of its fundamental rights under Article 19 (1) (c) (right to form associations) of the Constitution.
- “This is a private body and can arrange its matters in whatever way it wants. Memberships are part of internal management. In case of complaints, approach the Registrar, Co-operative Societies or the police station or the court” BCCI said
- Chief Justice Thakur shot back, saying the Supreme Court was not interested in controlling table tennis or football or khokho or kabbadi.
- “Every single penny you hold in trust is for the benefit of the game and for those who play and for the millions of cricket lovers who pay you to watch the game...Are you not accountable to them? Are you refusing to be reformed,” Chief Justice Thakur asked.
- The Chief Justice asked why the Board was against the Lodha committee’s recommendation to have a nominee from the Comptroller and Auditor-General’s office on board.
- The court said the Lodha panel’s recommendations were not meant to shrink the stature of the BCCI but to help it perform its public functions in the best way.

Meenam month celebrated in Kerala

- Watched by hundreds of devotees and admirer,, the ‘anavalpidi’ (catching the elephant’s tail) ritual was held at the Umayanallur Sree Balasubramanya Swamy temple precincts.
- The ritual is held on the sixth day of the annual festival of the temple during the Malayalam month of ‘Meenam’. After a bath, the tusker is brought to the ‘anathottil’ of the temple. This is an occasion when the tusker is free from fetters.
- A crowd of devotees run after it desperately attempting to catch the elephant’s tail. As though it is aware about it, the tusker races for about 100 meters with its tail lifted as high as possible.
- The event gives an impression that the tusker is being chased by the crowd. In the process, many succeed in getting hold of the elephant’s tail.
- The ritual is a symbolic gesture of the childhood pranks of the siblings, Lord Ganesha and Lord Subramanyan.

Hindu calendar new celebrated across India

- For everyone else, Ugadi is new year day. For the Adivasi farmers of Adilabad however, it is a day when they start nurturing hope with regard to the crop season ahead.
- The Telugu New Year is when the farming community, both tribal and non tribal, initiate agriculture operations for the ensuing kharif by worshipping farm animals and symbolically tilling the fields.
- In the event of adversities nevertheless, it the Adivasis who stand out by not losing hope anytime until they see the season end.
- There has been no suicidal death of an Adivasi farmer, the number of farmer suicides between June 1, and December 31, 2014 was about 75, 60 last year and so far this year, 20.
- The crop has failed successively since the last few years. But we cannot afford to dwell over the failure.
- In Maharashtra GudiPadwawhich marks new year was celebrated. Maharashtra also seen removal of gender bias against women to worship in ShaniShingnapur temple.
- The High Court held that it was the women’s fundamental right to go to places of worship and the government was duty-bound to protect it.
- The debate intensified after a woman last year tried to enter and offer prayers at the ShaniShingnapur temple in breach of the age-old practice.

Shan-E-Punjab express becomes first train with CCTV

- Railway Minister Suresh Prabhu flagged off the country’s first train with CCTV cameras in all coaches, to ensure improved safety for passengers.
- The Shan-E-Punjab Express, between Amritsar and Delhi, has four to six cameras on all its 21 coaches and video footage can be recorded and stored for a month.
- Live video stream of ladies coach will also be available on the LCD screens in rail guard’s compartment.
- The Railway Ministry said that surveillance cameras on coaches would significantly reduce crime against women and other crimes such as theft.
- While emphasising that safety was his top priority, Mr. Prabhu said a cyber security audit would soon be conducted for all zones of the Railways.

NIT Srinagar's student's demand of moving NIT out is not accepted by Govt

- Amid protests by the outstation students at the National Institute of Technology (NIT), Govt said that there was no plan to move the institution out of the State as demanded by a section of the students.
- M.J. Zarabi, Chairman of Board of Governors of the NIT said that the exams would be held as per the schedule from April 11.
- The other demands of the students — action against NIT workers “who had sided with anti-national students” and the policemen who resorted to the baton charge — would be considered after the State inquiry was completed.
- An email would be provided to students for redress of complaints against the teaching staff.
- Tension at the NIT — fuelled by the clashes between local and outstation students over the West Indies-India cricket match and the police action
- Hours after BJP national secretary R.P. Singh called a ‘Chalo NIT’ march to express solidarity with the non-local students, the JKLF called a shutdown for Tuesday.

Modernisations of ports is focus of the government

- The Centre will sanction contracts worth Rs.60,000 crore to modernise ports by May 26, Road Transport, Highways and Shipping Minister Nitin Gadkari said.
- Modernisation, mechanisation and computerisation of the ports will be undertaken. Since the NDA came to power two years ago, investment worth Rs.83,361 crore had come to the port sector.
- The ‘Sagarmala’ project, aimed at promoting port-led development along India’s 7,500 km coast, has been finalised with the views of all stakeholders present at the meeting.
- The government was hopeful of investments worth Rs.4 lakh crore and one crore jobs under the project.
- The capacity of 12 major ports increased by 4.3 per cent, when global trade had gone up by just 0.5 per cent.
- The improvement in efficiency in ports has lowered the logistics costs leading to a benefit of Rs.400-500 crore to the Indian trade. But compared with China and European countries, the logistics costs in India were higher.

Govt says all UP villages will be electrified before 2019

- Over 1,300 villages in Uttar Pradesh have been electrified under the rural electrification programme since the BJP-led NDA came to power at the Centre two years ago.
- Govt aimed to provide electricity to each and every household in the State before 2019.
- Mr. Goyal said after becoming the Power Minister, he “was surprised to find the status of rural electrification in Uttar Pradesh wherein only three villages were electrified during 2012-2014.”
- The Centre had sanctioned the highest amount, Rs. 6,946 crore, to the State government under the Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Gram Jyoti Yojna and Rs. 5,651 crore under the Integrated Power Development Scheme.
- Under the Centre’s Ujwal Discom Assurance Yojana (UDAY), U.P. would benefit by Rs. 33,000 crore in the coming years. In January, U.P. became the fourth State, and the first non-NDA ruled, to formally join UDAY.

- The State government has also promised to ensure electrification of one lakh villages and hamlets in U.P. by July 2016.
- The government has asked officials to make sure that the drought-hit Bundelkhand region gets at least 20 hours of electricity every day.
- U.P. had become the fastest State to replace one crore “bulbs with energy-efficient LEDs,” distributed under the Unnat Jyoti by Affordable LEDs for All (UJALA) programme.
- The price of LED bulb had dropped to Rs. 80 in U.P. due to the “transparent procurement by EESL and the removal of VAT” in the State.

Fire crackers incident killed more than hundred in Kerala

- In the worst-ever pyrotechnics tragedy to strike Kerala, 107 persons were killed and close to 400 injured, many of them grievously.
- Disaster struck the crowded precincts of the Puttingal Devi Temple at Paravur, when an entire dump of fire crackers meant to be burst to mark the conclusion of the Meena-Bharani festival exploded, killing over 40 persons instantly, maiming many more and causing extensive damage to nearby buildings.
- The State government has announced a judicial inquiry and a Crime Branch investigation into the disaster.
- The sparks reached the storehouse, igniting fireworks stored there. The explosion that followed brought down a building and caused damage to several structures in the vicinity.
- The explosion was followed by power disruption, which left the crowd clueless about the magnitude of the tragedy for some time. However, the locals swung into action, extricating bodies from the debris and pulling out the injured, many of whom did not survive the journey to hospitals.
- The Kollam district administration had denied permission for the fireworks display based on reports from the local police that the temple authorities planned to hold a competitive pyrotechnics display.
- However, the temple authorities went ahead with the display after giving much publicity to the event. People from neighbouring districts had converged on the temple to witness the show.
- The Paravur police have registered a case against the temple authorities and the fireworks contractor, who is stated to have suffered 80 per cent burns and is undergoing treatment at the medical college hospital.
- Prime Minister Narendra Modi cancelled all his programmes and rushed to Kollam with a team of medical experts from the All India Institute of Medical Sciences.
- After a visit to the disaster spot and hospitals, accompanied by Union Health Minister J.P. Nadda and discussions with Chief Minister Oommen Chandy, he announced all support for the State.
- At an emergency meeting, the State Cabinet announced ex gratia of Rs. 10 lakh to the kin of the deceased and Rs. 2 lakh to the seriously injured.
- Earlier in the day, the Prime Minister announced that the Centre would pay ex gratia of Rs. 2 lakh to the kin of the deceased.

A national conference on Kharif campaign to formulate crop strategy

- Realising the gravity of the agrarian situation after two back-to-back droughts, the Union government is all set to formulate a crop production strategy for the coming summer (kharif) season to ensure that the plan to double farmers’ income in the next six years gains momentum.

- A national conference on kharif campaign is being held in New Delhi on April 11 and 12 in which senior officials of agriculture and allied sectors from the Centre and States would review the performance of the preceding crop season and formulate a crop production strategy for kharif.
- The Department of Agriculture, Cooperation and Farmers' Welfare, which is organising the conference, said that kharif campaign-2016 assumes great importance in view of the recent crop damage on account of moisture stress due to uneven and untimely rains, hailstorm across various States.
- Notably, the south-west monsoon during the previous kharif season was weak leading to a rain deficit of 14 per cent. Also, the rabi 2015-16 season had experienced less post-monsoon and winter rains.

Committee recommended 1304 crore to UP under NDRF

- A high-level committee headed by Union Home Minister Rajnath Singh has recommended Rs. 1,304 crore as a drought relief to Uttar Pradesh under the National Disaster Relief Fund (NDRF).
- The State would disburse the relief amount directly into the bank accounts of farmers within a week.
- It was decided that the U.P. government will forward a memorandum for Rabi 2016 soon and the Ministry will examine the possibility, if an exemption can be given under SDRF on 25 per cent limit and continuation of distribution of food component beyond 90 days.
- The U.P. government, during the meeting, informed that a comprehensive contingency plan to address the drinking water situation in Bundelkhand region especially Mahoba, Chitrakoot and Banda districts of Chitrakoot division are ready and would be soon implemented, said sources.
- Centre approved a provision of extending man-days from 100 to 150 under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) in the Bundelkhand for financial year 2016-17.
- It was decided that to provide alternate source of income, National Rural Livelihood Mission would be strengthened and intensified and coverage would be extended to all the blocks.
- The government decided that water tanks, building of dug wells, farm ponds would be taken up on priority under various projects and schemes for Bundelkhand.
- CEO, NITI Aayog, in consultation with State government will explore the possibility of taking up fresh projects for drought proofing from the resources available under the package for Bundelkhand region.

Supreme Court recalled its judgement declaring NEET unconstitutional

- Admitting to have acted too hastily, the Supreme Court recalled its 2013 judgment declaring the National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test (NEET) unconstitutional.
- Earlier SC disqualified the NEET, a single common entrance test system for MBBS, BDS and post-graduate medical courses.
- SC said in that judgement that NEET is an interference in the right of the State and private medical colleges to administer, the court agreed without elaborating that its decision required re-consideration.
- The NEET was meant to end rampant corruption in medical admissions, especially payment of huge capitation fees or donations in private colleges.

Government discusses possibility of simultaneous elections with EC

- Days after Prime Minister Narendra Modi spoke in favour of holding simultaneous polls for the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies, a group of ministers, headed by Home Minister Rajnath Singh discussed the proposal with Election Commission.
- The GoM included Finance Minister Arun Jaitley, Law Minister Sadananda Gowda and Minister of State (PMO) Jitendra Singh.
- The GoM asked EC officials to explore the possibility of holding simultaneous polls.
- The GoM also wanted the EC's response on modernising the electronic voting machines (EVMs). Since the number of voters has increased in the last decade, the GoM asked EC officials to take stock of the surge in demand.
- The two companies — Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL) and Electronics Corporation of India (ECIL) — have been asked to study and examine the revamping of EVMs before the next general elections in 2019.
- The proposal for initiating e-ballots for NRIs was also discussed.
- During BJP's national office bearers meet, the Prime Minister had spoken in favour of simultaneous polls for Lok Sabha and State Assemblies.
- In that meeting, the Prime Minister also referred to the 78th report of the parliamentary standing committee of Law and Justice that had been asked to go into the issue in detail. The report was submitted in December 2015.

Meteorological department predicts rainfall close to 106 percent of normal

- In line with recent predictions by private weather forecasters, India's official weather forecasting agency too has said the monsoon is likely to be "above normal" and likely to be 106 per cent of the average of 89 cm.
- Monsoon rains within 96 per cent and 104 per cent of this average are considered "normal" in the terminology of the India Meteorological Department (IMD).
- "The monsoon will be fairly well distributed but southeast India will get slightly less rain.
- IMD also said some regions would see floods and that the chances of drought — defined as a deficit of 10 per cent or more — were only one per cent this year.
- In any given year, the chances of such a drought are 16 per cent.
- Several reasons underlie the IMD's optimism. Most importantly, it hinges on a waning El Nino — a global, meteorological phenomenon that's associated with a warming of the waters of Central Pacific and correlated with droughts in India.
- The historical observation that 7 out of 10 years, in the last century, that followed an El Nino saw normal or above normal monsoon rains in India.
- The years 2014 and 2015 were among the strongest El Nino years in meteorological history and were blamed for the climatically rare event of successive drought years.
- Though Pacific temperatures haven't cooled enough, "El Nino neutral conditions" are expected to set in between June and July.
- Another meteorological phenomenon known as a positive Indian Ocean Dipole — where the western portions of the Indian Ocean are warmer than the east and thereby push rain-bearing clouds over India — is also likely to form during the middle of the monsoon season, according to the IMD.
- Finally, a La Nina — or an anti-El Nino — and associated with heavy rains in India was expected to set in around September, too late for the Indian monsoon, but its onset is generally considered enabling for the rains.

India and US have agreed on a logistic support agreement

- In a significant decision that could have far-reaching implications for India's military posture, India and the U.S. have agreed "in principle" on a logistics support agreement.
- It was first proposed in 2004 and resisted by the UPA government for a decade — that would make it easier for both militaries to share each other's facilities.
- The Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) was the highlight of U.S. Defence Secretary Ash Carter's three-day visit to India.
- It ended with a meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Besides LEMOA, Mr. Carter and his Indian counterpart Manohar Parrikar announced initiatives to strengthen the growing strategic partnership.
- Denying that LEMOA would facilitate basing of U.S. troops in India, Mr. Carter said: "It makes it more routine and automatic for us to operate together."
- The three "foundational agreements" guide the U.S. high technology cooperation with other countries.
- Besides LEMOA (traditionally called the Logistics Support Agreement), the others are Communications Interoperability and Security Memorandum of Agreement (CISMOA) and Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geo-spatial Cooperation (BECA).

Sixty plus sex ratio tilt in favour of women

- India has more elderly women than men with the sex ratio of the country's 60-plus population recorded at 1,033 women per 1,000 men in the 2011 Census, up from 1,029 in the 2001 census.
- The Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation has put out these figures in the latest National Sample Survey report on 'Health in India', which notes that the share of 60-plus women is higher than that of men in both rural and urban areas.
- Experts describe the pattern as feminisation of ageing, which in the context of a developing country like India, brings with it health and financial concerns.
- According to the Health in India report, around 70 per cent elderly women in both urban and rural India are economically dependent on others. And around 35 per cent of women aged over 80 are immobile.
- The sex ratio in the country had shot up from 930 in the 1991 Census to 1,029 in 2001. However, the National Sample Survey in 2004 recorded a drop in this ratio to 999, before it went up again in 2011.
- Among rural areas, the highest sex ratio (1,289) was reported in Gujarat and in urban Assam it was recorded as 1,476.
- The overall proportion of the elderly in India, home to the world's largest youth population, too has gone up. An estimated 87.6 million aged people live in India, about 69 per cent of them in rural parts.
- In 1981, the share of the elderly population per 1,000 in rural India was 68, which went up to 88 in 2011. In urban India, the elderly share was recorded at 54 per 1,000 in 1981, going up to 81 in the 2011 Census.
- But about 50 per cent of the elderly population is totally economically dependent on others.
- Financial constraints are further compounded by illnesses of old age. The survey found a high proportion of the elderly battling chronic illnesses and around 8% of the elderly, particularly those aged over 80, confined to their beds.

Kerala HC ordered strict enforcement of Explosive rules

- The Kerala High Court on Tuesday ordered strict enforcement of the provisions in the Explosive Rules, banning the use of high-decibel crackers and display of fireworks between the hours of sunset and sunrise, at places of worship in the State.
- At a special sitting, the Bench directed officers of the Central and State governments to ensure that explosives were used only in accordance with the Explosive Rules 2008 in the State.
- If there was any lack of supervisory control by the official concerned, it should be considered a dereliction of duty, the Bench said.
- The court came down heavily on the police for not preventing the fireworks display at Paravur though the temple committee had failed to produce the required licence.

PM makes strong pitch for Tiger conservation

- Noting that conservation of tigers is not a choice but an imperative, PM called for considering them as ‘natural capital’ and underlined the need for collaboration between governments at the highest level to check trafficking in their body parts.
- Making a strong pitch for tiger conservation, the Prime Minister said it was “not a drag on development” and there is a need to define conservation as a means to achieve development than considering it as “anti-growth” and called for involving business groups.
- Mr. Modi inaugurated the three-day 3rd Asia Ministerial Conference on Tiger Conservation .
- “All we need is to re-orient our strategy by factoring in concerns of the tiger in sectors where tiger conservation is not the goal. This [conservation] is a difficult task but can be achieved,” the Prime Minister said.

SC to decide whether physiological phenomenon can be guiding factors in temple entry

- Questioning taboos entrenched in the Indian psyche from time immemorial, the SC decided to answer whether a physiological phenomenon like menstruation can be a guiding factor for denying women the right to enter and worship in a temple.
- Senior advocate Indira Jaising said gender stereotyping in Indian temples violates the fundamental right to equality under Article 14 of the Constitution.
- She asked the court how the healthy biological process of menstruation is used in the name of religion to discriminate against women.
- At one point, Justice Kurian asked whether the “individual morality” of the Sabarimala deity to remain a celibate should be subject to the parameters of constitutional morality.
- Justice Kurian wondered aloud whether the concept of ‘Nityabrahmachari’ (of the Sabarimala deity) and the tradition of no entry to women aged between 10 and 55 have really anything to do with menstruation.
- Ms. Jaising insisted that it had, saying the traditional argument is that women of that age will “disturb” the deity’s celibacy. “The onus of causing disturbance is on women. If you are true celibate, why blame women for disturbing you? This is a classical blaming-the-victim game,” she contended.
- The students want the apex court to decide whether society should continue to bear with “menstrual discrimination.

Bombay HC directed BCCI to shift IPL matches after Apr 30

- The Bombay High Court directed the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) to shift the Indian Premier League (IPL) matches scheduled to be played after April 30 outside the State of Maharashtra.
- The court started hearing a public interest litigation (PIL) plea on April 7 and passed an order on April 13, directing 13 matches scheduled after April 30 to be moved out of the league.
- Four of those were to be played at Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai, six in the Maharashtra Cricket Association Stadium in Pune and three in the Vidarbha Cricket Stadium.
- The court said, “There is a drought situation in the State, there is not a drop of water available, all dams are drying” and asked “whether the State can turn a blind eye to the scarcity of water.”
- The Bench observed, “Shifting of IPL matches alone won’t solve the problem, but it can be a beginning so that water used for pitches can be diverted to affected areas.”
- In its order, the court criticised the Maharashtra government. “On the one hand the State has filed an affidavit that it has no objection if the matches are shifted outside, on the other hand it acts as a mute spectator and does not even question the cricket associations.”

Earthquake measuring 6.8 in Richter scale hits Myanmar

- An earthquake, measuring 6.8 on the Richter scale, hit Myanmar, tremors of which shook the northeast, several parts of West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand and even Delhi and NCR.
- Jolts were also felt in Odisha, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, said J.L. Gautam, Operations Head, National Centre for Seismology. There was no immediate report of any casualty or major damage.
- This is the second quake in the day in the northeast as a medium intensity temblor measuring 4.6 hit areas around Manipur capital Imphal at 9:26 AM.
- In West Bengal, the impact was more in the northern districts. Metro Railway service was stopped for five minutes immediately after the quake.
- Tremors were felt in Patna, Begusarai, Vaishali, Kishangaj and other districts of Bihar, Patna.

PM launched Gramodaya Se Bharatodaya Abhiyan

- The 125th birth anniversary of B.R. Ambedkar saw leaders across the board compete for the legacy of India’s first Law Minister and Dalit icon.
- PM Modi addressed a rally at Mhow in Madhya Pradesh, Dr. Ambedkar’s birthplace.
- With Punjab, having the highest proportion of Dalits among Indian States (32 per cent), and Uttar Pradesh (21 per cent) going to the polls next year, the Dalit issue has acquired centrality in the political discourse. Dalits constitute 16 per cent of India’s population.
- Mr. Modi launched Gramodaya Se Bharatodaya Abhiyan (Development of the Nation through Development of the Village), underlining that the growth of purchasing power in villages, rather than growth in cities or having some billionaires, would help develop India.
- He sought to show this as part of Dr. Ambedkar’s vision for India.
- He also showcased the Jan Dhan Yojana and the plan to offer the poor LPG connections as part of his government’s “pro-poor” vision.
- Accusing the Congress of “undermining” the legacy of Dr. Ambedkar, Mr. Modi sought to know why the Congress had not developed places related to him when it was in power for several decades.

Second phase of Odd-even started in Delhi

- Findings on how Delhi behaved and what it breathed between 8 a.m. and 8 p.m. from April 15 to 30 will decide if the odd-even scheme will be repeated next month.
- Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal will take a final call based on the findings of an assessment of traffic congestion and pollution levels between April 15 and April 30.
- Public opinion, too, will have a significant impact on the decision. Real-time data of congestion and air quality will be collated on a daily basis by the Transport Department and the Delhi Pollution Control Committee and studied in detail to reach a conclusion.
- In either case, scientific data and public opinion will form the core of the Chief Minister's decision on whether or not the scheme will be enforced at least next month.
- The odd-even scheme, which was launched in January with the objective of checking pollution, had only managed to bring down congestion on city roads.
- This time, the Delhi government expects the scheme to better the quality of ambient air too. It aims to enforce the restrictions through a stringent prosecution regime and voluntary compliance from motorists.
- The air quality challenge will be posed by ozone and nitrogen dioxide, which are the main pollutants during summer months. In winter, it was the particulate matter whose soaring levels had bothered the Delhi government.
- Though the levels of particulate matter are lower now, they are still above the national standard, and reducing the number of vehicles on Delhi's streets is expected to lower them. Levels of ozone and nitrogen dioxide emanating from vehicles should also see a drop given the curb on the plying of vehicles.

United Nations described Dr. B.R. Ambedkar as a global icon

- Describing Dr. B.R. Ambedkar as a global “icon” for marginalised people, United Nations has voiced its commitment to working closely with India to help realise the social reformer’s vision of empowerment and social and economic equality.
- UNDP Administrator Helen Clark said this in her address at an event organised by the Permanent Mission of India to the U.N. to commemorate Ambedkar’s birth anniversary for the first time at the world body.

Major reservoirs in country are drying

- Water levels in major reservoirs of the country are alarmingly low, weekly data released by Central Water Commission (CWC) shows.
- CWC, a technical organisation under the aegis of Ministry of Water Resources, River Development and Ganga Rejuvenation, monitors live storage status of 91 major reservoirs in the country.
- Live storage capacity of these reservoirs is 157.799 BCM (Billion Cubic Meters), which is 62 per cent of the live storage capacity that is estimated to have been created in India.
- ‘Live storage’ is the portion of the reservoir that can be utilised for flood control, power production, navigation and downstream releases.
- As per the latest report released on April 13, 2016, live storage available in these reservoirs is 35.839 BCM, which is 23 per cent of the total live storage capacity of these reservoirs.
- The report states that current storage is 67 per cent of the storage of corresponding period of last year and 77 per cent of storage of average of last ten years.

- The western and southern regions are the most affected. The live storage level in 27 reservoirs of the western region, which includes Maharashtra and Gujarat, is a mere 18 per cent, compared to 36 per cent last year.
- In the southern region, the situation is even worse, with water levels at 15 per cent of the total live storage capacity in 31 reservoirs of this region.
- In fact, four reservoirs – three in Maharashtra and one in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana (combined project in both States) – are left with no water at the moment.
- Overall, 74 of the total 91 reservoirs have storage levels lower than the average of last ten years.
- Looking at States, apart from West Bengal, Tripura and Madhya Pradesh, all other 16 States housing these reservoirs have below normal storage levels.

Free WiFi at nine more stations

- Google, in association with RailTel, the telecom arm of the Indian Railways, announced the roll out of free WiFi services at nine more stations after Mumbai Central, bringing high-speed Internet access to about 1.5 million passengers.
- The companies are also looking at making the service, which is currently free for users, financially sustainable.
- The firms are in talks with multiple partners, including operators and advertisers, for potential revenue generation.
- Since the launch in Mumbai on January 22, more than one lakh users are seen every week. As people become more aware, this number will grow rapidly.
- The WiFi service is now available at Pune, Bhubaneswar, Bhopal, Ranchi, Raipur, Vijayawada, Kacheguda (Hyderabad), Ernakulum Jn (Kochi) and Vishakhapatnam stations.
- Google and RailTel had collaborated to make WiFi network available across 100 stations to deliver high-speed Internet to 10 million Indians a day by the end of the year.
- The project will eventually be rolled out to cover 400 railway stations across India.

ISRO planning to put 21 commercial satellites

- While the seventh and last of the regional navigation spacecraft is due to be launched on April 28, space agency Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) has lined up a record-making feat towards the end of May.
- It will put in orbit 21 small and mostly foreign commercial satellites along with a larger Indian spacecraft.
- The primary passenger on the PSLV-C33 launcher will be the Earth observing, high-resolution Cartosat-2C, weighing around 700 kg.
- Offering a resolution of about 60 cm, Cartosat-2C is touted to be the best Indian eye yet in the sky.
- It will cater to the country's military requirements. Its camera, among other functions, can spot objects that are 60 cm wide or long - roughly an arm's length, from its orbit of around 600 km.
- As far as multiple launches go, the PSLV has launched 10 spacecrafts including eight small foreign ones in April 2008.
- Then, too, the main passenger was Cartosat-2A, another defence enabler, giving pictures of 80 cm resolution of the ground below. Last December, a PSLV took up six small Singapore satellites into orbit in one go.
- NASA holds the 2013 record for placing the highest number — 29 — of mostly small customer satellites in orbit on a Minotaur launcher.

- Multiple launches need multiple interfaces between the rocket and the spacecraft, and coordination with operators of each spacecraft.
- The launch team must ensure that one spacecraft does not get into the path of the other. The needs of each customer and its spacecraft must be accounted for.
- Such many-in-one flights add to ISRO's capability to service more and more small satellites commercially.
- According to secondary sources, the small satellites are of masses ranging from one kg to 130 kg.
- Three are from Indian universities – the 12-kg NIUSAT from the Noorul Islam University in Kanyakumari; the 2-kg SathyabamaSat; and the 1-kg Swayam from Pune's College of Engineering.
- According to the ISRO official, considering the global demand for launching small satellites, packing many of them into one PSLV optimises a globally scarce service.
- Otherwise, satellite operators would have to wait for the next PSLV or look for another launcher.

Within days of a request from ED, Govt suspends Vijay Mallya's diplomatic passport

- After a request from the Enforcement Directorate, in connection with a money laundering probe in the over Rs. 900 crore IDBI Bank loan fraud case, the Ministry of External Affairs suspended Vijay Mallya's diplomatic passport.
- It has also threatened to revoke it if he doesn't appear before the Indian High Commission in London within a week.
- Section 10 A of the Act empowers the authorities to suspend passports or travel documents in certain cases. The suspension order is communicated to all the ports of entry or exit in India.
- The beleaguered NRI businessman, whose ordinary passport is also rendered invalid by a Ministry order, is now left with the sole option of returning to the country on an emergency certificate issued by the Indian mission.
- Mr. Mallya left India on March 2, flying out of Delhi on his diplomatic passport, and is believed to be in the United Kingdom.
- Mr. Swarup said Mr. Mallya was asked to respond within one week why his passport should not be impounded or revoked under Section 10(3)(c) of the Act.
- The provision is invoked if the passport authority deems it necessary to suspend the document in the interest of the country's sovereignty, integrity or security and its friendly relations with other countries, or in public interest.

Travelling in National Highways will be smoother

- Motoring along National Highway (NH) stretches is set to become further smooth with the Govt going ahead with removing all speed breakers from highway corridors that hinder speedier and smoother flow of vehicular traffic.
- The intervention of Govt comes in the wake of speed breakers (road humps) being constructed against the Ministry's policy of not providing them on the NH corridors.
- Scientifically designed rumble strips have been mooted by Govt for places such as approaches to sharp curves at level crossings, and congested or accident prone locations.
- But, the Ministry is worried over rumble strips being put up on NHs indiscriminately.
- Govt has asked the States to inform the Ministry by April 20 about removal of speed breakers and the location of rumble strips on NH corridors.

- Henceforth, the location of the rumble strip needs to be approved by the chief engineer, NH, or the appropriate authority in the NHAI.
- States have been asked to explore the possibility of providing foot overbridges and underpasses at pedestrian crossings on NH to prevent direct crossing and entry of pedestrians on highways.
- Govt's Road Accident Report for 2014 says 4,726 lives were lost in crashes due to humps and that 6,672 people died in accidents caused by potholes and speed breakers.
- Kerala has around 1,550 km of National Highways and removing speed breakers will be a risk. as there is no urban-rural divide in the State.

Talks for Rafale in critical phase

- Contrary to speculation that India and France have reached an agreement for the direct purchase of 36 Rafale fighter jets, govt said talks on pricing had reached a critical phase and were expected to be completed in a few months.
- The differences over pricing had narrowed down considerably, and the talks were in the final phase.
- While the French offer was about €11 billion, India said it would not go beyond €8 billion. Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar has clarified on various occasions that there will be no compromise on the price.
- After some hard negotiations, the differences seem to have narrowed down considerably, with the French climbing down on their offer. The conclusion of the inter-governmental agreement will pave the way for signing of the final contract.
- In January this year, both sides signed a Memorandum of Understanding for the purchase during the visit of French President Francois Hollande to India.
- The development comes one year after the surprise announcement by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Paris on the direct purchase of 36 fighter jets under a government-to-government agreement.
- However, the talks to conclude the deal were gridlocked over offset requirements, customisations as sought by the Indian Air Force (IAF) and pricing.

Digital Radio Mondiale (DRM) for the cross-border broadcasting initiative

- Digital Radio Mondiale (DRM) for the cross-border broadcasting initiative to be kick-started with President Pranab Mukherjee's inauguration of a transmitter at Chinsurah later this year.
- Director General of AIR, said: "DRM has the twin capabilities of analogue and digital transmission, which makes it perfect for simulcast modes."
- DRM is not a good option as its receivers cost around Rs. 15,000 and people may not buy such expensive receivers. People do listen to FM radio (available on cell phones) and car music systems) so it would have been nice to install more FM transmitters if the objective is to reach listeners.
- AIR is using both FM transmitters and DRMs to reach out to India's neighbours. A senior official said Radio Bangla was discontinued in 2010. With DRM, Radio Bangla will be active again.
- Two years ago, the Sam Pitroda Committee set up to suggest a road map for the Prasar Bharati, had struck a cautious note in its report: "Digitalise the present AM radio system to a new digital radio transmission after due evaluation subject to cost and availability of DRM receivers.
- In the transition period, FM may be expanded as per demand". AIR, according to officials, has set 2017 as deadline to achieve total digitisation.

Air quality was logged between moderate and poor levels

- Air quality in Delhi improved and was logged between moderate and poor levels. Fine respirable pollutants was reported to have dispersed “considerably” across the Capital on the second day of the enforcement of the odd-even vehicle rationing scheme.
- This even as the Delhi government claimed initial trends pointed at restrictions imposed on the plying of vehicles as per the provisions of the scheme showed it was expected to have a “positive impact” on Delhi's air quality but said that a “concrete assessment” would be made after assessing the data related to four-five working days.
- As per data released by the Delhi government, PM2.5 levels found within permissible limit (below 60) at 40 out of 74 locations while PM10 levels at a majority of locations were recorded below the level of 200.
- Meanwhile, the eight-hour average of Ozone, a gaseous pollutant, also dipped below 40 parts per billion (ppb) which was a sharp drop from Friday and the day before. Its eight hour notified average safe limit is 100 micrograms per cubic metre.
- The eight monitoring stations of the Centre's SAFAR (System of Air Quality and Weather Forecasting and Research) put air quality between moderate and poor with the forecast being the same.
- The safe levels of PM2.5 and PM10 are 60 and 100 ug/m³ respectively, anything beyond which are considered hazardous for the respiratory system.

Thrissur Pooram festival painted the city in vibrant hues

- Thrissur Pooram, the renowned festival of sound and light, painted the city in vibrant hues.
- Challenging the scorching sun, lakhs of Pooram lovers poured into the cultural capital of Kerala for the 36-hour- long festival, which is the meeting of deities of ten participating temples.
- There was something for everyone – processions, elephants, fire- works and percussion ensembles.
- The celebrations started on Sunday morning with Ezhunnellippu of Kanimangalam Sastha.
- It was followed by other processions (Cheru Poorams) from Karamukku Bhagavathy, Neythilakkavu Bhagavathy, Panamukkamballi Sastha, Choorakkottukavu Devi, Ayyanthole Karthyayani and Chembukkavu Karthyayani temples.
- The sight of tuskers emerging in their regalia through the milling crowds to the accompaniment of percussion ensemble was awe-inspiring. There is a friendly competition between the Devaswoms.
- Against the backdrop of the High Court order on fire- works and elephant processions, stringent security measures were taken for the Pooram.

New inscription shedding more light on Buddhism found in Karnataka

- A new inscription that sheds more light on the history of Buddhism in Karnataka has been discovered at Lakkundi village in Gadag district.
- It is the first time that an inscription related to Buddhism was found in Lakkundi, a place of antiquarian interest with nearly 50 temples, 101 stepped wells and a large number of inscriptions spread over the Chalukya, Kalachuri and Hoysala periods.
- The inscription, whose lower portion has been severed of, makes salutations to Lord Buddha, ‘dhamma’, ‘sangha’ and Tara Bhagavati.

- There are possibilities of the inscription speaking about donations to a Buddhist monastery located at Lakkundi. Besides, it was among a handful of inscriptions making specific reference to the Tara Bhagavati cult of the Vajrayana Buddhism.
- The period of this inscription could be assigned to the regime of Hoysala king Veeraballala II (1173–1220 CE).

Problem of Maharashtra is more economic than drought

- The water train chugged into Latur last week capturing national attention. But it took the spotlight away from the daily struggles of lakhs facing the most immediate consequences of an extended drought and acute water scarcity in Latur district.
- Scarce water availability has resulted in poor farm yield, low income and diminishing spending power of the farmers. The weddings lack the pomp, while festivities are curtailed both in urban and rural areas.
- The local Agriculture Produce Market Committee (APMC) turnover fell to Rs 905 crore in 2015-16 from Rs 1,460 cr the previous year and Rs 1,875 cr in 2013-14.
- The drop in the arrival of pigeon pea from 15,000 quintal last year to only 5,000 this year is an indicator of the crashing economy, say experts.
- Drought and water scarcity is a complex phenomenon. The district administration blames nature's vagaries while the oilseed and pulses lobby point fingers at the water- guzzling sugarcane crop.
- Northeastern Maharashtra Jalgaon, Ahmedpur, Deoni, Nitur and Udgir — are facing more of a hydrological drought and scarcity as compared to the slightly better off and greener northwestern belt of Ranapur, Latur City and Ausa.
- But they are also home to three powerful sugar factories and major sources of water, including the Manjara dam, and the Bhandarwadi barrage among others.
- There was no rain in June in the region, some in July and in most parts concentrated around August, and back again in October with devastating hailstorms in February.
- This means it becomes challenging for a farmer to opt for pulses (pigeon-pea, urad and moong) and easier to go for oilseeds (soyabean).
- With only 1.72 per cent water remaining in 141 small and big sources of water, the district officials estimate failure of in excess of 70 per cent of the kharif crop.
- As many as 125 farmer's suicides were reported from Latur district till July 2015.

ED obtained non-bailable warrant against Mallya

- In yet another step to secure the presence of liquor baron Vijay Mallya, the Enforcement Directorate obtained a non-bailable warrant against him from a Special Court here.
- The Ministry of External Affairs had earlier suspended Mr. Mallya's passport on the ED's advice.
- The businessman, who left the country in the midst of efforts by a consortium of banks to recover dues from Kingfisher Airlines, did not appear before the agency in response to summons on three occasions.
- Mr. Mallya was summoned thrice for his statement to be recorded, but he repeatedly failed to appear before the ED.
- ED would seek a Look Out Circular at all airports and ports in India in Mr. Mallya's name on the basis of the NBW. The ED would also approach Interpol for issue of a Red Notice against him.

Centre told SC that Kohinoor diamond was given voluntarily to British

- The heirs of Maharaja Ranjit Singh gave the Kohinoor diamond to the British as “voluntary compensation” to cover the expenses of the Anglo-Sikh Wars, the Centre told the Supreme Court.
- The Supreme Court is hearing a petition filed by an NGO, All India Human Rights & Social Justice Front, on whether the government intends to make a bid to get back the Kohinoor.
- There is a long journey of one of the world’s most famous diamonds from Indian shores to find a place of pride in the Crown jewels of the United Kingdom.
- During a visit to India, British Prime Minister David Cameron was reported by the media to have ruled out handing back the 105-carat Kohinoor. The diamond is on display at the Tower of London.
- Meanwhile, Chief Justice Thakur enquired whether Tipu Sultan’s sword was brought back to India.

Higher number of bore wells along with unscientific use are problems of Maharashtra

- The indiscriminate use of groundwater has been the bane of Latur. The number of irrigation bore wells in Latur stood at 34,778 in 2007, only second after Nashik at 37,545.
- As per the rules, there can be only five borewells per square kilometre. This simply means, in an ideal situation, the 715 sq km of the 10 talukas should have only 3,575 bores. But the unofficial number is 90,000.
- A 2012 GDSA report warned of over-withdrawal of groundwater in Latur and Osmanabad, due to “the water intensive cash crop like sugarcane, banana, grapes and oranges, which are mostly groundwater dependent.”
- However, even after knowing the disadvantages of irrigation borewell — low dependability of yield, low discharge and recuperation rate — farmers were still opting for it, the report said.
- The growing feeling is that sugarcane’s commodity cycle has to end. While cane farmers are being offered unattractive rates by loss-making sugar factories, there has been a rise in the rates of soyabean and pulses.
- The charge against sugarcane is it guzzles over 2,000 mm water in a year, forcing farmers to sink borewells. Initially, factory owners too did not promote drip irrigation.
- When the ‘water express’ chugged into Latur City last week with 5,00,000 litres, people hoped it would end the city’s crisis.
- But residents say water supply has been erratic for the past year, with the “poorer” parts getting water once every 25 days, while some “better-off” areas got it every fortnight.

Regional comprehensive economic partnership wants India to cut tariffs

- India has been told to either agree to eliminate tariffs on most products or leave the talks on the proposed Trade Agreement, negotiated by the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, trading bloc of 16 Asia-Pacific countries.
- Apprehensions were voiced at the last round of negotiations in Brunei, adding that the 12th round of RCEP talks slated for April at Perth in Australia could be a “turning point” in the negotiations with India.

- In particular, trade negotiators from the other RCEP members, comprising the 10-member ASEAN bloc, and China, Japan, Australia, South Korea and New Zealand were upset over India's protectionist stance.
- Ministries of External Affairs and Commerce are expected to seek a clear direction from PM Narendra Modi on whether or not India should be part of the RCEP.

Union is against Tamil Nadu govt proposal related to Rajiv Gandhi assassination

- The Centre has rejected the proposal of the Tamil Nadu government to re-lease seven convicts in the Rajiv Gandhi assassination case.
- This is the second time in two years that the State had written to the Centre seeking its views on its decision to remit their sentence. The first letter was sent during the UPA government's tenure in February 2014.
- The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) has told the State that "since the matter is sub judice in Supreme Court, it has no authority to release the prisoners."
- In 1999, the Supreme Court found the seven guilty of conspiring to assassinate former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in May 1991.
- The death sentences of Sriharan, Perarivalan and Suthendraraja were commuted to life imprisonment by the Supreme Court in 2014 due to delay in disposal of their mercy petitions.
- Nalini's death sentence was commuted to life by the State Cabinet in 2000. The remaining three are serving life sentence.

A complete and unconditional roll-back of new PF norms

- The government announced a complete and unconditional rollback of new norms that barred employees from withdrawing their provident fund corpus before retirement.
- Labour and Employment Minister said the new rules would be partially relaxed and their implementation deferred.
- Protests against the new norms that started in Bengaluru turned violent.
- Under the rules notified in February, employees were not allowed to withdraw their entire PF amount if they had quit or lost their present jobs, making it mandatory for them to wait till 58 years of age for a final settlement.
- The Minister said the norms would be relaxed to allow employees buying a house, getting a child married and pursuing professional education and healthcare to withdraw their entire PF savings.
- A similar exemption was granted to employees who join a government organisation.

Centre said all efforts will be put together to bring Kohinoor

- The Centre said it would make all efforts to bring back the Kohinoor diamond from the United Kingdom in an amicable manner—a stand that seems to be at odds with the Solicitor General's submissions to the Supreme Court.
- In a strongly worded statement, the Culture Ministry said the Solicitor General's submissions were consistent with the stand taken by earlier governments going as far back as 1956 during the tenure of India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru.

- The government said the factual position is that the matter is sub judice and a public interest litigation plea filed in the Supreme Court is yet to be admitted.
- The Centre stressed that it has not yet conveyed its views to the court, which it said had granted six weeks to the Solicitor General to make a submission.

PM to give awards on civil services day

- Two days after Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal warned civil servants to shape up or ship out, Prime Minister Narendra Modi will be giving out awards to bureaucrats for implementing government programmes.
- Awards will be given out to a dozen or so district magistrates from across the country on Civil Services Day.
- Some unlikely places find mention in the list of award-winning districts drawn up by the PMO for implementing the NDA government's flagship programmes.
- Anantnag in Jammu and Kashmir which has seen 100% implementation of the Swachh Vidyalaya scheme and Mulayam Singh Yadav's constituency, Azamgarh, registered maximum enrolment in the Jan Dhan Yojana figure in the awards list.
- Out of a huge list of around 70 districts, a dozen or so have been selected for the awards.
- Anantpur in Andhra Pradesh, again for Swachh Vidyalaya, Churu in Rajasthan for Swachh Grameen (clean village) campaign are also part of this list.
- The theme for the celebrations will be the cumulative changes of the last year that have resulted in some transformation in various parts of the country.

Union government amended bill for fund management related to forest

- The Union Cabinet has amended a Bill to ensure a greater role for States in deciding how they will use funds to replenish forests affected by construction and other development projects.
- The Bill is part of modifications proposed to expedite the creation of a central body, the Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management and Planning Authority (CAMPA), which will manage a corpus of nearly Rs. 40,000 crore.
- This is the money so far collected by States from organisations and companies which have used forest land or land in protected areas for their projects.

2016 is the hottest year to date

- This year is off to a record-breaking start for global temperatures.
- It has been the hottest year to date, with January, February and March each passing marks set in 2015.
- March was also the 11th consecutive month to set a record high for temperatures, which agencies started tracking in the 1800s.
- With the release Tuesday of its global climate report, NOAA is the third independent agency — along with NASA and the Japan Meteorological Association — to reach similar findings, each using slightly different methods.
- The reports add a sense of urgency at the United Nations, where world diplomats are gathered this week to sign the climate accord reached late last year in Paris, when 195 nations committed to lower greenhouse gas emissions and to stave off the worst effects of climate change.

- Since the initial agreement was reached, other global anomalies have been reported that punctuate the threat of climate change, including troubling trends on Arctic sea ice, floods, drought and carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere.
- Some of these — warm temperatures and heavy rains in particular — can be explained in part by this year's El Niño phenomenon.

As a sign of accelerated contact between India and China, President to visit China next

- In a sign of suddenly accelerated contact between India and China, President Pranab Mukherjee will travel to Beijing at the end of May.
- The President, who will also travel to Singapore on the same visit is expected to be in China in May last week, and will travel to Beijing and the South Eastern Chinese business hub of Guangzhou.
- The trip, billed as a “return bilateral visit” for President Xi Jinping’s visit in September 2014, will come close on the heels of visits by Defence Minister Parrikar, NSA Ajit Doval, and the meeting between External Affairs Minister’s in Moscow.
- However, it is also expected to indicate India and China’s desire to put some of the tensions of the past few months behind them.
- The tensions, which have been spurred mainly by China’s relations with Pakistan, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and its support at the U.N. on the issue of Masood Azhar’s designation as a terrorist, had meant a strain in ties.

Union Minister again advocates river linking across states

- Union Minister H.N. Ananth Kumar has favoured river linking to address drought and water scarcity.
- The BJP leader said that linking rivers across the State would create a water grid that would end droughts and ensure constant supply of abundant water to all regions.
- Andhra Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu has successfully linked the Krishna and the Godavari to transfer 80 tmcft of water from the Krishna Basin to the Godavari Basin.
- This has brought water to dry areas in that State. Such models should be replicated in Karnataka too, he said.
- He observed that 136 taluks were affected by drought. BJP MPs and legislators were ready to contribute their one-month salary towards drought relief, he said.
- He urged the government to supply water through tankers in 337 villages hit by water scarcity in Bidar district.
- He said that such emergencies demanded that all leaders worked for the welfare of the people, setting aside their political affiliations.

Nainital High court quashed Union government’s President’s rule

- The Uttarakhand High Court quashed the Union government’s order imposing President’s Rule on the State, holding that the situation must be viewed “on a larger canvas of democracy, federalism and the rule of law.”
- Deciding that the Congress shall return to power, a Division Bench ordered a floor test of Harish Rawat’s claim of majority in the Assembly on April 29.

- The decision is a setback to the Modi government, which had approached the President to prove that there was a breakdown of the constitutional machinery.
- Uttarakhand Speaker Govind Singh Kunjwal said the “effective strength” of the House has now come down to 62 as the High Court has upheld the disqualification of the nine rebel Congress MLAs.
- The Central government will challenge the ruling of the Uttarakhand High Court revoking President’s Rule in the State.
- Attorney General Mukul Rohatgi said this after Finance Minister Arun Jaitley, Home Minister Rajnath Singh and leaders of the BJP, including party president Amit Shah, went into a huddle on how to proceed following the legal setback.

Govt imposed regulations on surcharge in a cab

- The next time you pay a surcharge for travelling in a cab booked through an aggregator, look at the bill carefully.
- If you’re being charged more than Rs. 19.5 per km after the basic fare, you will soon be able to alert the Transport Department via a designated helpline or through social media.
- In an attempt to take action against aggregators who are getting customers to shell out over-the-top surcharges, the department will launch a helpline that will take note of customer complaints.
- At worst, this could include suspension of the aggregator’s licence.
- Such strong action against private app-based operators has become possible after services like Ola and Uber came forward this week to register with the department.
- However, the only complaints that will be taken up will be those in which the customer has been charged more than the maximum rate fixed by the government. This is currently fixed at Rs. 80 for 4 km and Rs. 19.5 per km after.

Environmentalist R.K. Pachauri stepped down as a member of governing council of TERI

- Environmentalist R.K. Pachauri, accused of sexual harassment by his former women colleagues in the recent past, has stepped down as a member of the governing council of TERI.
- The announcement came on the heels of a media report which said the green body has decided to “sever” its association with Mr. Pachauri even though his employment contract with TERI expires in 2017.
- It said the governing council had also decided to pay all the dues for the remainder of his tenure and bring an immediate end to it.
- Mr. Pachauri, however, maintained that his term as a member of The Energy and Resources Institute’s (TERI) governing council ended on March 31, 2016.
- Mr. Pachauri said he was issuing the statement “to provide the media with information” about his “stepping down” from TERI’s Governing Council, suggesting the decision to call time on his association with the organisation was voluntary.

Six new members nominated to upper house

- The Rashtrapati Bhavan approved a list of six nominated members to the Rajya Sabha, including senior BJP leader Subramanian Swamy, former Test cricketer and BJP MP Navjyot Singh Sidhu and boxing legend Mary Kom among others.

- Economist and former member of the Sonia Gandhi-led National Advisory Council (NAC) Narendra Jadhav has also been nominated for a Rajya Sabha seat, along with journalist Swapan Dasgupta and Malayalam actor Suresh Gopi.
- These nominations to the Upper House are for achievers in various spheres of public life, and total 12 in number. As of now, there are seven vacancies among these 12, for which six names have been announced, and one kept in abeyance.
- The government can nominate members in this category at anytime and it is not bound to an electoral cycle like the other seats.
- Of these, Mr. Sidhu's nomination is politically most significant as there had been talk that the former cricketer was negotiating with the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) just ahead of the Assembly polls in Punjab.

After undertaking from Attorney-General SC kept HC's order aside

- The Supreme Court restored President's Rule in Uttarakhand till April 27, barely a day after the Uttarakhand High Court quashed the Centre's decision and restored the Harish Rawat-led Congress government.
- A Bench of Justices Dipak Misra and Shiva Kirti Singh admitted the Centre's challenge to the High Court decision and brought back President's Rule in the State because judgment, dictated by Uttarakhand HC was not yet available in the public domain.
- The Bench said the High Court judgment would "remain in abeyance" till April 27, the next date of hearing in the Supreme Court. It further directed the High Court to release the signed judgment by April 26 to the parties, who will file copies in the apex court.
- The Supreme Court recorded an oral undertaking from Attorney-General Mukul Rohatgi that the Centre would not in the meantime revoke President's Rule in the State before April 27 as a ploy to install a BJP government.

Leaked chapter of draft RCEP shows reduction in access to affordable medicines

- A leaked chapter of the draft Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement being negotiated by 16 countries reveals that the trade pact in its current form could reduce access to affordable medicines in many developing countries.
- The chapter on Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) is part of an October 2015 draft of the RCEP agreement.
- India has opposed some damaging proposals initiated by the RCEP members, particularly Japan and Korea, involving patent extensions, restrictive rules on copyright exceptions, and other anti-consumer measures.
- Some member countries, who are part of both the TPP and the RCEP, are trying to push for the TPP standards in RCEP.
- Japan and Korea are working to introduce some of the worst ideas from the ACTA (Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement), the TPP and other trade agreements in the RCEP chapter on Intellectual Property.
- The humanitarian aid organisation is particularly concerned about a proposal by Japan and Korea demanding patent term extension — from the current 20 years by an additional five years — in ASEAN countries that are not party to the TPP.

- Countries like India have, in the past, resisted pressure to sign the patents treaty as it can curtail the flexibility under the Indian system to address key public policy issues such as ever greening.
- If these terms are accepted, it would limit access to affordable medicines for people in Indonesia, Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos who depend on Indian generics.
- The Least Developed Countries (LDCs) are concerned at the move to withdraw the exemption granted under the TRIPS to implement intellectual property laws until 2033.
- The RCEP is one of three mega FTAs proposed so far — the other two being the TPP and the TTIP (Trans-Atlantic Trade and Investment Partnership between the U.S. and the EU) — and aims to integrate Asian markets.
- The next round of RCEP discussions will take place in Perth, Australia, between April 23-29.

Govt looking to make exploration policy more attractive to private players

- To make exploration more attractive for private players, the Union government will reimburse the costs to mining firms that fail to find adequate mineral wealth and offer them a share of the revenue from blocks where they do strike valuable reserves.
- However, the exploration firms will not enjoy any preferential right to the blocks where they find viable mineral reserves or be eligible for direct compensation from firms that end up operating the mines they discover, as was earlier envisaged.
- The Union Ministry of Mines has set forth these ideas in the final Cabinet note on the new mineral exploration policy, which was circulated for inter-ministerial consultations this week.
- Under the Mines and Mineral (Development and Regulations) Act of 2015, reconnaissance permits cannot be converted into a prospecting licence or a mining licence, though there was a provision for that in the earlier law.
- Firms that did not find anything in the blocks they explored would be reimbursed on the basis of normative costs so that they did not suffer any loss.
- The Geological Survey of India has identified 108 blocks in 23 States that can be taken up for mineral exploration, once the Cabinet approves the new policy.

IMD says that there will be no respite from heat waves for few more days

- Several parts of India reeled under severe heat wave conditions, with the maximum temperature exceeding 47 degrees Celsius at Titlagarh in Odisha and above 45 degrees in several other parts of the country.
- No respite is in sight till April 27, as India Meteorological Department issued severe heat wave or heat wave warnings for parts of Odisha, Jharkhand, Telangana and Rayalaseema in Andhra Pradesh.
- Vidarbha in Maharashtra, Bihar and the Gangetic West Bengal also recorded above normal temperatures.
- IMD declares a heat wave when the maximum temperature exceeds 40 degrees Celsius in the plains.
- If the normal maximum temperature of a place is less than or equal to 40 degrees Celsius, an increase by 5-6 degrees Celsius is needed for heat wave to be declared.
- If the temperature goes up 7 degrees Celsius above normal, it is considered a severe heat wave.
- Heat wave across several places has already claimed over 160 lives. Heat wave during the third and fourth week of May last year claimed over 2,200 deaths in the country.

Ujjwala scheme to provide five crore free LPG connections

- Petroleum Minister said 10,000 new LPG distributors will be appointed in the current financial year.
- At present, there are 18,000 gas distributors in the country and in the coming three months, 2,000 new distributors will be made and by the end of this financial year 8,000 more distributors will be made
- The Rs. 8,000-crore Ujjwala scheme will provide five crore free LPG connections to BPL families using the money saved from 1.13 crore cooking gas users voluntarily giving up their subsidies.
- Mr. Modi will launch the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana on May 1 and do a repeat function at Dahod in Gujarat on May 15.
- 61 per cent households in the country have LPG connections, while in Uttar Pradesh 53 per cent houses have gas connections.

Centre notifies rules for amended SC/ST Act

- Govt notified the amended Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act of 1989 to tighten provisions to ensure speedier justice to SCs and STs, to give effect to the changes on Babasaheb Ambedkar's birth anniversary.
- The object of the amended provisions is to speed up the process of dispensation of justice, liberalise and expedite access to relief for victims of atrocities, ensuring special sensitivity in cases of offences against women.
- The new provisions now provide for an increase in the existing quantum of relief from between Rs. 75,000 to Rs. 7,50,000 to Rs. 85,000 to Rs. 8,25,000, depending on the nature of the offence.
- It also provides for admissible relief to SC/ST women for offences of grievous nature, on conclusion of trial, even though they may not have ended in conviction.
- The changes in the law also make provision for regular reviews of the scheme for the rights and entitlements of victims and witnesses in accessing justice at the State, district and sub-division level committees in their meetings.
- Other important provisions include completing investigation and filing a charge sheet within 60 days and provision of admissible relief in cash or kind or both within seven days to victims, their family members and dependents.
- For the first time, there is provision of relief for rape and gang rape.
- No medical examination will be necessary to seek relief for non-invasive offences against women such as sexual harassment, gestures or acts intended to insult the modesty of women.

Access to Justice survey puts gloomy picture

- Most of the litigants in the country earn less than Rs. 3 lakh a year, says a new survey by the Bengaluru- based civil society organisation DAKSH.
- The nationwide "Access to Justice" survey was conducted across 305 locations in 24 States between November 2015 and February 2016 to hear the voice and explore the profile of people making use of judicial system in India.
- The results of the survey, which were released, reveal that 90 per cent of the litigants earn less than Rs. 3 lakh per annum and the median expected cost of litigation for this group is around Rs. 16,000.
- Though legal aid aims to provide free legal services to the weaker sections who otherwise can't afford it, the survey found that that just one per cent of the respondents were making use of this service.
- A majority of the respondents found their lawyers by way of reference from colleagues, acquaintances or family members.

- Experts point out that accountability of legal aid lawyers towards their clients and lack of communication between the two are serious concerns plaguing the system.
- The financial barrier is not just limited to accessing courts. The main reason individuals could not meet the conditions of bail was found to be lack of funds.
- A third of the respondents, who couldn't get a bail when it was due, cited this as a reason.
- Also, around half the litigants cited expense as a major deterrent for filing appeals in the High Court if their cases were not resolved in their favour.
- The survey shows that two-thirds of all civil disputes were regarding land and property, followed by litigation on family matters.
- Researchers and lawyers present during the release of survey concurred that 'access to justice' should not be equated with 'access to courts', which is too narrow.

MEA revoked the passport of Vijay Mallya

- The Ministry of External Affairs announced that it had revoked the passport of Vijay Mallya, owner of the now-defunct Kingfisher Airlines, starting the process of bringing him back to India.
- The MEA revoked the passport of Shri Vijay Mallya on the facts brought by the Enforcement Directorate and Non-Bailable Warrant under the PMLA Act, 2002, issued by Special Judge, Mumbai.
- The move comes days after the MEA said it had started consultations to bring Mr. Mallya to justice.
- The ED had begun coordinating with the MEA to bring Mr. Mallya back, especially because of his reluctance to disclose overseas assets.
- Within hours of the announcement, news agencies reported that Mr. Mallya's name featured in the electoral rolls in the United Kingdom. The rolls mention his address as Hertfordshire, where he has been staying since last month.

CJI broke down at the Chief Ministers and Chief Justices conference

- Chief Justice of India Tirath Singh Thakur Broke down several times in his half-hour speech addressed directly to Prime Minister who was present at the Annual Chief Ministers and Chief Justices Conference.
- He also launched a scathing attack on government inaction, blaming the Centre for stalling appointment of judges to the High Courts and doing nothing to increase the number of courts and judges.
- The Chief Justice asked what was the point of 'Make in India' and inviting foreign direct investments when investors would worry about timely delivery of justice in case of litigation.
- "Therefore, not only in the name of the litigant... the poor litigant languishing in jail but also in the name of the country and progress, I beseech you to realise that it is not enough to criticise the judiciary," he said
- He said there were 434 judicial vacancies in the High Courts as of date, "thanks to" the fact that judicial appointments remained in limbo because of the prolonged litigation over the NJAC.
- Prime Minister Narendra Modi delivered an unscheduled speech, immediately after the Chief Justice of India Tirath Singh Thakur's emotional speech.
- Taking on the CJI, the Prime Minister said judges and the government should sit together and work for a more efficient tomorrow rather than dwell on the past and what was said in 1987.
- He said the ordinary citizen had full faith in the judiciary and the government would not let his faith in the judges falter.

- He blamed the flood of archaic laws that filled up the statute books, faulty or vague drafting of laws and their multiple interpretations by various courts for prolonged litigations.

Water conservation became the focus of PM's Mann Ki Baat

- Prime Minister Narendra Modi gave a call for water conservation in villages at a time when parts of the country are reeling under an unprecedented drought.
- He said that monsoon would be 106-110 per cent of the normal this year is heartening.
- "To fight the drought and ensure water security, the governments will do its work.
- But I have also seen people making their own efforts. In several villages, there is awareness about the value of water and in such places there is sensitivity and a will to do something to conserve it," Mr. Modi said in his address.
- "Rain water should be preserved. The water of a village should remain in the village. If we take a resolve to do that, it is possible through a mass campaign."
- The Prime Minister gave his address a feel-good ring when he hailed the one crore families that had voluntarily given up LPG connections so that the poor can get cooking gas.
- Faith in people was important, he asserted. At the same time, he wondered whether a train journey could take place without a ticket-checker, on the basis of faith in the people.
- Mr. Modi asked people to visit a website 'Transforming India.' They would get news about positive achievements there.
- Former President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam had said that "positive news" alone should be on Page 1. There was a move towards "positive news," which was the "greatest reason for inspiration to do good work."
- Later addressing a rally in Jharkhand to mark Panchayat Day, the Prime Minister stressed the need to strengthen the panchayats as the development of the country was linked to the development of villages.

Mobile phones will have button for distress from next year

- Starting next year, all mobile phones sold in India will come with a dedicated 'panic button' that can be used to send out a signal in case of distress.
- The Panic button and Global Positioning System facility in all mobile phone handsets Rules, 2016 are aimed at improving the safety of women and ensuring a quick response from security agencies.
- The notification says that no handset shall be sold in India from January 1, 2017, without a panic button and all handsets must also have GPS from January 1, 2018.
- "Technology is solely meant to make human life better and what better than using it for the security of women," Telecom Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad said.
- Once the panic button is pressed, a signal/call will be made to the nearest security agency. However, the details of how the system will work are yet to be finalised.

After recommendation from pay commission Govt looking to make allowances structured

- Secret allowance, family planning allowance, desk allowance, cash handling allowance, metropolitan allowance and headquarters allowance are among 52 of the nearly 200 allowances which the government could scrap soon.

- The Seventh Pay Commission found inadequate the justifications offered by the Ministries for these allowances.
- The government was asked to suggest rationalisation of a variety of allowances. A committee is examining the Commission's recommendations.
- The Commission found the entire system of nearly 200 allowances "haphazard".
- There are 13 for travel, 14 for additional duty, 51 for risk and hardship, nine for uniform, 4 for good services, 5 sumptuary allowances, 2 for training and 3 for knowledge update.
- Many were meagre cash payments and lost significance.
- The Commission Rejected the demand for doubling the family planning allowance ranging from Rs. 210 to Rs.1,000 a month depending on grade pay, for those who adopt family planning norms after one child.

Union government considering to make prescription of generic drugs mandatory

- The Central government is considering the introduction of a law to make it mandatory for doctors to prescribe generic drugs so that patients can access affordable medicines provided through state-run Jan Aushadhi stores.
- The legal route to counter doctors' preference for branded medicines is expected to be discussed with Prime Minister Narendra Modi at an upcoming meeting to assess the progress made in the plan to set up 3,000 Jan Aushadhi stores across the country this year, a promise made in the Union Budget.
- A major hurdle is that doctors don't prescribe generic medicines supplied through Jan Aushadhi stores, so patients find it tough to ask for the correct generic equivalents.
- The Bureau of Pharma PSUs of India (BPPI) is the agency under the Department of Pharmaceuticals entrusted with implementing the Jan Aushadhi programme which was launched in 2008.
- BPPI's main focus is accessibility, affordability and availability. But if generic equivalents are not prescribed by doctors, sales won't take place. Pharmacists should have the option to give the generic substitute.

SC slammed M.H. Govt for delay in the grant of licences to conduct dance performances

- The Supreme Court slammed the Maharashtra government for delaying the grant of licences to hotels and bars in the State to conduct dance performances.
- Apex court said that it is better for women to dance professionally on a platform rather than beg on the streets or get into other "undesirable means of livelihood".
- A Bench of Justices Dipak Misra and Shiva Kirti Singh said the State should not adopt a prohibitory mindset when the apex court has only asked it to regulate the activities of dance bars.
- "As the State, your job is to protect the dignity of these women in their workplace. Your attitude should not go into the extremes of prohibition when you are only supposed to regulate. This is 2016."
- "We are talking about dance as a profession, as art. In case the performances slip into obscenity, it naturally stops having legal permissibility and the Indian Penal Code will take care of the rest," Justice Misra explained
- The court, however, acknowledged the plea of Additional Solicitor-General Pinky Anand, appearing for Maharashtra, that the State has to ensure that there is no "obscenity" in dance bars and the dignity of women is protected there.

- The court directed all dance bars applicants to co-operate with providing information on any criminal antecedents of their employees to the police, besides installing CCTV cameras.
- Ms. Anand submitted that over 150 applications for dance bar licences were received, of which only 39 bars had offered themselves for inspection.

SC backed the resolve of the banks to go after Vijay Mallya

- The Supreme Court backed the resolve of the banks to “go after” chairman of Kingfisher Airlines, Vijay Mallya, by handing over details of his overseas assets to them despite his plea to keep them a secret.
- Mr Mallya accused the banks – who have said he is a “fugitive fleeing from justice” of trying to lure him back with appeals of a “negotiated settlement” of his debts, when in fact they just wanted to send him “straight to Tihar Jail”.
- Mr Mallya, whose passport has been revoked by the government, and who has all but lost his status as a Rajya Sabha member, called the wrecked Kingfisher Airlines a “bonafide business failure”.
- He said he had never misused his bank loans, and though a “defaulter,” he had never been a “wilful defaulter” as the government and the banks made him out to be.
- The Bench ordered the Supreme Court’s Registry to hand over to the banks a sealed envelope submitted by Mr Mallya, containing details of foreign assets owned by him, his estranged wife and children.

48 Youths had been arrested for allegiance to IS and for planning attack

- 48 youths had so far been arrested nationwide for their allegiance to the IS and for planning attacks on behalf of the outfit.
- During a countrywide raid in January-February this year, the National Investigation Agency arrested 25 men for allegedly trying to establish an Islamic State-backed caliphate in India.
- The Islamic State is definitely a threat to India and the State intelligence officials were asked to improve intelligence-gathering techniques. The group may be losing steam internationally, but India remained vulnerable to it.
- As per an estimate, there are 70-80 active terrorists in the Valley, and all of them are identified in police records.
- They belong to the Hizbul Mujahideen (HM), the Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) and the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) among others.

Advanced new ship Shoor commissioned

- Coastal security, particularly in the State, has received a shot in the arm as an advanced new ship, Shoor, of the Indian Coast Guard, commissioned about two weeks ago, arrived at its base in Mangaluru.
- The 105-m-long Shoor, an offshore patrol vessel, is the fifth ship of the Coast Guard based in Mangaluru at the New Mangalore Port.
- The Coast Guard already has four ships which are fast patrol vessels based at New Mangalore Port.
- They are Savtiribai Phule, Kasturba Gandhi, Amartya and Rajdoot. In addition, the Coast Guard has two hovercrafts based in Mangaluru.

- Designed and built by Goa Shipyard Ltd., Shoor can carry a helicopter. The ship can carry a single engine Chetak helicopter or a double engine advanced light helicopter.
- The ship is also capable of carrying pollution response equipment to combat oil spill contamination at sea.
- It carries five high speed boats, including for fast boarding operations, search and rescue, law enforcement and maritime patrol.

Delhi govt. moves SC to define its powers

- The Delhi government has moved the Supreme Court seeking a judicial declaration on the boundaries of the constitutional relationship between it and the Centre in administering the National Capital.
- In a suit filed in the apex court, the Arvind Kejriwal government said the Centre was encroaching into the Delhi government's administrative domain and the Supreme Court should now clearly define the powers of the Lieutenant-Governor.
- It has also highlighted issues like the Delhi Police being run by the Centre, unlike in other States.
- Delhi's Anti-Corruption Branch has been restrained from registering FIRs against the employees of the Central government for corruption.
- Commissions of Enquiry set up under the Commissions of Enquiry Act, 1952, have also not been allowed to function on the ground that they have not been notified by the L-G, it said.
- It was only recently that the Supreme Court had allowed the Kejriwal government to withdraw a similar petition on the ground that the High Court was already seized of an identical issue.
- However, this time, the Delhi government has argued that it is the apex court which has the exclusive jurisdiction to decide disputes relating to the constitutional relationship between the NCT of Delhi and the Union of India.

In line with U.S. And U.K. Govt to make sex offenders registry

- The NDA government is planning to set up a sex offenders registry in the country, on the lines of those maintained in western countries including the U.S. and the U.K.
- Details of sexual offenders even below 18 years of age would be included in the database, which will be put up on the website of National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), government informed the Rajya Sabha.
- The government plans to publicise their photographs, addresses, PAN card details, Aadhaar card number, fingerprints and DNA samples through this registry.
- The proposal to set up a registry was first mooted by the UPA government after the 2012 Nirbhaya gangrape case in Delhi.
- It would be a handy tool for the law enforcement agencies as well.
- It will instil fear in the minds of repeat sexual offenders and the public would be benefited from it.
- This will be an online database of charge-sheeted sexual offenders in the entire country, which people can access through a Citizen Portal in the upcoming Crime and Criminal Tracking Network and Systems (CCTNS) project.
- The United States has a similar website called the National Sex Offender Public Website.
- Replying to the supplementaries, Home Minister Rajnath Singh said "the Central government has issued these draft guidelines to check sexual harassment. They are still at a very primary stage.
- The draft guidelines, which have been readied have been sent to Ministries, including the Women and Child Development for suggestions. After this, public comments will be solicited."

- This will include, inter-alia name and aliases, registration of primary or given name, nicknames, pseudonyms, telephone numbers, addresses including temporary lodging information, travel and immigration documents.

Detailed survey of Patel community to be taken by Gujrat Govt

- The OBC Commission in Gujarat is set to undertake a detailed survey of the Patel community to determine whether the community is eligible to be recognised as “backward” community and whether the quota benefits can be extended to it.
- The Commission headed by a former High Court judge Sugnyaben Bhatt is understood to have compiled a questionnaire to survey ore than a million households of the Patel community.
- Community has been on a highly charged and violent agitation demanding quotas in the universities and the government jobs in the State.
- The commission launched the exercise following a Ms. Bhatt's meeting with Chief Minister Anandiben Patel, who has been at the receiving end of the agitation from her own community.

Union govt started the process of deportation of Vilay Mallya

- India has asked the United Kingdom to deport Vijay Mallya, the owner of the now-grounded Kingfisher Airlines, wanted for money laundering and financial mismanagement.
- The MEA has written to the High Commission of the United Kingdom in Delhi requesting deportation of Shri Vijay Mallya from the United Kingdom.
- The High Commission of India (in UK) will also issue a similar note verbale on the case. We shall pursue the matter with the United Kingdom.
- The MEA cancelled Mr Mallya’s passport last week after the Enforcement Directorate (ED) asked the ministry to initiate steps to bring back the businessman Mr Mallya who owes more than \$1 billion to banks and creditors in India.
- Mr Mallya who flew out in the first week of March has not returned since even as law enforcement authorities and banks have been demanding for his return.
- Soon after the cancellation of Mr Mallya’s passport, news agencies had reported that his name has appeared on the electoral rolls of the United Kingdom.
- However, officials pointed out, that appearance of his name on the roll does not necessarily mean that Mr Mallya has stealthily acquired British citizenship.

Govt is looking to make driving licence and vehicle registration process online

- Visits to regional transport offices (RTOs) for driving licence and vehicle registration could soon be a thing of the past, as the government is looking to move the process online.
- For instance, an online theory test will be conducted for procuring a learner’s licence. The government may also digitise renewal applications for driving licences and requests for change of address and other details.
- The driving school principals can help educate candidates on road safety norms and the learners’ licence test could be taken online and printed as well.
- The government is simultaneously pursuing steeper penalties for traffic violations, particularly those related to drunken driving, juveniles on the wheel, over-speeding and not wearing helmets or seat

belts. Moreover, registration of both commercial and private vehicles may soon be possible at the dealer's point. The government will issue standardised norms for number plates across the country.

- Under the proposed system, the automobile dealer will have access to Vahan, a centralised database of the Transport department. The dealer will help complete the formalities to obtain number plates for vehicles.
- The government will also do away with dress code for commercial drivers and allow third-party accidental insurance cover for public transport drivers of buses, autos and taxis.

Narendra Modi may address a joint meeting of Congress when he visits the U.S

- U.S. House Speaker Paul Ryan invited Prime Minister Narendra Modi to address a joint meeting of Congress when he visits the U.S capital in June.
- India has not announced the Prime Minister's visit yet, but Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar is in Washington to finalise the agenda of the visit that is reportedly at the behest of President Barack Obama.
- Making an announcement at his weekly press conference, Mr. Ryan said Mr Modi's address could be likely on June 8. This will be the first joint meeting of the Congress during his speakership.
- "The friendship between the United States and India is a pillar of stability in an important region of the world," Mr. Ryan said.
- Mr. Modi will be the fifth Prime Minister of India to address a joint meeting of the Congress, and the first since 2005.

Economically backward class gets 10% reservation in Gujrat

- In a bid to placate the Patidars demanding reservation in jobs and education, the government in Gujarat announced a 10 % quota for those earning Rs. 6 lakh a year or less among the upper castes.
- "Gujarat government has decided to accord 10% reservation for economically backward in general category," Chief Minister Anandiben Patel said.
- She also added that the existing 49% reservation for SC, ST and OBC will remain untouched.
- But the Patidar Anamat Andolan Samiti dismissed the announcement as "lollipop" and demanded specific quota for the Patidars.

Govt says conducting NEET this year is difficult

- Attorney general suggested before a Bench led by Justice Anil R. Dave that the NEET on May 1 be scrapped and instead a combined exam be held on July 24.
- The "majority" of States and private medical colleges had almost completed or were midway through their own entrance tests, Mr. Rohatgi pointed out that States like Tamil Nadu did not even have a legacy of entrance exams.
- But the court had chosen to go by the assurances given by the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), the Medical Council of India (MCI) and the Health Ministry that holding NEET was definitely possible this year.
- NEET, as per the December 21, 2010 Medical Council of India notification brought back to life on April 28, replaces all other exams for medical and dental admissions in the country.
- The common entrance examination is meant to end rampant corruption in medical admissions.

- It was quashed by the Supreme Court in 2013 on the ground that it interfered with the administrative powers of government-run and private colleges.
- A petition on whether NEET is constitutionally valid is listed for fresh hearing on May 3 before a five-judge Bench.

Govt declassifies a new batch of Netaji files

- The latest instalment of files on the Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose, released by the government, suggest that the Janata Dal government of V.P. Singh was unsure whether it was indeed Bose's ashes that were being preserved in Japan.
- This was in variance with the government's stated position, built over decades and on the basis of two inquiry commissions, that Bose had died in an air crash in Taiwan, and his cremated remains were preserved at Rekonji Temple in Tokyo.
- Documents show that on August 7, 1990, the then Prime Minister, Singh, got a letter from Shantilal Patel, Member of Parliament, requesting that the government ceremoniously prepare to receive Netaji's ashes.
- Mr. Singh replied on the advise of his colleagues in the Prime Minister's Office, that "in the absence of consensus in our country on whether the ashes, which are preserved in the Renkoji Temple in Japan, are those of Netaji, it is difficult to consider bringing these ashes to India at this stage."
- The Indira Gandhi government too had stayed away from attempting to retrieve Netaji's ashes largely because his brother, Sarath Chandra Bose, disputed the conclusions of the commissions — set up in 1956 and 1970.
- Both ruled that Bose had died in a air crash, and it was his remains that were being preserved in Japan.
- The communications of Singh, Shanker and Patel are all part of 25 documents that were uploaded on the Ministry of Culture's Netaji microsite.
- Though the Indian mission in Tokyo had taken custody of Netaji's ashes in the early 50s, it did not send the remains to India and had spend Rs. 52,66,278 between 1967 and 2005 on the upkeep of the remains at Rekonji Temple.

Odd-even shows mixed data

- Emissions from all sources, including vehicles, appear to have been lower this month compared to April 2015, but levels of harmful fine particulate matter have been about the same or more during the corresponding period last year.
- An analysis of air quality data from eight stations in Delhi by the Union Ministry of Earth Science's SAFAR has found that the level of the dangerous ozone gas has been less this April compared to 2015.
- Ozone does not exist at the surface level on its own; it is formed when volatile hydrocarbons and other gases emitted by combustion sources like vehicles react in the air.
- Ozone becomes a bigger concern in the summer as the hot weather lends itself to its formation.
- The level of ozone from April 1 to 28 this year has been less than the corresponding daily figure for 2015.
- Despite favourable weather conditions, ozone has been less than last year. This is not much to do with the odd-even scheme as the level was less during April 1 to 15 as well.

- Delhi has seen several measures in the past year that could have contributed to the reduction, including the Supreme Court-ordered imposition of 'green tax' on commercial vehicles entering the city.
- According to the Environment Pollution Control Authority, which was tasked with monitoring the implementation of the tax, the number of commercial vehicles entering Delhi has decreased by 50 to 60 per cent.
- Though the ozone levels have been less, the level of PM2.5, which is harmful for health, on April 26, 27 and 28 was more than the same dates last year.

INTERNATIONAL

Sri Lankan Govt. firm on demilitarising the Northern Province

- The recent seizure of a host of arms in Jaffna and Mannar of the Northern Province will not have any adverse bearing on the Sri Lankan government's plan for demilitarising the North, according to Defence Secretary KarunasenaHettiarachchi.
- However, he hastened to add that demilitarisation is "not the right word. What we say is right-sizing and right-deployment" of security forces."
- Three police found at a house in Chavakachcheri a suicide kit, four claymore mines, three parcels of C4 (Composition 4) explosives and ammunition, weighing 12 kg.
- Govt. Said that "isolated instances" did not constitute threat to national security. "The media and the Opposition are highlighting them, but we take them on the merit of the incident."
- Already, members of the Joint Opposition, a coalition of parties and groups owing allegiance to former president MahindaRajapaksa argue that the country's security was in danger.
- Meanwhile, a study on the status of occupation of land by the authorities revealed that about 12,750 acres in the Northern Province are still under the military's control.
- Continued land occupation by the military and police fuels suspicion of plans to use land to effect demographic change and ultimately, impact electoral representation of the area.
- Such fears must be addressed if the GOSL [Government of Sri Lanka] is genuine in its commitment to reconciliation.
- It recommended complete implementation of the 13th constitutional amendment.

VojislavSeselj acquitted of all charges by UN court

- In a sweeping defeat for UN prosecutors, the Yugoslav war crimes tribunal acquitted Serbian ultranationalist VojislavSeseljof all nine counts alleging that he was responsible for or incited atrocities by Serbian paramilitaries in the 1990s Balkan wars.
- Prosecutors had charged Seselj, 61, with crimes including persecution, murder and torture and had demanded a 28-year sentence.
- But in a majority decision, the three-judge panel said there was insufficient evidence linking the politician himself to the crimes.
- At a Belgrade news conference shortly after his acquittal, Seselj, who defended himself throughout his trial and did not call a single defence witness, said the decision was "the only possible one from the legal aspect."

- He said “After so many proceedings in which innocent Serbs were given draconian punishments, this time two honest judges showed they valued honour more than political pressure.”
- The court’s chief prosecutor, questioned a number of key findings by two of the three trial judges. He almost certainly will appeal, but said that he first has to study the 100-page ruling and its dissenting opinions.

The 13th India-EU summit concluded with many agreements

- The 13th India-EU Summit concluded in Brussels without a consensus on a bilateral free trade deal known as the BTIA (Broadbased Trade and Investment Agreement) even as progress was made in bilateral cooperation in other fields -- from foreign policy to outer space.
- The talks were a culmination of efforts to kick-start a relationship that has been flagging for at least four years. The very fact that they occurred made them significant.
- The discussions on trade involved an expression of ambitions and degrees of flexibility from both sides.
- India has been pushing for opening European markets for its services sector and the movement of people to deliver those services while the EU has been keen on reducing or abolishing tariffs in several sectors, including in the automobile and wine and spirits sectors.
- The Brussels meetings evidently did not see the closing of gaps between the two sides.
- There was some promise of action that would be taken in areas such as water, climate and energy, with the adoption of joint declarations on the India-EU Water Partnership and a Clean Energy and Climate Partnership.
- Government-to-government and business-to-business level meetings to exchange best practices in these areas, including deadlines for setting the work programmes in some instances, have been agreed.
- The cost of these programs will be borne by the parties that incur them. India is no longer eligible for development assistance from the EU.
- However, India will still have access to concessional loans from the European Investment Bank (EIB).
- India and the EIB signed the first tranche of a Euro 450-million-loan at the Summit towards the construction of a metro rail line planned in Lucknow.
- The joint declarations and Agenda for Action suggest that the EU has specifically courted Mr. Modi on several of his pet projects including the ‘Clean India’ initiative and the ‘Ganga Rejuvenation Initiative,’ where the EU will help in developing a solution to clean up the river as well as developing legal and governance frameworks for managing the basin.
- The two sides agreed to cooperate in countering violent extremism, disrupt recruitment of terrorists and prevent the free passage of foreign fighters in a joint declaration on counter terrorism, which also called for the early adoption of the Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism in the UN.
- They have also agreed to explore the possibility of India and EUROPOL, the EU’s law enforcement agency, to share intelligence.
- The Agenda also includes the prevention of human trafficking and promoting international protection as priority areas. Points of special interest to India on the agenda are likely to be easier visa procedures for skilled workers, IT professionals, and business travellers.
- Regarding ‘sensitive issues’ that were to be discussed at the summit, both parties have officially expressed their confidence in the legal processes of the Permanent Court of Arbitration, where the case of the Italian marines, Massimiliano Latorre and Salvatore Girone, is currently being heard.
- The EU also expressed a swift solution, “through due process of law” in the case of MV Seaman Guard Ohio, where 14 Estonians and six Britons were arrested in 2013 and sentenced in India.

- One of the ostensible reasons for stalled talks between the European Union (EU) and India had been the EU's concern over human right violations in India.
- A joint statement from India and the EU yesterday reiterates the importance that both countries officially accord human rights and the rights of women.

Eight core industries grew at fastest pace in 15 months

- Output from the eight core infrastructure industries grew at the fastest pace in 15 months, clocking a 5.7 per cent growth in February, driven by a robust growth in cement and fertilisers.
- Analysts said these core sector numbers bode well for overall industrial output to recover from three successive months of contraction, and register a 3 per cent to 4 per cent growth in February.
- The core sectors constitute around 38 per cent of the Index of Industrial Production (IIP).
- The core sector growth number for February is encouraging at 5.7 per cent with a fairly diversified picture across: steel, electricity, refinery products and fertilisers.
- This high growth should hopefully translate into an IIP growth rate of 3-4 per cent for February.
- However, the numbers don't point to a full-scale revival yet as a similar growth levels needs to be sustained in the next few months.
- While production of fertilisers and cement posted a double-digit growth of 16.3 per cent (from fall in output by 0.4 per cent in February 2014) and 13.5 per cent (from 2.2 per cent), respectively, that of electricity rose to a five-month high of 9.2 per cent.
- Among all core sector industries, only steel saw a fall in output in February, by 0.5 per cent, against a decline of 0.6 per cent in February last year. In January, the output of crude oil, natural gas and steel had declined.

Safeguard duty on steel imports extended till Mar 2018

- The government has extended safeguard duty on steel imports till March 2018. The move is aimed at protecting the Indian industry from cheap China steel.
- The 20 per cent safeguard duty will apply to import of "hot-rolled flat products of non-alloy and other alloy steel in coils of a width of 600 mm or more" till September 13, 2016.
- Thereafter, it will drop in a staged manner to 18 per cent between September 14, 2016 and March 13, 2017, 15 per cent from March 14, 2017 to September 13, 2017, and 10 per cent between September 14, 2017 and March 13, 2018.
- China had, in the face of a domestic economic slowdown last year, increased its steel exports, which attracted duties in several markets such as India and the European Union.
- The Director General (Safeguards), had in September 2015, come to the conclusion that "increased imports of subject goods (steel goods) into India had caused and threatened to cause serious injury to the domestic industry."

US and China to sign agreement on climate change

- U.S. President Barack Obama and President Xi Jinping of China said that they would sign the Paris Agreement on climate change on April 22, the first day the UN accord will be open for government signatures.
- It is a statement of joint resolve by the world's two largest greenhouse gas polluters, even though there are doubts about whether the U.S. can meet its obligations under the agreement.

- The U.S. Supreme Court temporarily blocked an Obama administration regulation to curb greenhouse gas pollution from power plants, the centrepiece of Mr. Obama's climate change policy.
- Mr. Xi, said: "As the two biggest economies, China and the U.S. have a responsibility to work together."
- The Paris Agreement, reached in December, is the first global accord to commit nearly every nation to take domestic actions to tackle climate change.
- To promote the accord, Ban Ki-moon, the UN Secretary-General, planned the signing ceremony for April 22, Earth Day, although world leaders will have a year afterward to sign.
- The Paris Agreement will enter into legal force only when enough countries have signed on: together they have to be responsible for causing 55 per cent of the world's greenhouse gas emissions.
- Combined, the U.S. and China account for about 40 per cent of global emissions.
- In the U.S., enactment of Mr. Obama's climate change commitments under the Paris deal will ultimately fall to the next President.
- But that fact also worries some climate diplomats as they watch the 2016 presidential campaign from afar.
- Although the Democratic front-runner, Hillary Clinton, has pledged to enact and strengthen the Paris Agreement, on the Republican side, both Donald Trump and Ted Cruz have questioned or denied the science of human-caused climate change.

Indian Government looking for steps after China blocked sanction against JeM

- China sidestepped a direct response to queries about its alleged role in blocking sanctions at the UN against the Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) chief, Masood Azhar, who is accused by India of plotting the January attack on the Pathankot air force base.
- Earlier, media reports had said China requested the UN Committee, which was considering a ban on Azhar, to hold the decision of listing the JEM chief under the al-Qaeda Sanctions Committee, hours before the inclusion deadline expired.
- China had apparently taken the decision in "consultation" with Pakistan.
- The 1267 Committee, also known as the al-Qaeda Sanctions Committee, is one of three Security Council committees dealing with counter-terrorism.
- Meanwhile, in New Delhi, Union Minister of State for Home Affairs Kiren Rijiju warned that the government would take appropriate action in view of China's move.
- "What China has done [in the UN] was not good. The Ministry of External Affairs will take an appropriate action. Whatever action is required, we will take it," he said.
- India has accused Masood Azhar and his brother Abdul Asghar Rauf of being directly linked to the attack, planned at the JeM's Bahawalpur headquarters. It has sought the voice samples of the brothers from Pakistan.

A day before PM Modi's visit Saudi Arabia and US announce joint action against terrorists

- A day ahead of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's arrival in Saudi Arabia for his first visit, the Gulf kingdom and the U.S announced joint action against two groups and four individuals for promoting terrorism.

- These groups and individuals are suspected of supporting the al-Qaeda and the Taliban in their operations in Pakistan and Afghanistan and the Lashar-e-Taiba that targets India have been put under sanctions.
- Entities and individuals in the U.S and Saudi Arabia are barred from dealing with them.
- Abdul Aziz Nuristani and the Jamia Asariya Madrassa that he runs in Peshawar, Pakistan; Naveed Qamar, an LeT operative and Muhammad IjazSafarash, also an LeT operative who has been active in fund-raising in Saudi Arabia are the others sanctioned.

New Ebola death recorded in Liberia

- A woman has died of Ebola in Liberia, months after the West African nation was declared free of the virus and weeks after neighbouring Guinea also recorded a new flare-up.
- More than 11,300 people have died over the past two years in the world's worst Ebola epidemic, nearly all of them in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone.
- Liberia was declared free of active Ebola transmission in January, having passed 42 days, twice the length of the virus's incubation period without a new case.
- While the World Health Organisation said this week that West Africa's Ebola outbreak no longer constitutes an international public health risk, the region has continued to see small flare-ups even after countries received the all-clear.
- Guinea announced new cases on March 17 just hours after Sierra Leone declared an end of active transmission, a fact that briefly meant that West Africa was officially free of Ebola.
- Liberia subsequently closed its border with Guinea its northern neighbour, fearing the potential spread of the outbreak.

IS losing ground in Syria

- IS has in recent months claimed responsibility for deadly attacks in Brussels and Paris, but has lost ground in Syria and Iraq.
- Days after Syrian troops backed by Russian forces recaptured Palmyra and its ancient ruins, the army "uncovered a mass grave of officers, soldiers, members of the popular committee".
- In a major symbolic and strategic coup for President Bashar Al-Assad, the Syrian Army on last Sunday recaptured Palmyra and its UNESCO World Heritage Site, which IS had overrun in May 2015.
- During their nearly 10-month occupation of Palmyra, the jihadists executed at least 280 people, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based monitor which confirmed the discovery of the mass grave.
- Soon after IS stormed Palmyra, it shot dead 25 soldiers in the ancient Roman theatre. It later released a video of the mass killing in which the executioners appeared to be children or teenagers.
- Syria's five-year war has left at least 270,000 people dead. Few mass graves have been found, however.
- About 70 km to the west, Syrian troops on Saturday pounded the city of IS-held Sukhna, which the Army wants to take back in order to consolidate its grip over Palmyra.
- It was one of the single highest tolls that IS has suffered in a single strike since it emerged in Syria in 2013, the monitor said.

US military allowed Sikhs to maintain articles of faith

- In a landmark decision, the U.S. military has granted a decorated Sikh-American officer a long-term religious accommodation, allowing him to continue serving while maintaining his articles of faith of keeping a beard and wearing a turban.
- The move makes Captain Simratpal Singh (28) the first active duty Sikh soldier to receive approval to maintain his articles of faith while actively serving in the U.S. Army.
- He had sued the Defence Department last month in a first of its kind lawsuit, saying he was being subjected to “discriminatory” testing because of his turban and beard.
- The Army granted the permanent accommodation, saying in a court document that it would only be revoked if the beard and turban affected “unit cohesion and morale, good order and discipline, health and safety”.

Brussels airport reopens

- Brussels Airport reopened on Sunday with three “symbolic” flights and strict additional checks for passengers, marking a new high-security era for air travel in Belgium after attacks by Islamic State suicide bombers.
- The key travel hub has been closed since two men blew themselves up in the departure hall on March 22 in coordinated blasts that also struck a metro station, killing a total of 32 people.
- There was also a strong security presence inside the tents, where travellers, who have been asked to arrive three hours before their flight, walked through metal detectors and had their bags screened.

Suspected traces of MH370 found two years after aircraft vanished

- A piece of debris found on the Indian Ocean island of Mauritius will be examined by investigators to see if it came from missing Malaysia Airlines Flight 370.
- The discovery comes less than two weeks after officials confirmed that two pieces of debris found along the coast of Mozambique were almost certainly from the aircraft that vanished on March 8, 2014, with 239 people on board.
- Australia is leading the search for the airliner in a desolate stretch of the Indian Ocean far off the country’s west coast, about 6,000 km east of Mozambique and around 4,000 km east of Mauritius.
- Authorities had predicted that any debris from the plane that isn’t on the ocean floor would eventually be carried by currents to the east coast of Africa.
- Last year, a wing flap from the plane washed ashore on the island of Reunion, not far from Mauritius.

China looking for big market to become energy exporter

- In tune with its One Belt, One Road initiative, China is positioning itself as a formidable energy exporter, targeting markets that span from Germany to India along the New Silk Road.
- Two factors are driving Beijing’s ambitions of emerging as a regional electric supply hub. First, China is already a surplus power producer following a decade of continuous investments at home in all forms of energy.
- Since 2004, when it suffered chronic outages that threatened to restrain its manufacturing, the Chinese went into overdrive, investing heavily in hydro and coal-fired plants, apart from escalating development of nuclear and renewable energy.
- Second, China has mastered ultra-high voltage (UHV) technology, which has allowed State Grid, China’s state-owned power behemoth, to transmit electricity from production centres in West — in places such as Xinjiang — to coastal industrial centres in the faraway east.

- China has the technical capacity to increase the voltage to 1500 kilovolts, so that it can transport power 8,000 km away. And it is financially viable to expand.
- Now, with Xinjiang in western China as the hub, China has the proven technological heft to transmit electricity as far as Germany.
- While focusing on the One Belt One Road for now, Mr. Liu has even more ambitious plans.
- The idea is to connect these and other power grids to a global grid that will draw electricity from windmills at the North Pole and vast solar arrays in Africa's deserts, and then distribute the power to all parts of the world.

Chahabar free trade summit to be organised by Iran

- Pakistan is likely to be kept out from the Chabahar free trade summit Iran is organising in May, the Director General of Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) said.
- 27 countries have been invited to participate in the summit in Chahbahar. Some non-littoral Indian Ocean states have also been invited. But Pakistan is not on the list.
- It is learnt that Pakistan was not invited even for an informal representation. Though the summit was being supported by a coordinating cell of the IORA in Tehran, the bulk of the work was being done by the Iranians.
- India scaled up its investment in Chabahar following Transport Minister Nitin Gadkari's visit to Iran last year.
- Iran wants to present Chabahar as a new door to the newly revived Iranian economy. Pakistan has an alternative in the Gwadar port but Chabahar has a broader appeal unlike Gwadar which is dedicated to Chinese energy needs.

PM of Iceland resigns due to panama papers

- Iceland's Prime Minister resigned, becoming the first political victim of a mushrooming worldwide scandal over hidden offshore financial dealings exposed in the so-called Panama Papers.
- Prime Minister Sigmundur David Gunnlaugsson was the biggest casualty of a worldwide media probe into 11.5 million leaked documents that purportedly reveal the offshore financial activities of 140 political figures, including 12 current or former heads of state.
- Though the Prime Minister denied ever hiding money abroad, pressure on his government had mounted, with egg-throwing protesters gathering in the streets Monday and fresh demonstrations planned.
- President Olafur Ragnar Grimsson, who cut short a U.S. visit to return to Reykjavik earlier to deal with the crisis, told a televised press conference he wanted to consult the government's junior coalition member.

Amnesty International Death Penalty Report shows increase in death penalty

- At least 1,634 people were executed by 25 countries last year alone, according to Amnesty International (AI).
- Its Death Penalty Report 2015-16, to be released, says the number shows an alarming 54 per cent increase over the previous year.

- Significantly, the rise also represents the maximum number the group has recorded in a single year since 1989.
- Most executions take place in China, where such data remains a state secret. Barring information from Beijing, the Asia-Pacific region saw 367 people subjected to the death penalty — more than a ten-fold rise from 2014.
- Pakistan alone accounted for 326 of them (the highest recorded by AI).
- West Asia and North Africa saw a 26 per cent rise in executions, even if there was no addition to the eight countries that resorted to the punishment in 2014. While Iran accounted for 82 per cent of executions in the region, for Saudi Arabia, the total rose by 76 per cent over 2014.
- But the 158 executions were the highest since 1995. For the seventh year running, the U.S. remained the lone country in the Americas to have executed convicts. But the numbers were the lowest since 1991.
- Four more countries abolished the death penalty for all crimes in 2015, taking the tally of abolitionist states to 102.

Islamic State threatened to carry out terror attacks in London, Berlin and Rome

- Islamic State (IS) threatened to carry out terror attacks in London, Berlin and Rome — as deadly as the Paris massacre — in a chilling video which shows images of the U.K. Parliament and Eiffel Tower crashing to the ground.
- The video shows footage of the Paris and Brussels attacks as well as of the 9/11 strikes, calling the previous massacres a “cautionary message”.
- It also shows other iconic European landmarks such as the Rome’s Coliseum interplayed with footage of executions and beheadings from Syria and Iraq.
- The threat has come a week after British Prime Minister David Cameron warned that IS was willing to use “whatever materials they can get their hands on” to attack the West.
- IS Syrian Army troops with mustard gas in an offensive against a Syrian military airport in the eastern province of Deir al-Zor that borders Iraq, state media said.
- Syrian state media did not disclose how many casualties were sustained in the latest drive by the militants to capture the heavily defended airport.
- Deir al-Zor is a strategic location. The Province links Islamic State (IS)’s de facto capital in Raqqa with its fighters in Iraq.

Panama Govt says it is unfair to single out Panama

- Panama mounted a fierce defence of its crucial financial services sector, trying to head off a feared international clampdown on its offshore business in the wake of the “Panama Papers” leak.
- Diplomats accredited to the small Central American nation were called to the foreign ministry to hear officials argue that it was unfair to single out Panama in the scandal.
- The government has also written a harshly worded letter to the head of the OECD, attacking a statement he made describing Panama as “the last major holdout that continues to allow funds to be hidden offshore from tax and law enforcement authorities”.
- Earlier, law firm Mossack Fonseca, at the centre of the scandal after its papers were obtained from an anonymous source by various media organisations, said it had lodged a criminal complaint against the leaks.

India took the issue of J-e-M chief with China

- India has conveyed its disappointment to China after its move to add Maulana Masood Azhar, head of Pakistan-based militant group Jaish-e-Mohammed, to an international blacklist of terrorists faced Chinese opposition at the UN.
- “We have taken up the issue with the Chinese at a fairly high level and we will continue to pursue this with them. We will have to wait and see where this goes,” Mr. Jaishankar said.
- India accuses J-e-M of masterminding the January attack on the Pathankot air base, and had requested that Azhar be added to the U.N. Security Council blacklist of groups linked to al-Qaeda or Islamic State, but China objected it.
- Mr. Jaishankar, however, added that the issue will remain limited between India and China at the UN and will not “overflow into other areas”.
- Chinese Ambassador Le Yucheng said that Beijing had not dismissed India’s move to bring a ban on Azhar. “We felt that the information provided by India to the UN was inadequate, that is why we placed a ‘technical hold’—a temporary measure,” Mr. Le said.

US Presidential nomination still far from settled

- Democrat Bernie Sanders and Republican Ted Cruz won the presidential primaries in Wisconsin, toppling national front runners Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump.
- Both winners are still a long way away from winning the nominations, but the Wisconsin outcomes could mean that the nomination contests in neither party will be settled before conventions in July.
- “We have won seven out of the last eight contests”, said Mr. Sanders. “We have a path toward victory, a path to the White House”.
- Mr. Sanders is expanding his base with targeted ads appealing to the black and other minority populations that have been Ms. Clinton’s voter bases.
- But all this is may not be sufficient to win the nomination. After Wisconsin, Ms. Clinton has 1,743 and Mr. Sanders 1,027 delegates.
- The overwhelming delegate lead that she maintains is due to a special category called super-delegates — who are not elected through primaries but are party functionaries who are eligible to vote in the national convention.
- Of the total 712 super delegates, 469 have pledged support to Ms. Clinton.
- On the Republican side, Mr. Trump faced the most decisive setback in his presidential campaign as the entire party establishment coalesces behind Mr. Cruz, who was also considered an outcast not so long ago.
- Mr. Cruz now has 517 delegates against the 1,237 required to win the nomination and Mr. Trump has 743. Mr. Trump has to win 55 per cent of the delegates in the remaining contests; Mr. Cruz will have to win 88 per cent, in order to win the nomination.
- Those agitated over Mr. Trump’s campaign vitriol might now need to catch up on Mr. Cruz’s positions — over the last fortnight, he has called for measures like special police vigilance in Muslim neighbourhoods, reiterated his blanket opposition to abortions; and has promised to build a wall along the border with Mexico.

India is sixth largest military spender in 2015

- India is the sixth largest military spender in 2015 having spent \$51.3 billion even as the world spent \$1,676 billion reversing a global trend which was on the decline since 2011., as per the latest report from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI).
- India moved one rank up from last year accounting for 3.1 percent of global military expenditure.
- Over a ten-year period from 2006-15 this represents a 43 per cent jump. India is also ahead of countries like France, Germany and Israel who happen to be among its top arms suppliers.
- World military expenditure rose by 1 per cent in 2015, the report noted said it reflects continuing growth in Asia and Oceania, Central and Eastern Europe, and some Middle Eastern states.
- On the one hand, spending trends reflect the escalating conflict and tension in many parts of the world; on the other hand, they show a clear break from the oil-fuelled surge in military spending of the past decade.
- The U.S. remained by far the world's largest spender in 2015 despite its defence expenditure falling by 2.4 per cent to \$596 billion followed by China, Saudi Arabia, Russia and U.K.
- China's expenditure rose by 7.4 per cent to \$215 billion.

India trying to avoid embarrassing episode of five years ago on immigration

- The U.S. federal agencies that caught 10 Indians in a sting operation for allegedly defrauding the country's immigration system are yet to move against the recipients of fraudulently obtained visas and other documents.
- Meanwhile, Indian diplomats are trying to avoid the repeat of an embarrassing spectacle five years ago when Indian students trapped in the Tri Valley University scam were radio tagged to monitor their movement.
- Indian diplomatic sources said they have not received any response yet from the State Department or the Department of Homeland Security to India's request that the 'students' who have been involved in the sting operation should not be arrested or deported.
- The 10 Indians among the 21 arrested by the U.S. agencies so far were middlemen who facilitated the transactions between visa seekers and the fake 'University of Northern New Jersey' set up by undercover agents of the Department of Homeland Security.
- Fresh documents released by the U.S. Attorney's Office for the District of New Jersey illustrate an elaborate racket to game the U.S. immigration system.
- The visa seekers were already in the U.S. on student visas that were about to expire. The deal that the two sought involved two types of visas.
- First, student visas that would allow the recipients Curriculum Practical Training or CPT, under the guise of which Promatrix would employ them. Second, H-1B visas through fake diplomas and transcripts provided by the fake university.
- India's contention is that if a fake U.S. university issues documents to a prospective student and the immigration department then issues him a visa, it reflects the loopholes in the U.S. system more than the criminality of the visa seeker.
- In this instance, the 'university' itself is fake, but in many cases, there are legally functioning universities that enable such operation.
- The counter to that argument is that in this case 'students' get into the university with the explicit understanding that they would not be attending classes.
- Incidentally, the annual growth of Indian students in the U.S. in 2014 was the highest in recorded history, rising by 29.4 per cent compared with the previous year.

- There were 132,888 Indians studying in U.S. schools in 2014, compared to 102,673 in 2013. China has the largest student contingent in the U.S. – 304,040 in 2014, which was an increase of 10.8 per cent from the previous year.

Panama papers continue to jitter international political arena

- Iceland's new rightwing government was to take office, under fire from the start as the Opposition sought a vote of no-confidence and maintained calls for a quick election to be held.
- The new Prime Minister Sigurdur Ingi Johannsson was chosen on Wednesday by his centre-right Progressive Party. He would replace Sigmundur David Gunnlaugsson, who resigned amid mass protests over a hidden offshore account revealed in the so-called Panama Papers leak.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin denied any "element of corruption" after a massive leak of confidential papers linked a close friend to a hidden \$2 billion offshore empire, and he blamed the United States for orchestrating the scandal.

Srilanka and China looking for rapid infrastructure development

- Looking beyond the current difficulties in reviving a stalled multi-billion dollar project, Sri Lanka and China are now defining a new blueprint, based on rapid infrastructure development, to rail their growing ties for the future.
- Mr. Wickremesinghe called on Chinese President Xi Jinping. Following talks with Prime Minister Li, both countries affirmed that the \$1.4 billion Colombo Port City project had their support, but "technical details" needed to be ironed out before construction could resume.
- On the Colombo port, both sides agreed to further speed up the overall and comprehensive resumption of work on this project.
- The announcement to resume the work has been made by the Sri Lankan side, but now we will go into further technical details.
- Chinese officials also made it plain that they were now engaged in a dialogue with the Sri Lankans to carve out a new plan that will steer Beijing-Colombo ties.
- The opportunity to advance the relationship has arisen following the end of Sri Lanka's civil war and China's adoption of its 13th five-year plan along with its Going Abroad strategy.
- In tune with Colombo's aspirations, the two Prime Ministers agreed to prioritise the construction of an industrial park at Sri Lanka's Hambantota port.
- The focus on infrastructure has resulted in the signing of a preferential buyer credit loan agreement for the construction of an extension of section two of the Southern Highway.
- The Southern Highway is a 126km-long expressway that runs from Colombo to Matara on the southern coast of the island.
- Both sides have also agreed to advance their FTA negotiations, with the year-end as the target to achieve tangible results.
- Chinese officials said Sri Lanka is "very willing" to participate in China's Belt and Road initiative so as to re-establish Sri Lanka's position as the trade hub in the Indian Ocean.

Pope says Catholic Church to revamp response to modern family life

- Pope Francis has called for the Catholic Church to revamp its response to modern family life, striking a delicate balance between a more accepting tone towards gay people and the defence of traditional church teachings on issues such as abortion.
- In a landmark papal document entitled *Amoris Laetitia* (Joy of Love), the Pope outlined his vision for the church on family issues, urging priests to respond to their communities without mercilessly enforcing church rules.
- The apostolic exhortation concludes a two-year consultation which saw bishops twice gather in Rome to debate issues affecting the world's 1.2 billion Catholics.
- In comments likely to be welcomed by some LGBT organisations, Pope Francis urged the church to "reaffirm that every person, regardless of sexual orientation, ought to be respected in his or her dignity and treated with consideration, while 'every sign of unjust discrimination' is to be carefully avoided, particularly any form of aggression and violence."
- But the Pope stopped short of pushing for a change in church doctrine.
- Following lengthy debate about the role of remarried divorcees in the church, who are not allowed to take holy communion, Pope Francis did not call for the rules to be changed but said such parishioners must be made to feel part of the church.

Maldives President to visit India next week

- Maldives President Abdulla Yameen will meet with Narendra Modi next week, the pair's first tête-à-tête since Mr. Modi controversially cancelled a visit to the island nation last year.
- Mr. Yameen, who will be accompanied by a high-level delegation, arrives in New Delhi for the two-day visit and will have a meeting and lunch with the Prime Minister.
- Ties between traditional allies India and the Maldives took a hit last year due to a bitter internal power struggle in the Maldives, which led to the jailing of former president Mohamed Nasheed.
- The political turmoil prompted Mr. Modi to cancel a planned visit to the Maldives in March 2015 at the last minute.
- But a trip by External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj in October appears to have calmed tensions.

Colombo port city project will develop into a financial hub

- The Colombo Port City project, which both China and Sri Lanka have decided to develop into a financial hub, will not have any impact on Indian security, visiting Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe said.
- "We have discussed it with India and we are willing to discuss it with India further. As you know, this is not going to be a China-Sri Lanka venture. It is going to open to everyone and already many Indian businessmen have told me that they are willing to come to the port city," Mr. Wickremesinghe said.
- Sri Lanka has been planning to establish a financial and business hub in the Indian Ocean and we selected the port city to be the location. So from a landfill and real estate [project], it has become a financial hub.
- The Port City would become part of efforts to turn Sri Lanka's western province into a mega-polis of eight million people.
- The Prime Minister highlighted that his government wanted to turn the port of Hambantota into another Shenzhen—the city that was at the heart of former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping's reforms.
- He rejected the contention that like Gwadar in Pakistan, the Chinese will manage the operations of the port.

- Sri Lankans were talking to Andhra Pradesh about greater cooperation between Sri Lankan ports and Visakhapatnam once an economic and technology agreement with India is materialised.
- Mr. Wickremesinghe said during his visit “a comprehensive economic strategy” between Sri Lanka and China had been defined, which would be relevant for the next two decades.
- The Prime Minister pointed out that with China as one of the core partners, his country had devised a regionally inclusive “economic plan”, which would establish Sri Lanka as a “financial, business and logistics hub”.

US wants Taliban to engage with Afghanistan

- U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry called on the Taliban to re-enter peace talks with Kabul during an unannounced visit on Saturday to show his support for Afghanistan’s unity government, which he helped create 18 months ago.
- His visit comes as Kabul desperately tries to bring the insurgent group back to the negotiation table to end their conflict which began in 2001.
- “We discussed our shared goal of launching peace talks with the Taliban,” he told reporters at a joint press conference with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani in Kabul.

Frustrated with Pak, US wants larger role for India

- The U.S. is now more open to a larger role for India in Afghanistan, partly due to its frustration over Pakistan’s failure or unwillingness to deliver on the promises it has been making with regard to the peace process.
- U.S. Defence Secretary Ash Carter’s visit to India emphasises the partnership between the countries, U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Olson, indicates fresh U.S. thinking on India’s role in Afghanistan.
- However, the caveat is that India can never replace Pakistan in U.S.’s Afghanistan calculus, and the signalling may well be more to Pakistan than to India.
- Mr. Olson and Peter Lavoy, Senior Director for South Asian Affairs at the National Security Council, met with senior Indian officials, including India’s National Security Advisor (NSA) Ajit Doval. They then joined Secretary of State John Kerry in Kabul on an unannounced visit.
- While the U.S. has never opposed or actively discouraged India from playing a significant role in Afghanistan, it has been very sensitive to Pakistan’s objections, particularly on security-related issues.
- The U.S. has welcomed India’s efforts in reconstruction, development and institution-building in Afghanistan that take place under the U.S security umbrella, but maintained ambiguity on its security role.
- At the same time, at Pakistan’s insistence, it has kept India out of the Afghanistan peace negotiations, which are now a four-nation initiative of the U.S., China, Pakistan and Afghanistan.
- The U.S. is grappling with the increasing complexity of the situation in Afghanistan, even as it is planning to pull its troops out of the country by next year.
- Meanwhile, India under Prime Minister Narendra Modi appears less constrained by Pakistan’s views and more willing to enhance cooperation with Afghanistan on security issues.
- India and Afghanistan had signed the Strategic Partnership Agreement in 2011, but security cooperation slowed as both sides sought not to antagonise Pakistan.
- However, Mr. Modi’s recent visit to Afghanistan and India’s transferring of three Mi-25 attack helicopters to the Afghan Air Force (AAF) recently indicate fresh thinking on the Indian side.

- Pakistan has so far not been able to get Taliban to the process, even as new challenges emerge. Last year demonstrated the vulnerability of the Afghanistan security forces.
- They briefly lost the city of Kunduz to Taliban. Casualties rose to an all-time high of more than 11,000.
- Meanwhile, Mullah Mansoor, who has succeeded Mullah Omar as Taliban chief, is struggling to consolidate power within the group, even as some Taliban factions are transmuting into those of the Islamic State (IS).
- Given this uncertainty, Mr. Kerry's mission in Afghanistan was to demonstrate U.S.'s support for the unity government.
- Dismissing the notion that the current arrangement will be replaced by a new one, Mr. Kerry said the Ashraf Ghani-led government would continue for five years.

A 6.6-magnitude quake struck Afghanistan

- A powerful earthquake rocked large parts of South Asia, with one person killed by falling rocks and tremors felt in at least four countries.
- The 6.6-magnitude quake struck northeast Afghanistan at a depth of 210 km at 2:58 pm (1028 GMT), the U.S. Geological Survey said.
- It was felt for a few seconds in the Afghan capital Kabul, 282 km to the south, and in Pakistan's capital Islamabad, where some residents evacuated apartment blocks after tremors shook ceiling fans and furniture.
- In Dushanbe, capital of Tajikistan which borders northern Afghanistan, tremors were felt but there were no immediate reports of damage. One man was killed in Gilgit-Baltistan when he was hit by falling rocks in the town of Chilas.
- Authorities in Pakistan's northwestern city of Peshawar said 28 people were brought to the government-run Lady Reading Hospital.

US President admits lack of planning after fall of Qadhafi was a big mistake

- Barack Obama says the biggest mistake of his presidency was the lack of planning for the aftermath of the fall of late Libyan leader Muammar Qadhafi, with the country spiralling into chaos and grappling with violent extremists.
- Reflecting on his legacy in an interview aired, Mr. Obama said his "worst mistake" was "probably failing to plan for the day after what I think was the right thing to do in intervening in Libya".
- Since the downfall of Qadhafi, who was killed in a popular uprising, Libya descended into near-anarchy, ruled by rival militias vying for power.
- Mr. Obama also reflected on some of the best moments of his tenure as President — due to end in January — in the interview.
- "Saving the economy from a great depression" was his biggest accomplishment, he said. As for the best day in the White House? "The day that we passed health care reform," Mr. Obama said.

Researchers came up with evidence to prove that Zika virus causes brain defect

- Researchers have now produced evidence of how Zika virus causes brain defect in babies. Several cases of microcephaly, a rare birth defect in which the brain fails to grow properly, continue to be reported in Brazil following the outbreak of Zika virus, first detected in the country in May 2015.
- To study how the virus causes birth defects in babies, the researchers used human induced pluripotent stem (iPS) cells to make neural stem cells (NSC), neurospheres and brain organoids.
- How quickly the neural stem cells get infected with Zika virus became clear when the researchers detected it just 24 hours after they were exposed.
- The researchers used the virus-infected neural cells and cultured them as neurospheres (a culture system composed of free-floating clusters of neural stem cells).
- While those cells not infected with the virus generated normal neurospheres, the virus-infected neural cells generated neurospheres with abnormalities. At the end of six days, the virus killed most of the neurospheres.
- To further investigate the impact during neurogenesis, organoids were exposed to the virus and followed for 11 days.
- To check if dengue virus, a flavivirus with similarities to Zika, caused similar effect on neurogenesis, the researchers infected human neural stem cells with dengue virus 2 (DENV2).
- After six days, significant difference in cell viability was seen between dengue-infected cells and Zika-infected neural stem cells.
- The dengue-infected cells were similar to the normal cells and there was no reduction in growth of dengue-infected organoids at the end of 11 days.
- However, further studies are needed to characterise the consequences of Zika infection during different stages of foetal development.

Brazil's first woman President facing impeachment

- Brazil's President Dilma Rousseff entered the straight Tuesday of a desperate battle to save her presidency ahead of an impeachment vote in Congress this weekend.
- In a ruthless and complex contest, supporters and opponents of Brazil's first woman President raced to amass the votes that will either send her to trial in the Senate or torpedo the procedure.
- The speaker of the lower house of Congress, Eduardo Cunha, was expected to present the formal impeachment document to the chamber.
- Deputies were then due to start debating on Friday with a vote pencilled in for Sunday.
- In the committee, a simple majority was enough to push the case along, but the full house requires a two-thirds majority, or 342 deputies, to send Ms. Rousseff's case to the Senate.
- Anything less and Ms. Rousseff — accused of fiddling accounts to mask the dire state of the government budget during her 2014 re-election — will walk out with her job.
- The latest survey of the 513 deputies in the lower house by Estadão daily on Monday showed 299 favouring impeachment and 123 opposed.
- Ms. Rousseff and allies, led by ex-president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, have fought back hard in the last few days, describing the impeachment drive as a coup plot in disguise.

Canada will offer apology for Komagata maru

- Almost 102 years after Canada turned away more than 376 migrants, mostly Sikhs from India, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau will formally apologise on May 18 for the incident that happened due to “discriminatory laws of the time”.

- Speaking at the Baisakhi celebration in Ottawa on Monday, Mr. Trudeau said that the Komagata Maru's passengers were seeking refuge and better lives, "like millions of immigrants to Canada since".
- "With so much to contribute to their new home, they chose Canada. And we failed them utterly," the Prime Minister said
- In May 1914, Komagata Maru, a Japanese steamship that was carrying 376 immigrants, mostly Sikhs, from India, was denied entry by the Canadian government and forced to return.
- Two months later, it arrived in Calcutta where British soldiers fired upon the disembarking passengers, leading to 19 deaths.

European Union plans for world's biggest multinationals to faithfully report earnings

- The EU unveiled plans to force the world's biggest multinationals to faithfully report earnings and pay their fair share of taxes, saying the Panama Papers scandal added to the need for change.
- The European Commission, the EU's executive arm, said under the new rules big companies operating in Europe would have to make public what they earn in each member state of the 28-nation bloc.
- Country-by-country reporting has for years been a major demand of tax activists who accuse big corporations of secretly shifting profits from major markets to low tax jurisdictions, often through the use of shell companies such as those exposed in the Panama Papers leaks.
- "The Panama Papers have not changed our agenda but strengthen our determination to make sure taxes are paid where profits are generated," EU Financial Services Commissioner Jonathan Hill said.
- Longstanding criticism of corporate tax policy blew up into the open with the Lux Leaks scandal in 2014, which exposed secret sweetheart tax deals given to huge corporations -- including the likes of IKEA and Pepsi — by the small duchy of Luxembourg.

United States escalates its presence in South China Sea

- The U.S. has launched joint South China Sea naval patrols with the Philippines, escalating its presence as it accused Beijing of "militarising" a region which is locked in territorial disputes.
- In a show of strength, U.S. Defence Secretary Ashton Carter also announced that 275 troops and five A-10 ground attack aircraft currently in the country for annual war games will remain there temporarily.
- China warned deployments must not damage "regional stability", but Mr. Carter said Washington's efforts to strengthen its military role in the region were not done "in order to provoke".
- He said the U.S. was responding to regional anxiety over China's muscular actions in the South China Sea, including building artificial islands over disputed reefs.
- The joint naval patrols, which began last month, "contribute to the safety and security of the region's waters," he said after meeting with Philippines President Benigno Aquino.
- Manila has been improving its defence ties with the United States to help boost its ability to defend its territory.
- Mr. Carter announced that 275 American troops, among about 5,000 military personnel taking part in the annual Balikatan war games, are to stay behind after the exercises end on Friday.
- Five A-10C Thunderbolt ground attack planes and four other aircraft will also remain until the end of the month.

- Some 200 of the U.S. personnel are to train Filipino soldiers, as well as “conduct flight operations in the area, including in the South China Sea”, Mr. Carter said

Cambodia contemplating programme to restore tiger population

- Cambodia is contemplating a \$50 million (Rs. 32.5 crore) programme to improve enforcement and restore tiger populations after the big cat was declared ‘functionally extinct’ there by the WWF.
- MD Madhusudan, a wildlife expert at the Nature Conservation Foundation said the idea of sending Indian tigers to the South-east Asian country wasn’t outrageous.
- “We have made gains too, but we would be interested in technical cooperation and partnerships to better understand India’s success,” said Lyonpo Yeshey Dorji, Minister for Agriculture and Forests, Bhutan.
- India has improved its tiger count from an estimated 1706 in 2010 to 2226 in 2014.
- Officials from 13 tiger-range countries converged here for discussions on tiger conservation.
- Union Environment Minister Prakash Javadekar said India was committed to the principles of ‘restoration, reintroduction and rehabilitation’ that formed part of a resolution by the assembled countries to double the world’s tiger numbers by 2020 from the current 3,890.
- Translocation of tigers is a sensitive subject where even transfers among Indian States spark a controversy.
- However, translocations have been used to repopulate reserves in Panna, Madhya Pradesh and Sariska, Rajasthan.

European Parliament approves that airlines need to share passenger information

- The European Parliament voted to force airlines to share passenger information with EU countries to help detect jihadists, ending five years of debate that intensified after the Paris and Brussels attacks.
- The Parliament in the French city of Strasbourg overwhelmingly adopted the Passenger Name Record (PNR) system after resolving privacy concerns raised after the European Commission, the executive of the 28-nation EU, first proposed the law in 2011.
- The legislation, which also aims to boost the fight against organised crime, passed with 416 votes for, 179 votes against and nine abstentions.

Canadian PM seeks to legalise assisted suicide

- The government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau introduced legislation on Thursday that will legalise physician-assisted death for Canadians with serious medical conditions.
- The Supreme Court of Canada overturned a criminal ban against assisted suicide in February 2015 and had given the previous government led by Stephen Harper one year to introduce a new law.
- But his Conservative Party strongly opposed assisted death and did little to deal with the looming legal void. After Mr. Trudeau and his Liberal Party came into power in the fall, the Supreme Court extended its deadline until June.
- Although criminal law is a federal matter in Canada, when it became apparent that the Conservative government was not acting on the court’s ruling, Quebec used its powers over health care to introduce a provincial assisted-dying system late last year.

- Since the Supreme Court ruling, judges in other parts of Canada have also given individual patients permission for assisted deaths.
- It is likely that the new legislation will pass, given the Liberal Party's strong majority. However, a few Liberal Members of Parliament have said that it conflicts with their religious beliefs.

China still analysing India-US logistic support agreement

- China has taken in its stride India's decision to sign a logistics support agreement with the U.S., saying New Delhi "will make up its diplomatic policies based on its own interests".
- In New Delhi, Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar announced that the two countries had agreed "in principle" to conclude a Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement in the coming months, which would allow the two militaries to use each other's assets for repair and replenishment.
- Earlier, China criticised Mr. Carter's decision to drop Beijing from the itinerary of his Asia visit, which took him to India and the Philippines.
- In a written statement to China Daily, the Chinese Defence Ministry noted that Mr. Carter's visit to China "has been listed in the plan for this year's China-U.S. military exchanges."
- The defence authorities of the two countries have maintained normal communication and coordination over the concrete time of the visit".
- The website attributed comments to The Wall Street Journal, which said that Mr. Carter had dropped his plan to visit Beijing this month during his trip to India and the Philippines amid tensions between Beijing and Washington over the South China Sea issue.

India expressed concern over the hike in visa fee

- India has expressed concern over the hike in visa fee by the U.S., saying it is "discriminatory" and largely affects Indian information technology professionals.
- During a bilateral meeting with U.S. Trade Representative Ambassador Michael Froman, Finance Minister Arun Jaitley also underlined the need for early conclusion of Totalisation Agreement which would benefit Indians working in America.
- Referring to the visa issue, Mr. Jaitley spoke about "India's concern over the hike in the H-1B and L1 visa fee, which is discriminatory and in effect is largely targeted at Indian information technology companies".
- Last year, the U.S. Congress imposed a special fee of up to \$4,500 on H-1B and L-1 visas — popular among Indian IT companies — to fund a 9/11 healthcare Act and biometric tracking system.
- While agreeing on the \$1.1 trillion spending Bill, Congressional leaders decided to impose a special fee of \$4,000 on certain categories of H-1B visas and \$4,500 on L-1 visas.

Finance minister says India is undergoing reform which is parallel to 1991

- India is undergoing a phase next only to 1991 in terms of unleashing its productive forces, with resistance to reforms from sectorial interests and political parties on the wane, Finance Minister Arun Jaitley said.
- There was a broad consensus on the desirable course for the country, Mr. Jaitley said while addressing delegates at the think tank Carnegie Endowment for International Peace on India's growth prospects.

- The Finance Minister is in the U.S capital to attend a series of meetings at the World Bank, IMF and with U.S officials.
- The Minister said the 7.5 per cent annual growth looked impressive relative to the current global standards, but considering the requirements of India, it was “not good enough.”
- The government had turned around the economic and governance outlook of India through a three-pronged approach — “being decisive, consistent and transparent.”
- “Many people ask where is the big bang idea of this government. But taking it all in totality, this government has undertaken the most critical and significant reforms after 1991,” he said.
- Mr. Jaitley said the government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi had tackled corruption, eased procedures and empowered the states to take decisions.
- Admitting that the easing of procedures is still a work in progress, Mr. Jaitley said what couldn’t be denied is the fact that “it is clear what the direction is.”
- India has wisely used the gains made in declining oil prices by not transferring all of it to the consumers, the minister said.
- The government kept significant part of the revenue gained and diverted it to social sector and infrastructure.
- Agriculture was a priority for the Modi government and public spending in the sector would continue.
- “We will have to see whether growth is reducing and eliminating poverty. Does it create jobs? Is it helping Indian villages? How much of the new resources is going to the vulnerable sections of the population?”
- No reform has been abandoned because of politics. Yes, it may take time but it will happen. GST is hanging now, but it won’t hang for too long.

More civilians fled Syria due to fighting

- At least 30,000 civilians have fled fighting between jihadists and rebels in northern Syria in the past 48 hours, Human Rights Watch said, calling on Turkey to open its border to them.
- The watchdog accused Turkish border guards of shooting at some of those displaced in Aleppo province by fighting between the Islamic State (IS) group and rebels as they approached the frontier.
- “The whole world is talking about fighting IS, and yet those most at risk of becoming victims of its abuses are trapped on the wrong side of a concrete wall.” HRW said

Minorities including from India likely to vote for UK to stay in EU

- Ethnic minorities in the U.K., including those from India, are likely to vote for the country to stay in the European Union in the June 23 referendum in which roughly 43 million people are eligible to cast their vote.
- One reason is that the ethnic minorities are still pro-Labour. While one should not, of course, fall into the trap of assuming that all immigrants are pro-immigration, there is something on the edge of racism of people in the Leave campaign.
- In the political realignments that the referendum debate has effected, prominent Indian-origin Conservative cabinet minister Priti Patel — whom Prime Minister David Cameron had appointed the U.K. India Diaspora Champion — joined the group of Conservative members of Parliament, led by Michael Gove and Boris Johnson, who support Brexit.
- The official campaign period for the June 23 referendum began on Friday, according to the U.K.’s Election Commission.

- In this period, which includes the referendum day, “the rules that campaigners must follow at the referendum on issues such as spending and working together come into force,” the release states.
- Spending limits for a registered campaigner is £7,00,000, for the designated lead campaigners £7 million, and for political parties a variable amount between £7,00,000 and £7 million based on the party’s share of the vote at the last United Kingdom Parliamentary General Election

Tussle between US and Saudi over 9/11 bill

- Saudi Arabia has told the Obama administration and members of Congress that it will sell off hundreds of billions of dollars’ worth of American assets held by the kingdom if Congress passes a bill that would allow the Saudi government to be held responsible in U.S. courts for any role in the September 11, 2001, attacks.
- Adel al Jubeir, the Saudi Foreign Minister, delivered the kingdom’s message personally last month during a trip to Washington, telling lawmakers that Saudi Arabia would be forced to sell up to \$750 billion in treasury securities and other assets in the U.S. before they could be in danger of being frozen by U.S. courts.
- The administration, which argues that the legislation would put Americans at legal risk overseas, has been lobbying so intently against the bill that some lawmakers and families of September 11 victims are infuriated.
- President Barack Obama will arrive in Riyadh for meetings with King Salman and other Saudi officials.
- Saudi officials have long denied that the kingdom had any role in the September 11 plot, and the 9/11 Commission found “no evidence that the Saudi government as an institution or senior Saudi officials individually funded the organisation”.
- But critics have noted that the commission’s narrow wording left open the possibility that less senior officials or parts of the Saudi government could have played a role.

Earthquake in Japan take many toll

- Scores of people were feared buried alive on Saturday after two powerful quakes hit southern Japan a day apart, killing at least 41 people, as a forecast storm threatened more devastating landslides.
- Homes, roads and railway lines were swept away when huge hillsides collapsed as thousands of tonnes of mud were dislodged by the thunderous seismic tremors.
- Buildings were reduced to rubble, including a university dormitory and apartment complexes, with dozens of people unaccounted for over a wide area.
- More than 90,000 people have been evacuated, including 300 from an area near a dam thought to be at risk of collapse.
- Isolated villages in mountainous areas near Kumamoto were completely cut off by landslides. At least 500 people were believed trapped in one settlement and expected to spend the night in public buildings.

Strong earthquake jolt Ecuador

- Rescuers in Ecuador raced to dig out people trapped under the rubble of homes and hotels, after a powerful 7.8-magnitude earthquake that killed at least 235.
- Vice-President Jorge Glas called it the “worst seismic movement we have faced in decades”. In a news conference, he raised the toll to 235 killed and 1,557 injured.

- The quake, which struck at 2358 GMT on Saturday about 170 km northwest of Quito, lasted about a minute and was felt across Ecuador, northern Peru and southern Colombia.
- Ecuador lies near a shifting boundary between tectonic plates and has suffered seven earthquakes of magnitude 7.0 or higher in the region of the quake since 1900, the USGS said. One in March 1987 killed about 1,000 people.

Lawmakers authorised impeachment proceedings against Dilma Rousseff

- The fight to oust Brazil's President speeded up after lawmakers authorised impeachment proceedings against her, deepening the country's political crisis.
- Rivals of the 68-year-old leftist leader said they would rush to the Senate to launch an impeachment trial, after lower house voted overwhelmingly against her.
- Ms. Rousseff's supporters denounced the vote as an attack on Brazil's democracy just three decades after it emerged from a military dictatorship.
- 367 of the 513 deputies in the lower house of Congress backed impeachment — well over the two thirds majority needed to move the case forward.
- She is accused of illegally manipulating budget figures but her supporters say there is no evidence and the impeachment drive amounts to a "coup".
- The case now passes to the upper house which is expected to vote in May on whether to open an impeachment trial.
- Experts consider it almost certain the Senate will vote to launch a trial, since its political makeup reflects that of the lower house. If that happened, Ms. Rousseff would step down for up to 180 days while the trial got under way.

US and Russia on agreement for increasing Syria ceasefire

- Russian President Vladimir Putin and his U.S. counterpart Barack Obama agreed to strengthen a Syria ceasefire brokered by their two nations.
- Mr. Putin stressed the need for moderate rebels to distance themselves from Islamic State and al-Nusra Front jihadists and also urged the closure of the border between Syria and Turkey from where "supplies of arms for extremists" are continuing.
- A partial ceasefire, which was negotiated by the U.S. and Russia and took effect on February 27, had dramatically curtailed violence across much of Syria and raised hopes that a lasting deal could be struck in Geneva to end the bloodshed.
- Syria's opposition has postponed its "formal participation" in peace talks in protest over escalating violence, but will remain in Geneva and may continue informal discussions with mediators, the UN envoy said.

US president Obama's visit to Saudi Arabia to ease the strained relationship

- President Barack Obama will arrive in Riyadh, the Saudi capital, for a private meeting with King Salman, Saudi Arabia's 80-year-old monarch.
- During Mr. Obama's tenure, there has been distrust and disagreement over how to contain Iran, the fight against the Islamic State, the future of Syria and clashes in Yemen.

- Blunt comments about the Saudis by Mr. Obama in a recent interview have deepened the ill will.
- The two nations still need each other. The U.S. provides military and intelligence support to the kingdom for its regional security, and is expected to announce additional support.
- Saudi Arabia helps fight terror groups like al-Qaeda and remains the second-largest provider of oil imports to the United States, selling about 1 million barrels per day.
- Now, with Mr. Obama in the twilight of his presidency, Saudi leaders are looking past him, to the winner of November's presidential election.
- In the 70 years since President Franklin D. Roosevelt initiated the alliance at the end of World War II, the Saudis have primarily looked to the United States to help ensure its security in an often unstable region.
- The Saudis have sought intelligence assistance and training, and the U.S. has given the Saudis targeting and logistical support for their war in Yemen.
- The United States has looked to Saudi Arabia as a source of stability in the West Asian region, an ally whose oil reserves have only recently begun to diminish in importance for U.S. interests.

China described ties with India will promote multi polar world

- Amid a string of diplomatic exchanges, China has described its ties with India as a factor in promoting a multi-polar world, as well as an important component for fostering stability in the region.
- On the eve of the arrival in Beijing of National Security Adviser, China said: "China and India are two largest developing countries and major emerging economies as well as two significant forces that drive forward world multi-polarisation."
- China said that the "intensive high level interactions" reflect that Beijing-New Delhi ties are "enjoying a sound and stable momentum of development, with in- depth growth of political mutual trust.
- China also said enhanced exchanges and cooperation in various fields, and sound coordination and cooperation in international and regional affairs.

After New York win Hillary Clinton and Donald trump fortified their positions

- Emphatically winning their party primaries in the state of New York, Democrat Hillary Clinton and Republican Donald Trump fortified their frontrunner positions after a string of setbacks over recent weeks.
- On the Democratic side, outcome could also mark the beginning of the end of Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders's campaign for presidency.
- Among the Republican candidates, Mr. Trump left his rivals — Ted Cruz and John Kasich — miles behind as he won almost all of the delegates in New York.

US President began two-day visit to Saudi Arabia

- President Barack Obama held talks with Saudi Arabia's King Salman as he began a two-day visit hoping to ease tensions with the historic U.S. ally.
- Riyadh and its Sunni Arab Gulf allies have bristled at what they see as Washington's tilt towards regional rival Iran after Tehran's landmark nuclear deal with world powers.

- Mr. Obama is to attend a summit of Gulf leaders focused on intensifying the fight against the Islamic State (IS) group and resolving the wars in Syria in Yemen.
- Mr. Obama held bilateral talks with King Salman at the Erga Palace.
- Tensions between Riyadh and Washington have increased sharply due to what Saudi Arabia sees as Mr. Obama's disengagement from traditional U.S. allies in the region and opening towards Iran.

Military restructuring in China continues

- The ongoing military restructuring in China appears to have peaked, with President Xi Jinping assuming the title of Commander-in-Chief of the Joint Battle Command of the People's Liberation Army (PLA).
- The move showed that President Xi had built up a level of personal authority over troops on par with late leaders such as Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping.
- President Xi insisted that the new formation should be "absolutely loyal, resourceful in fighting, efficient in commanding, and courageous and capable of winning wars."
- The new title adds to the other three that President Xi holds— general secretary of the Communist Party of China, President, and chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC).
- The CMC is responsible for the PLA's management and defence building, while the joint battle command centre focuses on combat and relevant strategies.

Islamic state killed more than 250 girls in northern Iraq

- The Islamic State (IS), notorious for its brutality, has reportedly executed 250 girls in northern Iraq for refusing to become sex slaves, according to a media report.
- The girls had been ordered to accept temporary marriages to the terrorists and were murdered, sometimes alongside their families, for their refusal to be sex slaves in Iraq's second largest city of Mosul.
- The IS began selecting women of Mosul and forced them into marrying its militants, calling it temporary marriage since it has taken control over Mosul, and the women who refused to submit to this practice would be executed.
- Human rights were being widely violated in all IS-held territories, particularly the women's rights as they're seen as commodities and have no choice in choosing their spouses.
- The executions follows a spate of similar killings that took place last August in which 19 Mosul women were slaughtered for refusing to have sex with IS fighters.
- Up to 500 Yazidi women and girls were kidnapped and sexually abused by the dreaded militants in August 2014.
- In October, more than 500 Yazidi women and young girls were reportedly abducted by the IS when they stormed the Sinjar region in northern Iraq.
- The IS took control of Mosul in June 2014 after the fall of Iraqi army in the city and since then has been slaughtering its residents for various charges to spread fear.

Commonwealth Ministerial Action group expressed concern over misuse of anti-terror law

- The Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) has expressed concern over the "continued misuse" of anti-terrorism legislation in the Maldives.

- They also said there is “little or no evidence of substantive progress” in promoting freedom and space for civil society.
- The CMAG also raised concerns over the recent introduction of a “broad-ranging” Defamation Bill seeking to criminalise defamation and statements against national security, an official release said.
- Reacting to the CMAG’s decisions, the Maldives government, contended that the Group decided “not to place the Maldives on its agenda”.
- The government also welcomed the CMAG’s call to all political parties to participate constructively on a political agenda dialogue.

India along with 174 other countries signed Paris climate agreement

- A total of 175 Countries, including India, signed the Paris climate agreement at the United Nations.
- This is a record for one-day signing of an international accord.
- Fifteen countries, mostly small-island states, have already ratified the agreement on combating global warming.
- The landmark deal takes a key step toward entering into force years ahead of schedule.
- States that do not sign on Friday have a year to do so. The agreement will enter into force once 55 countries representing at least 55 per cent of global emissions have formally joined it.
- The U.S. and China have said they intend to join this year.

Resolution of border dispute discussed during NSA meet between India and China

- China and India should reach a “fair and reasonable” political solution to the border dispute acceptable to both sides, the China said in an indication of Beijing’s willingness to make concessions on the vexed issue.
- As National Security Advisor Ajit Doval, who along with his Chinese counterpart held border talks.
- China said in a statement that both sides had in-depth and candid exchanges on the boundary question, bilateral relations and relevant international and regional issues.

US President makes an impassioned appeal against Brexit

- In an impassioned appeal visiting U.S. President Barack Obama has urged British citizens to vote to stay in the European Union in the referendum.
- He said a united Europe, which turned “centuries of war in Europe into decades of peace”, must preserve its “remarkable legacy.”
- In what is likely to be his last visit to the U.K. as President, Mr. Obama set the tone for his three-day visit in an exclusive article in the Daily Telegraph.
- He placed the EU in the class of post-war international institutions and initiatives like the United Nations, Bretton Woods, the Marshall Plan and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation.
- Mr. Obama told British citizens that they should be “proud that the EU has helped spread British values and practices — democracy, the rule of law, open markets — across the continent and to its periphery”.
- The appeal by Mr. Obama will come as an enormous boost for the ‘Stay’ campaign, especially in the light of the very small margin with which it leads over the Brexit group in opinion polls.

- With almost one-third of the electorate still undecided, Mr. Obama's intervention may help sway votes to the 'Remain' side.
- London Mayor and the lead campaigner for the Brexit campaign Boris Johnson retaliated in an equally strong reply in the British tabloid The Sun.
- The U.K. was not merely contributing over £20 billion each month to the EU kitty, it has also lost control over its borders and its right to determine its public policy, a surrender that the U.S. would never make.

China to provide power to islands through floating nuclear plants

- All the radar systems, lighthouses, barracks, ports and airfields that China has set up on its newly built island chain in the South China Sea require tremendous amounts of electricity, which is hard to come so far from the country's power grid.
- Beijing may have a solution: floating nuclear power plants.
- A state-owned company, China Shipbuilding Industry Corp., is planning to build a fleet of the vessels to provide electricity to remote locations including offshore oil platforms and the contentious man-made islands.
- China would not be the first country to employ floating nuclear power plants. In the 1960s, the U.S. Army installed a nuclear reactor inside the hull of a World War II freighter to provide electricity for the Panama Canal Zone.
- And nuclear power has been on vessels since 1955, when the commanding officer of the Nautilus, an American submarine, sent word that the craft was "underway on nuclear power".

IS takes responsibility for Bangladesh professor's murder

- The Islamic State (IS) claimed responsibility for the murder of Rezaul Karim Siddiquee, an English professor in Bangladesh's Rajshahi University.
- The group said it killed him for "calling to atheism" in Bangladesh, according to U.S.-based SITE Intelligence Group, which monitors jihadist outfits. The claim was made by IS-linked Amaq Agency, according to SITE.
- But fellow university teachers said Mr. Siddiquee, while active in cultural events, never spoke or wrote anything about religion or Islam.
- He was attacked near his home in Rajshahi. Witnesses and police said the assailants on a motor.
- Five secular bloggers and a publisher have been killed in a similar fashion since February last year.
- The IS has claimed responsibility for the killings of two foreigners, attacks on mosques and Christian priests in Bangladesh in recent months. The government says there is no organisational network of IS in Bangladesh.
- The gruesome killing triggered protest by teachers and students of the Rajshahi University who blocked a major road and demanded immediate arrest of the killers. Three teachers at the university have been killed in recent years.

TTIP and Syria remain the focus of Obama's visit to Germany

- U.S. President Barack Obama arrived on a valedictory visit to Germany to see his "friend" Chancellor Angela Merkel, but their show of unity looked unlikely to silence opposition to their push for a transatlantic trade pact.

- Mr. Obama jetted into the northern city of Hanover, where he warned that it would be a “mistake” to send Western troops into Syria and cautioned Britain on reduced global influence should it quit the EU.
- While his fifth and final official trip to Europe’s biggest economy is expected to cover global crises, one of the headline goals is to advance negotiations on what could become the world’s biggest free trade agreement.
- Both sides say they aim to see the Trans-Atlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) finalised, at least in its broad outlines, before Mr. Obama leaves office in January.
- However Ms. Merkel’s Economy Minister warned that the deal “will fail” if the United States refuses to make concessions in the protracted talks.
- His comments came a day after tens of thousands of people marched against the U.S.-EU free trade deal through the streets of Hanover, where Mr. Obama and Ms. Merkel were to open the world’s largest industrial technology fair.
- Before he left for Germany, Mr. Obama told the BBC the United States would continue efforts to broker a transition deal between the Syrian regime and its moderate opponents to end the bloody civil war.
- He called for “international pressure” on “all the parties, including Russia and Iran, who, essentially, are propping up Assad”.
- In the same interview, Mr. Obama reiterated his warnings about a so-called Brexit, saying Britain would have “less influence globally” if it voted to leave the European Union in June.
- Mr. Obama’s visit will wrap up Monday with a keynote speech in which he is expected to frame his vision of transatlantic relations.

Jamaat-e-Islami activist arrested in connection with the professor murder

- Police arrested reportedly an activist of Jamaat-e-Islami, in connection with the murder of A.F.M. Rezaul Karim Siddiquee in northern Rajshahi, but rejected the claim of the involvement of the Islamic State (IS) in the killing.
- A senior police officer admitted that murder bore similarity to the previous killings of bloggers.
- However, he claimed that those behind the murders were local Islamists and purported messages from IS and al-Qaeda were only aimed at confusing the investigators.
- Siddiquee, a professor at the English department of Rajshahi University, was hacked to death by two unidentified gunmen on Saturday morning near his home in Rajshahi when he was waiting for a university bus to go to the campus.
- The murder case has been handed over to the Detective Branch of Police, to be investigated on “top priority”.
- Though monitoring group SITE reports that the IS has claimed responsibility for the murder for the professor’s alleged views on religion, the murdered professor had reportedly never written or spoken anything against religion.
- Attacks on teachers with a liberal bent of mind at Rajshahi University, believed to be a den of radical Islamist groups, is nothing new. Prof. A.K.M. Shafiul Haque was killed in 2014, a murder for which al-Qaeda claimed responsibility.
- Geology teacher Prof. S. Taher Ahmed was found dead in a septic tank of his house in 2006. His colleague and a Jamaat-backed teacher were among the three were sentenced to death for the murder.
- Earlier this month, Nazimuddin Samad, an activist, was killed in Dhaka. Earlier, in 2015, four bloggers were murdered, all for their writing and views against religious bigotry.

NPC says they demand federalism not separatism

- The Northern Provincial Council (NPC), which has reiterated the position of Tamil parties for a merger of the North and the East, is not for special powers to be provided to the proposed State, according to its chairperson C.V.K. Sivagnanam.
- On the significance of the resolution adopted, Mr. Sivagnanam said that “our demand for federalism should not be misconstrued as something in favour of separatism.
- Let the Central government share power with all the States or Provinces uniformly.. We expect other Provinces to fall in line with us so that we all can have greater powers.
- The Council’s proposals on constitutional reforms were essentially based on the constitutional models of two countries — India and Switzerland.
- As in the case of India, there should be States demarcated on the basis of languages.
- This was one of the reasons for the proposed merger of the Northern and Eastern provinces as “Muslims in the East are all Tamil speaking people,” Mr. Sivagnanam pointed out.
- Taking into account aspirations of hill-country Tamils, the NPC suggested another autonomous body. The Tamil National Alliance (TNA) has 30 members in the 38-member body.

United States will send special forces to help rebel fight IS

- President Barack Obama said the U.S. would send up to 250 more military personnel including special forces to Syria to help rebels fight Islamic State group jihadists.
- Mr. Obama was in Germany for talks with Chancellor Angela Merkel. In a speech on transatlantic unity, Mr. Obama hailed NATO partners’ progress so far in pushing back IS, which he called “the most urgent threat to our nations”.
- Mr. Obama had pressed for all parties to the Syrian conflict, including Russia, to return to the negotiating table and “reinstate” the ceasefire.

Hillary Clinton campaign chief says relations with India is her priority

- If elected President of the U.S., Hillary Clinton will take relations with India to a new level and better economic and strategic ties with New Delhi will anchor the U.S. in the region, her campaign chief has said.
- Chairman of Ms. Clinton’s campaign committee, said a future Democratic administration under Ms. Clinton will have a significant presence of Indian Americans.
- Mr. Podesta, who served as chief of staff to president Bill Clinton and as adviser to President Barack Obama, said successive Presidents have been in agreement on strengthening relations with India, and Ms. Clinton would “follow in that tradition”.
- Mr. Podesta said Ms. Clinton has built strong relations with India when she was the First Lady and later as Secretary of State.
- Mr. Podesta said Republican candidate Donald Trump’s campaign was dangerous for the country, referring to him mocking Indian call centre workers at an election rally.

Iran does not want frozen funds to be diverted to compensate victims of attacks

- Iran threatened to take legal action in the International Court of Justice against the United States if \$2 billion in frozen funds are “diverted” to compensate victims of attacks.
- Tehran said the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision to deduct \$2 billion from its frozen assets to compensate American victims of “terror” attacks amounted to theft.
- “We hold the U.S. administration responsible for preservation of Iranian funds and if they are plundered, we will lodge a complaint with the ICJ for reparation,” said Foreign Minister.

After India deny visa to Uighur leader, China says establish direct communication with Pak

- China nudged India and Pakistan to establish direct communication to resolve differences on listing JeM chief Masood Azhar on the UN terror roll, close on the heels of New Delhi’s decision to deny visa to an Uighur leader wanted by Beijing.
- In a written response Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson said: “We encourage all parties related to the listing matter of Masood Azhar to have direct communication and work out a solution through serious consultations.”
- She added: “China is willing to continue with its communication with all the relevant parties,” signalling Beijing’s intent to stay diplomatically engaged on this subject, and achieve results based on consensus.
- Provision of international law could help Beijing steer clear of a possible controversy in the future, for adopting a “condescending approach” towards a subject that embroiled India and Pakistan.
- Sustained diplomatic interaction between the two South Asian neighbours could yield a “suitable language”, which could be included in a new draft acceptable to both sides.
- The officials, however, were non-committal on whether a closure to the controversy had now been achieved, pointing out that official communication from New Delhi on this subject was yet to be received.

British Court says Hillsborough tragedy was gross negligence by Police

- The 96 Liverpool fans who died in the Hillsborough football stadium disaster were unlawfully killed, a jury found, blaming police for the worst tragedy in the history of British sport.
- Following the longest-running inquest in English legal history, jurors concluded that policing decisions at the ill-fated match in 1989 “caused or contributed” to the deaths, and amounted to “gross negligence”.
- Relatives of the victims have fought a 27-year campaign to get to the heart of what happened during the disaster, and were angry at an initial inquest ruling the deaths were accidental.
- They emerged from the courtroom hugging and in tears, holding pictures of their loved ones and a scarf reading “JUSTICE”.
- They linked hands above their heads and sang the Liverpool Football Club anthem “You’ll Never Walk Alone” and chanted “Justice for the 96”.
- Prime Minister David Cameron paid tribute to their “extraordinary courage” in their “long search for the truth”.
- The disaster occurred on April 15, 1989 during an FA Cup semi-final between the teams of Liverpool and Nottingham Forest at Sheffield Wednesday’s Hillsborough stadium in northern England.

Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump close to getting nominations

- Donald Trump gets overwhelming victories that exceeded expectations in Republican primaries in five states in the northeast.
- Mr. Trump now has 953 delegates, and needs nearly 250 of the 502 up for grabs before the Republican convention in July to win nomination.
- On the Democratic side, frontrunner Hillary Clinton won four of the five, roughly on expected lines, and ceding only Rhode Island to challenger Bernie Sanders.
- Ms. Clinton held out an olive branch to Mr. Sanders, and even complemented him and his supporters for challenging her on issues such as unaccounted money in politics.
- White smoke from the Democratic tent may be a while away, but it is in the Republican camp that bloodbath could be expected.
- The wounded warriors of the 'neverTrump' hashtag have not given up yet, and declared that their campaign to deny him the nomination would continue.
- Several cash-rich campaign groups have announced that they would intensify their anti-Trump campaign ahead of the Indiana primaries, which has now become the last barrier that stands between Mr. Trump and the nomination.
- Mr. Cruz has reached a pact with John Kasich, the distant third candidate in the race, who has agreed to stay away from campaigning in Indiana in order to allow Mr. Cruz a head to head contest with Mr. Trump.
- Winning the nomination is no longer in question for Ms. Clinton, but winning over Mr. Sanders and his supporters is.

SalahAbdeslam, a key suspect in the Paris attacks appears before French judges

- SalahAbdeslam, a key suspect in the Paris attacks last November, has appeared before French judges on charges of murder and being part of a terrorist organisation.
- His lawyer Frank Berton said today that he would rather not answer questions because he is tired by the transfer, and the judge said he did not want to interrogate him.
- Abdeslam is suspected of being the logistics mastermind behind the shootings and suicide bombings in November.
- He is alleged to have rented and paid for several apartments used by the attackers. He left three suspects at the Stade de France, where they blew themselves up.
- After the Paris attacks, Abdeslam is said to have called two friends who drove from Brussels to Paris to pick him up and take him back to Belgium, where he went into hiding.
- After a four-month manhunt by police, Abdeslam was shot in the leg and arrested during a raid in the Molenbeek area of Brussels.

President brushed aside India-China rivalry in Pacific

- The first ever state visit by an Indian head of state to Papua New Guinea began with remarks by President Pranab Mukherjee that brushed aside a suggestion that India was in competition with China in the Pacific region.
- He also voiced the hope that his visit will be a precursor to intensified economic and security cooperation with the Pacific island nation.

- He also said India was ready to cooperate with Pacific Island countries in protecting their Exclusive Economic Zones.
- Although building trade relations was high on the agenda, the larger message was that India is eager to deepen its engagement with all Pacific Island countries.
- In a speech Mr. Mukherjee made a pointed reference to Papua New Guinea's natural resources and said there were many opportunities waiting to be seized as both countries had prioritised sustainable use of ocean and marine resources.
- He also underscored that the untapped potential of India's ties with Pacific nations was not limited to Papua New Guinea.
- Referring to FIPIC, the Forum for the India-Pacific Islands Cooperation, a multilateral forum launched by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Mr. Mukherjee said it indicated that "India intends to seriously engage with this entire region."
- In the forum's second summit in Jaipur August 2015, one subject discussed was enhanced cooperation between India and Pacific island countries, especially in coastal surveillance and protection of exclusive economic zones.
- India and Papua New Guinea are due to sign an MoU on cooperation in health and pharmaceuticals.
- Under the agreement, doctors and nurses from the island nation will be trained in India, and Indian physicians, nurses and trainers would be deputed to Papua New Guinea.
- India will also pledge support to establish a pharmaceutical production unit here to meet the demand for life-saving medicines.

China asserted that it will play leading role in maintaining peace in Asia

- China asserted that it will not allow the breakout of a conflict on the Korean Peninsula and signalled its readiness to play a leading role in maintaining peace in Asia, a position that could increase friction between Beijing and Washington.
- Tensions on the Korean Peninsula have spiked after North Korea conducted its fourth nuclear test in January, followed by tests of missiles that could carry atomic warheads.
- In a signal to the U.S., President Xi also emphasised that there was no room for outside powers, or internationalisation, for resolving differences among Asian countries, which have rival territorial claims in the South China Sea.
- Some analysts say Mr. Xi's comments signal China's rejection of U.S. interference, including "freedom of navigation" naval patrols in the South China Sea.
- The President's insistence on direct talks with other claimants—chiefly Vietnam, the Philippines and Taiwan—is also meant to reinforce China's rejection of international arbitration to resolve the South China Sea disputes, they say.
- The Chinese side has repeatedly slammed Manila's decision to petition the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague to settle its maritime claims with Beijing.
- Russia has also backed China's approach. Following a meeting with his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov stressed that Moscow opposed any interference from third parties, "or any attempts to internationalise these disputes".
- It added China is working with other CICA members to formulate an action plan for the next two years to implement confidence-building measures.
- In tune with the rising tensions with Washington in the South China Sea, China has sought to bolster its nuclear deterrence by successfully testing the DF-41 long-range ballistic missile.

- The weapon would apparently take only 30 minutes to cover its maximum 12,000-km range, and deliver multiple strikes on its target.
- The test coincided with the inspection of an artificial island in the Spratly group of islands by Gen. Fan Changlong, a top-ranking officer of the People's Liberation Army.
- The Chinese have also announced this month the landing of a military aircraft on an artificial island in the Spratly islands on a 3,000 meter runway, which could be used by heavy bombers and fighter jets.

U.S. lawmakers expressed concerns over the sale of F-16 fighter jets to Pakistan

- Top U.S. lawmakers have expressed concerns over the Obama Administration's decision to sell eight F-16 fighter jets to Pakistan, saying the aircraft could be used against India and not to combat terrorism.
- They have also urged the Obama Administration to review its decision in this regard.
- "Indo-Pak. tensions remain elevated and some question whether the F-16s could ultimately be used against India or other regional powers, rather than the terrorists as Pakistan as asserted," Congressman Matt Salmon said.

India looking to explore Papua New Guinea's oil and gas resources

- India is looking to explore and develop Papua New Guinea's vast oil and gas resources through joint ventures and investments from both the Indian private and public sectors in ongoing and new projects.
- The Pacific island country agreed that oil and gas exploration and development could be a new avenue of cooperation between the two countries, keeping in view India's desire to achieve energy security.
- Indian companies are looking at projects coming up in Papua New Guinea after natural gas was discovered in the country's Southern Highland Province.
- Gas discoveries elsewhere in the country have evoked interest among Indian companies that believe they could participate in associated projects as well as in some gas blocks.
- Papua New Guinea is estimated to have 35 trillion cubic feet of natural gas as recoverable reserves.
- India agreed to provide a line of credit of \$100 million to Papua New Guinea for infrastructure projects and signed a pact to set up a 'Centre of Excellence' in information technology.
- The request for the line of credit had been made by Papua New Guinea Prime Minister during a meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the sidelines of a summit of the Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation.
- Four memorandums of understanding were signed on the second and final day of President Mukherjee's visit, the first state visit by an Indian head of state to the island nation.
- Papua New Guinea gave support for India's claim for permanent membership in the UN Security Council and agreed to expedite a proposed Bilateral Investment Promotion and Protection Agreement to facilitate investments.
- Mr. Mukherjee announced that India would provide anti-retroviral drugs and equipment to benefit 20,000 HIV positive patients in Papua New Guinea, a figure that would help at least half the number of those suffering from the disease.
- UNAIDS estimates say that between 37,000 and 41,000 people were living with HIV in 2014 in the country, which has a population of about eight million.

India- EU could go for a deal which is lesser than BTIA

- India and the EU should consider a less-ambitious free trade agreement if necessary, vice chair of the Delegation for Relations with India, said.
- “Yes I would prefer a watered down agreement, it’s better to take small steps and move on than moving for a very high goal that is not achievable in the near future,” she said.
- The India EU summit of March 30 failed to breathe life back into the stalled Broadbased Trade and Investment Agreement (BTIA).
- There have been gaps in the offers and demand of both sides in the trade in services, automobiles and wine and spirit sectors.

Former bureaucrat N. K. Singh will receive one of Japan’s highest civilian honours

- Former bureaucrat and parliamentarian N. K. Singh will receive one of Japan’s highest civilian honours for promoting economic, educational and cultural ties between India and Japan.
- Mr. Singh, who is a former Member of the Planning Commission, will receive the ‘Order of the Rising Sun, Gold and Silver’ and is among 91 foreign recipients to be honoured during the 2016 Spring Imperial Decoration of Japan.
- The Orders of the Rising Sun are conferred in recognition of distinguished accomplishments of an individual.
- The statement from the Embassy of Japan acknowledged Mr. Singh’s contribution to enhance Japan-India educational ties through his association with the Nalanda University.

INDIA AND WORLD

Facing objection from intelligence agencies Govt. stayed away from global terror database

- The government has decided not to join a U.S. maintained global terror database in the face of objections from the intelligence agencies.
- Unhindered access to the Americans to the database of terror suspects in India, which includes their biometric details, was opposed by both the Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW) and the Intelligence Bureau (IB), a senior official in the security establishment said.
- The proposal has been stuck since it was initially proposed by the U.S. in 2012.
- A model text of the proposal — the Homeland Security Presidential Directive (HSPD-6) — was to be discussed at a bilateral homeland security meet to be held in June this year.
- The HSPD-6 is an agreement for exchange of terrorist screening information between the Terrorist Screening Centre (TCS) of the U.S. and a selected Indian security agency. The TCS has the database of 11,000 terror suspects.
- In the past one year two dozen people with terrorist links were arrested in Canada and Australia with the help of HSPD-6 as both countries are signatories to it.
- There have been several rounds of discussions between India and the U.S. in the past one year on the issue. Both sides narrowed down their differences on several key aspects.

US Secretary of State says India is responsible in securing nuclear material

- India has a very important role to play in securing nuclear weapons and nuclear materials, said U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry. “India has a long record of being a leader, of being responsible,” Mr Kerry said, after a meeting with Indian National Security Advisor Ajit Doval.
- He also said that “It is particularly important right now at a time when we see in the region some choices being made that may accelerate possible arms construction, which we have serious questions about”.
- The U.S. has repeatedly said battlefield deployments make nuclear weapons vulnerable to theft and sabotage and has called upon Pakistan to desist from the move. Pakistan has turned down the U.S. request.
- Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, who was scheduled to participate in the summit, cancelled his visit after the Easter Sunday terror strike in Lahore.
- Mr Doval said Mr. Modi was “deeply interested in seeing and ensuring that the safety and security of the radioactive material must be ensured.”

PM says terrorism has evolved over time, response to terrorism should also evolve

- Global terrorism has evolved over time and terrorists are now using modern technology and devices while the national and international efforts to counter them have become outdated, PM Narendra Modi told a gathering at the White House.
- This is the fourth and final Nuclear Security Summit (NSS), an initiative of Mr. Obama to coordinate international efforts to prevent acts of nuclear terrorism.
- Leaders from over 50 countries and four international organisations were scheduled to discuss the topic on Friday in more detail.
- Making his brief intervention at the dinner, the PM thanked Mr. Obama for putting the “spotlight on nuclear security.” “President Obama has done great service to global security,” Mr. Modi said.
- Mr. Modi said: “The recent terror strikes in Brussels showed the world how real and immediate the threat to nuclear security from terrorism was.”
- The Prime Minister identified three “contemporary features of terrorism.” “First, today's terrorism uses extreme violence as theatre.
- Second, we are no longer looking for a man in a cave, but we are hunting for a terrorist in a city with a computer or a smart phone.
- Third, State actors working with nuclear traffickers and terrorists present the greatest risk.
- The Prime Minister said without prevention and prosecution of acts of terrorism there could be no deterrence against nuclear terrorism.
- Drop the notion that terrorism is someone else’s problem and that “his” terrorist is not “my” terrorist,” the PM said.

India along with other nations will ratify Paris agreement

- India will join 100 nations in ratifying the Paris agreement on climate change on April 22, Union Environment, Forests and Climate Change Minister Prakash Javadekar said.

- The United Nations agreement, negotiated in Paris in December 2015, sets out a global action plan to put the world on track by limiting global warming below 2 degrees Celsius and attempt to shield the world from the catastrophic effects of climate change.
- Mr. Javadekar described the Paris agreement as an image makeover for India. India was always perceived to be a naysayer and negative in its approach and took a corner seat in most of the international conferences.
- But in Paris, Prime Minister Narendra Modi introduced the concept of climate justice driving home the message of sustainable development.
- The global 1 degree rise in temperature was due to 150 years of uncontrolled carbon emission by the developed world.
- He said while 30 per cent of cumulative contribution was that of the United States, 50 per cent by Europe, Canada and other developed world and 10 per cent by China, India was responsible for only 3 per cent.
- Among India's proactive measures to combat the pernicious effects of global warming was Rs. 400 per tonne green cess on coal and a proposed Compensatory Afforestation Funds Bill, 2015, which would unlock Rs. 40,000 crore of funds made available to States to take up afforestation programmes.

PM Modi arrived in Riyadh for two-day visit

- Prime Minister Narendra Modi arrived in Riyadh on his maiden two-day visit to Saudi Arabia as both countries are set to firm up a raft of pacts to bolster their strategic partnership, besides exploring ways to enhance security and counter-terror cooperation.
- Mr. Modi announced a 24X7 multilingual helpline for Indian expatriates, and said a move to regularise migration was in the offing through an online programme.
- He announced the setting up of worker resource centres in Riyadh and Jeddah to provide them help.
- Addressing a gathering of L&T workers who are constructing a metro rail here, he said India was proud of their contribution which had enhanced India's image abroad and opened doors for overseas employment opportunities for their compatriots.
- Combating threat of terrorism and radicalisation is expected to figure high on the agenda of the talks between Mr. Modi and the leadership of Saudi Arabia.
- Riyadh has recently formed a major coalition of 34 Muslim nations to fight terror, particularly of the Islamic State type.
- India's ties with Saudi Arabia, one of the world's leading oil producers, have been on an upswing over the past two decades based on burgeoning energy ties and both countries may look to move beyond a buyer-seller relationship in the sector and go for joint ventures and investment in refineries and oil fields.
- Mr. Modi may seek deeper involvement of Indian companies in upstream and downstream oil and gas sector projects in the Gulf nation whose economy has been hit due to falling prices of crude oil, cut in oil exports and slowing down of domestic consumption.

Report in Nuclear security summit praises India

- India has taken multiple measures to prevent terrorists from acquiring nuclear weapons, according to a progress report circulated at the Nuclear Security Summit (NSS) in Washington.
- The idea behind the two-day summit, hosted by U.S. President Barack Obama, is to get political leaderships across countries directly involved in dealing with the threat of nuclear terrorism.

- India has set up a permanent team of technical and security experts from multiple ministries and agencies that conducts tabletop exercises simulating nuclear smuggling, phased out the use of highly enriched uranium (HEU) and built a database of all radioactive sources in the country.
- It has also started real-time tracking of radioactive sources when they are transported and set up a network of 23 emergency response centres across the country for detecting and responding to any nuclear or radiological emergency.
- India is also in the process of equipping all major seaports and airports of the country with radiation detection machines.
- While nuclear security is a serious domestic concern, India also used the platform to push its desire for membership in the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), the exclusive club that controls global nuclear trade.
- “India’s export controls list and guidelines have been harmonised with those of the NSG, and India looks forward to strengthening its contribution to shared non-proliferation objectives through membership of the export controls regimes,” the progress report said.
- Besides the IAEA, global coordination to prevent terrorists from acquiring nuclear material will continue in four other forums — Interpol, the U.N., the Global Partnership Against the Spread of Weapons and Materials of Mass Destruction, and the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism.
- The security of Pakistan’s nuclear weapons remains a key concern for the U.S., but that was not a topic at the NSS.
- The U.S. has repeatedly said Pakistan’s decision to deploy battlefield weapons could increase the risks associated with its theft or sabotage.
- But the U.S. was particular that the NSS could not be a forum for “naming and shaming any particular country.
- Mr. Modi, however, touched upon the risk of insider threats to nuclear material in general terms.

US-India Defence Technology and Partnership Act to institutionalise the DTTI framework

- The US-India Defence Technology and Partnership Act, which was introduced in the U.S. Congress a couple of weeks ago, would “institutionalise” the Defence Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI) framework between the two countries and the Indian-specific cell in the Pentagon.
- The resolution was introduced to amend the U.S. Arms Export Control Action to formalise India’s status for the purpose of Congressional notifications as a major partner of equal status as America’s treaty allies and closest partners.
- The U.S.-India Business Council played a major role in pushing the resolution forward.
- The India Rapid Reaction Cell (IRRC) is the only country-specific cell in the Pentagon and functions under the office of the Under Secretary of Defence Acquisition, Technology and Logistics.
- It was set up in January 2015 with a six-member team which, officials said, is indicative of the importance attached to deepening strategic cooperation with India.
- The IRRC was the initiative of U.S. Defence Secretary Ash Carter, also the key architect of the DTTI, launched in 2012 to deepen high-technology cooperation and move towards co-development and co-production of high technology platforms.

The birth anniversary of the father of Indian constitution will be observed in UN

- The birth anniversary of B.R. Ambedkar, father of the Indian Constitution, will be observed on April 13 at the United Nations for the first time with focus on combating inequalities to achieve Sustainable Development Goals.
- The Permanent Mission of India to the U.N., in association with the Kalpana Saroj Foundation and Foundation For Human Horizon, will commemorate Ambedkar's 125th birth anniversary at the U.N. headquarters, a day before his date of birth.
- The landmark 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development recognises that combating inequality within and among countries, creating sustained, inclusive and sustainable growth and fostering inclusion are interdependent.
- The vision of Dr. Ambedkar, the architect of the Indian Constitution, to achieve social justice and equality also finds resonance in the core message of the 2030 Agenda.
- On the occasion, a panel discussion will be organised on the topic "Combating inequalities for the achievement of SDGs" with the objective of raising awareness of the importance of addressing all forms of inequality for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.
- United Nations Development Group Chair and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme Helen Clark will deliver the keynote speech.

Abdulla Yameen thanked India for protecting from CMAG action

- Maldivian President Abdullah Yameen has thanked India for "protecting" his country from possible punitive actions from the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG), which had been asking Maldives to move towards genuine democracy.
- "I am in India today to show my appreciation for the very steadfast way India has protected the Maldives from the CMAG." Abdullah Yamen said.
- The CMAG held an extraordinary meeting in February 24 and asked Maldives to create an "inclusive" country.
- Mr. Yameen said his government was trying to achieve the same goal based on universal human rights and democratic principles, which were essential if his country had to provide employment to youngsters prone to radicalisation.
- Maldives drew international criticism in November, 2015 after he declared national emergency ahead of a big wave of protests against his political opponents. The Emergency was withdrawn later.
- Maldives has undergone a wave of crackdowns since September 28, 2015, when a bomb targeting Mr. Yameen went off in the Presidential yacht, injuring his wife.

India sought changes in the U.N. Procedures

- India has sought changes in the U.N. procedures to designate a group or an individual terrorist.
- The demand for more transparency comes days after China blocked its bid to designate Jaish-e-Mohammad chief Masood Azhar a terrorist.
- The existing rules allow Security Council members to oppose any move in the sanctions committees in a clandestine manner and without offering any explanation.
- The sanctions committees can take decisions only unanimously, and this means any of the 15 members can veto a move.
- For instance, China put a 'technical hold' on action against Azhar, and India came to know only informally from members of the council.
- This amounts to allowing a "hidden veto" for every member of the council, Syed Akbaruddin, Permanent Representative of India to the U.N., said at an open debate.

- The Security Council has Al-Qaeda, Taliban and Islamic State Sanctions Committees that can mandate international sanctions, which will require countries to freeze the targeted group's or individual's assets, ban designated individuals from travelling and prevent the supply of weapons, technology and other aid.
- Earlier too, China delayed moves against the Pakistan-based terror groups such as the Jamaat-Ud-Dawa and the Lashkar-e-Taiba.

US defence secretary visit send important message to neighbours

- The many strategic decisions agreed upon during U.S. Defence Secretary Ashton Carter's visit last week to India opens up not just new possibilities but also challenges, say specialists in the defence sector.
- Many of them also see a message for India's neighbourhood, especially China, in the decisions.
- Both sides reached an "in-principle" understanding on concluding the first of the three foundational agreements, the Logistical Exchange Memorandum of Understanding (LEMOA), which has been in the works for over a decade.
- India needs more support as it cannot stand against China on its own either militarily or economically. Some kind of message had to be sent. It doesn't mean we are allying with the U.S.
- The LEMOA, a modified logistics support agreement, addressing Indian concerns entails the militaries of two nations to share facilities for refuelling, supplies and spares.
- The U.S. has similar arrangements with over 80 countries.

Iran assures India that they can be relied upon

- Iran President Hassan Rouhani assured External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj that his country could be a "reliable partner" for India's energy needs, as the two nations decided expand engagements in their ties, particularly in the oil and gas sectors.
- Ms. Swaraj called on Mr. Rouhani and held talks with her Iranian counterpart, Javad Zarif, besides meeting Ali Akbar Velayati, Adviser to Supreme Leader Sayyed Ali Khamenei, and discussed a range of issues.
- India has been eyeing deeper energy ties with Iran following lifting of nuclear sanctions and has already lined up \$20 billion as investment in the oil and gas and petrochemical and fertilizer sectors there.
- India is keen on increasing oil imports from Iran from the current 3,50,000 barrels a day. Mr. Rouhani spoke of the Chabahar port as a "defining partnership which has the potential of connecting the entire region,".
- Enhancing energy cooperation and development of the Chabahar port were the centre-piece of talks which was mostly dominated by economic issues.
- Mr. Rouhani, whose country shares borders with Afghanistan and Pakistan, hoped for closer consultations with India on regional issues, especially Afghanis- tan and the challenge of terrorism.

External affairs minister wants China to cooperate in Masood Azhar issue

- External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj told her Chinese counterpart, Wang Yi, that China needed to cooperate with India's campaign to declare Masood Azhar, leader of the Pakistan-based Jaish-e-

Mohammed, a global terrorist through the U.N. Security Council's 1267 Committee against terrorism.

- A bilateral meeting between Mr. Wang and Ms. Swaraj happened in Moscow on the sideline of the trilateral Russia-India-China (RIC) ministerial meeting.
- The discussion between the two Foreign Ministers was the first bilateral high-level contact almost a fortnight after China put a "technical hold" on India's bid to declare Masood Azhar a global terrorist through the 1267 Committee.
- China's attitude toward India's campaign at the U.N. would be keenly observed over the coming months as current stand would automatically end India's diplomatic bid against Masood Azhar.
- Both the Foreign Ministers reviewed the number of high-level bilateral engagements planned for 2016.
- Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar's first official visit to Beijing which began on Monday would usher in bilateral and multi-lateral high-level activities, including the September G-20- meet in Hangzhou.

Breakthrough in establishing a hotline between India and China military is close

- India and China are close to a breakthrough in establishing a hotline between the two military headquarters as part of an effort to improve border management through a new round of confidence building measures (CBMs).
- Mr. Parrikar said that first talks with Chinese Defence Minister and with Vice-Chairman of the Central Military Commission, focused on CBMs through various means like increasing the local border meeting points.
- Mr. Parrikar raised the issue of clarification of the Line of Actual Control (LAC) with his interlocutors in order to ensure "stability at the border."
- the Chinese side agreed to enhance CBMs to bolster border management, but did not demonstrate particular enthusiasm in the clarification of the LAC.
- Mr. Parrikar said that neither side specifically raised India's "in principle" agreement with the United States on the Logistics Support Agreement (LSA), though the Chinese side "indicated" its concerns on this topic.
- Mr. Parrikar took up the negative fallout of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) from Gwadar to Kashgar during talks. "
- On China's role in blocking U.N. sanctions on Masood Azhar, head of the banned Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), Mr. Parrikar said that he "expressed his feeling [that] it was not exactly the right direction that they [the Chinese side] have taken."
- Earlier, the Defence Minister said that "India attaches highest priority to its relations with China."

External affairs ministry exploring legal options in Mallya case

- The External Affairs Ministry is consulting legal experts to explore the option of deportation of Vijay Mallya in connection with the money laundering probe against the liquor baron in the Rs. 900 crore IDBI 'loan fraud' case.
- On revocation of the passport of Mr. Mallya, whose Kingfisher Airlines has allegedly defaulted on loans of over Rs. 9,400 crore, the Ministry, which has "suspended" his passport, said it was examining the reply sent by him while declining to divulge its contents.

- The Ministry was also examining the response provided by Mr. Mallya through his lawyer to the show-cause notice asking why his passport should not be impounded or revoked.
- Once the deportation proceedings were initiated, the government would seek the U.K.'s assistance to interdict Mr. Mallya and fly him back to India.

After J-e-M snub by China, India allows China declared terrorist

- Dolkun Isa, a German national of Uighur ethnicity who is in the middle of the latest diplomatic stand-off between India and China, has requested Indian and German authorities to ensure his safety during his next week's visit to Dharamshala.
- Mr. Isa, a leader of the so-called World Uighur Congress, who has been declared a "terrorist" in China, said he was granted an electronic visa by India to attend a conference in Dharamshala.
- Beijing was quick to protest. "Dolkun Isa is a terrorist on red notice of Interpol and the Chinese police. Bringing him to justice is a due obligation of relevant countries,"
- However, Indian Govt said that the MEA was yet to "ascertain" the details of the conference.
- The WUC is a member of the Unrepresented Nations and People's Organisation (UNPO), founded in 1991 in The Hague, according to the UNPO website.
- The Dharamshala conference is being organised by the Citizen Power of China, an organisation based in the U.S.

Foreign secretary of Pak and India to meet at the 'Heart of Asia' conference

- Pakistan Foreign Secretary Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry will meet Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar for bilateral talks with their delegations on the sidelines of the Afghan donor 'Heart of Asia' conference.
- Officials of both countries confirmed that the initiative for the meeting came from the Indian side.
- In a statement issued in Islamabad, Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said Mr. Chaudhry would hold "bilateral meetings with other leading delegations attending the ['Heart of Asia'] meeting."
- The bilateral meeting might include discussions on the Pathankot airbase attack and a possible visit by the National Investigation Agency (NIA) to Pakistan to probe the plot behind the attack.

India cancelled visa for Dolkum Isa

- In an about-turn, India cancelled the visa issued to the exiled Uighur-Chinese leader Dolkun Isa, even as the Citizen Power for China, the Washington DC-based organisers of the Dharmshala event told that the event may not take place in the way planned.
- The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said that the glitches of the electronic visa system of the Ministry of Home Affairs is the reason for cancellation of visa.
- China criticised the Indian move to grant him a visa to attend the conference, despite an Interpol Red Corner notice against him, Isa said that he believed "India had bowed to Chinese pressure."
- Mr Isa, heading the World Uighur Congress, was designated a "terrorist" by Beijing and has faced travel curbs under Chinese pressure.

India and Pakistan foreign secretary meet first time after Pathankot attack

- The much-anticipated talks between the Indian and Pakistani Foreign Secretaries on Tuesday failed to make headway on the Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue, with both sides trading allegations.
- Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar conveyed that Pakistan cannot be in denial on the impact of terrorism on the bilateral relationship. Terrorist groups based in Pakistan targeting India must not be allowed to operate with impunity
- The Pakistan delegation, led by Foreign Secretary Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry, alleged that Indian intelligence agencies were responsible for the unrest in Balochistan, and Mr. Jaishankar “firmly rebutted” the charge.
- The meeting between Mr. Chaudhry and Mr. Jaishankar was the first after the January 2 Pathankot attack.

Unfazed by China placing a technical hold India is ready with other cases

- Unfazed by China placing a “technical hold” on classifying Jaish-e-Mohammad founder Masood Azhar as a terrorist by the sanctions committee of the United Nations, India is ready with cases of other JeM individuals.
- India believes that China, by siding with ally Pakistan, is turning a multilateral issue into a bilateral one given that the JeM is known to have interests beyond South Asia and was listed as a terrorist group by the U.N. in 2001.
- “The Chinese don’t look good by siding with the Pakistanis on the issue. After all, we are talking about designating individuals. It is not a government-to-government issue at all.
- Also, the Indian action to designate Azhar as a terrorist was co-sponsored by the United States, the United Kingdom and France, revealing that Delhi was not alone in its efforts.
- A “technical hold” on designating Azhar was placed by the Chinese earlier this month.
- Simultaneously, India is engaging China on Azhar by talking to Pakistan at the just-concluded Foreign Secretary-level interaction in Delhi. China had publicly suggested that India hold direct talks with Pakistan on the issue.
- A “technical hold” in the 15-member sanctions committee remains valid for six months following which a decision to block or proceed with the proposed action must be conveyed to the secretariat.

BUSINESS AND ECONOMY

NITI Aayog to propose model farm land act

- Even as the Bill to amend the land acquisition law remains stuck with a parliamentary committee, the NITI Aayog is all set to propose a Model Act for freeing up of farm land through leasing.
- The Act is meant for States that plan to legalise farm land leasing. State governments are expected to improvise it to suit the local socio-political requirements.
- Attestation of the lease is proposed to be done at the level of the sarpanch, local bank official or notary.
- The Model Act proposes that farmers and farmer groups be allowed to lease out land. The definition of ‘farm land’ is proposed to be broadened to include food processing.
- The Model Act proposes quicker litigation process in case of disputes, by suggesting recourse through criminal proceedings and special tribunal, the source said.

- At present, only land owners can avail of crop insurance schemes or loans. Also, disaster relief in case of drought and crop damage is provided only to the owners and not cultivators.
- The Model Act will enable share croppers to receive such benefits and relief. “Lessee cultivators could raise crop loans on the basis of expected produce.
- The Model Act is being finalised by an expert committee which NITI Aayog Vice- Chairman Arvind Panagariya had set up in September 2015 under former Commission for Agricultural Costs & Prices (CACP) chairman T. Haque.

Second Global Exhibition on Services to be held between April 21-23

- The government will utilise the upcoming Global Exhibition on Services (GES) to garner support for India's proposal for a Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA) on Services that it wants to be taken up for negotiations at the (WTO)-level.
- The second (annual) edition of GES is slated for April 21-23 to boost trade and foreign direct investment in the services sector and will be held at Greater Noida in the national capital region.
- The GES will also see discussions on another important area of India's interest — regarding elimination of curbs on temporary movement of professionals and relaxation of labour mobility norms across the world.
- The TFA on Services was proposed by India along the lines of the WTO's TFA on Goods (aimed at easing customs rules to expedite global trade flows in the merchandise sector).
- However, so far India's proposal for a TFA in Services has found few takers at the multilateral level, the sources said.
- India had recently dragged the U.S. to the WTO over the Obama administration's move to hike fees for H1B and L1 visas — temporary work visas for skilled professionals.
- Being the largest user of these visas, India feels America's decision is discriminatory because it will mainly impact Indian tech firms.
- India is also taking up with the U.K. its concerns over the recent restrictions in the British immigration law that is likely to hurt professionals including from India.
- In a statement to promote the GES, Govt said: “Removal of restriction on temporary movement of professionals and easing labour mobility could constitute major step towards facilitation of international trade in services leading to global growth, employment and prosperity.
- The GES focus sectors, among others include banking and financial services, education and environmental services.

AIIB might give one the first loans to India

- India hopes to receive one of the first loans issued by the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) later this year, as it looks to raise \$500 million for solar power projects from the newly created lender.
- Funding for clean energy projects would allay fears of environmental lobbyists that the bank's relaxed lending criteria could promote dirty fuels like coal in developing economies, like India, that are in a hurry to ramp up energy output.
- The multilateral investment bank, which has authorised capital of \$100 billion, plans to join global clean-energy initiatives, and could fund eco-friendly investment projects to avoid allegations of promoting pollution.

- India, the bank's second biggest shareholder after China, is looking to borrow from the AIIB, to back Prime Minister Narendra Modi's plan of expanding installed solar capacity to 100 gigawatts by 2022.
- Interest on the loan is likely to be 2-2.5 per cent and would be linked to LIBOR — a floating benchmark based on the rate at which commercial banks lend to each other — for a term of over 15 years.
- The AIIB, which is head-quartered in Beijing and was launched in January, did not comment directly on borrowing by India but said it was developing a project pipeline in a number of countries.

Uttar Pradesh has generated maximum employment among large states

- Among the larger States, Uttar Pradesh has seen the highest growth in enterprises and employment generation over the past decade, outstripping the economically strong states such as Gujarat, Maharashtra and Punjab, according to data from the Sixth Economic Census released by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation.
- Uttar Pradesh has seen a 67.4 per cent growth in the number of economic establishments in the state between 2005 and 2013 compared to a national average of 41.8 per cent.
- The country's most populous state has fared better than all of the major economic states such as Gujarat (66.3 per cent), Tamil Nadu (15.6 per cent), Karnataka (15 per cent), Maharashtra (47.8 per cent) and West Bengal (41.4 per cent).
- Notably, Uttar Pradesh has been placed third in terms of growth in employment (79.4 per cent) over the last decade generated by its economic establishments, significantly ahead of the other states such as Gujarat (65.9 per cent), Maharashtra (37.9 per cent), Karnataka (19.9 per cent) and Tamil Nadu (22.5 per cent).
- The Economic Census also provides data on whether the enterprises and employment have been created in rural or urban areas.
- Overall, urban India has performed better, seeing a growth of 47 per cent in the number of establishments and 42 per cent growth in employment over the last decade. Rural India saw a growth of 38.4 per cent and 34.8 per cent, respectively.
- The growth of establishments in the last decade was 90 per cent in rural Uttar Pradesh, more than twice as fast as the 40 per cent seen in urban Uttar Pradesh.
- Similarly, employment growth in the state came in at 97.7 per cent in its rural portion and 61.3 per cent in its urban centres.

Civil aviation policy will be released soon

- The government is close to reaching a consensus on the civil aviation policy, including the contentious flying abroad norm for airlines, also known as the '5/20 rule'.
- The 5/20 rule requires an airline to have five years of domestic flying experience and 20 aircraft in its fleet before it can fly to overseas destinations.
- The government's plan to ease the 5/20 rule has divided the aviation industry with the incumbent airlines opposing any move to relax the norms and the new airlines Vistara and AirAsia India pressing for abolition of the rule.

Market expects 25 bps rate cut in the first bi-monthly review of monetary policy

- With most of the conditions set by the RBI Governor for further easing of the monetary policy met, market participants said the stage is set for at least a 25 bps reduction in interest rate in the first bi-monthly review of monetary policy.
- The case for a rate cut becomes even stronger considering the benign CPI trends and a strengthened transmission mechanism..
- Retail inflation for February grew by 5.18 per cent, the slowest in four months due to lower food inflation.
- In the budget, the government showed resolve in adhering to the fiscal consolidation path by keeping the fiscal deficit target for 2016-17 at 3.5 per cent.
- The central bank has reduced interest rate by 125 bps to 6.75 per cent since January 2015. However, it kept interest rate unchanged in the last two monetary policy reviews.
- The future inflation trajectory beckons more hope and we believe that for a major part of the current fiscal inflation could well be below 5 per cent, and with a little bit of luck, it may even go lower than 4 per cent.
- Bankers are also expecting the central bank will revise the liquidity framework to address structural issues in liquidity management.
- Liquidity deficit in the banking system was over Rs.2 lakh crore in March, mainly due to lack of government spending which jacked up the short term rates.
- SBI — the country's largest lender — had demanded that the government's cash balances to be kept with the lenders, and not with the Reserve Bank of India, which will give more flexibility to banks for managing their liquidity.

States are set to exceed their fiscal deficit targets

- India's gross fiscal deficit for 2015-2016 could be 6.9 per cent of GDP, wider than the budget estimate of 6.3 per cent, according to an analysis.
- Although the Centre's estimates show that it will succeed in keeping its fiscal deficit within the target of 3.9 per cent of GDP, a slippage is expected by the States as a whole.
- The study is based on the budget projections of 18 States, which make up just less than 80 per cent of India's economy. These States released their budget projections for the upcoming fiscal year over the past month.
- The IMF estimates that the average fiscal deficit for the emerging market and middle-income economies was 1.1 per cent in 2015. For G20 emerging market economies it was 4 per cent. Its latest data shows that China's general government deficit was 1.9 per cent of GDP in 2015 and is projected to rise to 2.3 per cent in 2016.
- The IMF calculates fiscal deficit differently than how it is done in India. It excludes disinvestment proceeds, which are essentially capital receipts, from the calculations for instance. Its estimate for India of 7.2 per cent for 2015 is, therefore, higher than the official estimates
- Though States cut expenditure to reduce the deficit, they by and large avoided touching capital spending, which saw only a minor decrease. Much of the hit was taken by current expenditure.
- This, the study concludes, is an important development as last year when the centre decided to give more untied funds to States following the 14th Finance Commission Award, the risk was that States would be reckless with spending.
- The deficit widened despite the higher-than-expected funds transfers from the Centre on account of the implementation of the 14th Finance Commission award, according to the study, which projects further slippage this year: To 2.9 per cent, against the official estimate of 2.6 per cent.

- The spoilers this year are going to be the twin burdens of the wage hikes following the awards of the pay commissions of the States and the interest bill on UDAY (Ujwal DISCOM Assurance Yojana) bonds.
- According to latest available information, eight States will issue around Rs.1.8 lakh crore of UDAY bonds over 2016 and 2017. As per the norms, the State deficits will still have to finance the interest costs of these bonds.
- Despite the fiscal slippage of the States, the study doesn't see the aggregate government borrowings rising much this year.
- According to RBI data, States borrowed a total of Rs.2.95 lakh crore last year, which is around half of the gross borrowings of the Centre, of Rs. Six lakh crore.
- Union Finance Minister Arun Jaitley has indicated that instead of fixed annual targets, the amended FRBM could specify a range for deficit to be contained within. However, the unpredictability even in a narrow range could trigger volatility in the markets.
- Lower levels of government borrowings can bring down borrowing costs for all borrowers – government and private--and thus restart the investments cycle and spur growth.
- It has also been suggested by a number of public finance experts that in the revised FRBM framework, the Government must also commit to not borrow to finance consumption spending.
- Over the long run, government borrowings to finance fiscal deficits raise inter-generational issues.

More than 21000 crore pumped by FPI in March

- Overseas investors pumped in over Rs.21,000 crore (over \$3 billion) into Indian equity markets in March after pulling out massive funds in the preceding four months.
- However, Foreign Portfolio Investors (FPIs) have pulled out Rs.1,476 crore in the debt markets.

Purchasing managers index show turn around in manufacturing sector

- Indian manufacturing saw a significant upswing in March due to a pickup in domestic demand and an increase in output, according to the Nikkei India Manufacturing Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI).
- Analysts said that the Index, which stood at an eight-month high of 52.4 in March, suggests a turnaround in the manufacturing sector and assumes significance following the country's core sector output clocking its fastest growth in 15 months in February.
- A value above 50 in the PMI implies an expansion, while one below 50 shows a contraction. The corresponding index values in January and February were 51.1. Core sector output grew 5.7 per cent in February.
- In the last ten years, the manufacturing PMI has fallen by an average 0.6 points between February and March, so this year's 1.3 point rise is indicative of an improvement in the underlying trend, primarily led by strengthening domestic order demand.

Freight handling target reduced due to global slowdown

- The government has scaled down the freight handling target of major ports for the year 2016-17 after they failed to achieve 695 million tonnes set by the Shipping Ministry for 2015-16 as a global slowdown affected cargo volumes.

- 13 major ports in the country ended 2015-16 by recording a moderate growth of 4.13 per cent over the year-ago period by handling 606.37 million tonnes of cargo.
- Several other reasons for the ports missing out on cargo targets including European economic crisis, ban on export of iron ore by some states, a drop in imports from China and decrease in industrial output in India.
- Following this, the Ministry scaled down the target for 2016-17 to 644 million tonnes, lower by nearly 51 million tonnes from the 695 million tonnes fixed for 2015-16.
- For the current year, six ports (Haldia, Paradip, Kamarajar, Chennai, V.O. Chidambaranar and Cochin) have been asked to handle 10 per cent more cargo than they handled during 2015-16, five ports (Mumbai, JNPT, Visakhapatnam, New Mangalore and Kandla) are to handle an additional 1 to 5 per cent cargo while targets for Kolkata and Mormugao have been scaled down marginally.
- During 2015-16, major ports handled 606.37 million tonnes against 581.34 million tonnes in the year-ago period. Coal for power plants, fertilisers, pulses, iron and steel and petroleum products were the main drivers of this growth.
- According to Shipping Ministry statement, since 2012-13, only four, three and four ports respectively had crossed the target.
- This year, only Mormugao Port could do it. During March 2016, Kandla Port created history by handling 100 million tonnes of cargo. In the east coast, Paradip Port moved 76.38 million tonnes of cargo.

Bankers view that Mallya can pay more than his offer

- The consortium of bankers led by the State Bank of India is likely to reject the Rs.4,000-crore offer from liquor baron Vijay Mallya to settle the dues of Kingfisher Airlines as it is of the view that the promoter can afford to pay more.
- Mr. Mallya had offered to pay Rs.4,000 crore by September and another Rs.2,000 crore if Kingfisher won a lawsuit seeking damages from a plane engine maker, his lawyers informed the Supreme Court last week.
- The total due of the airline is around Rs.9,000 crore, of which the principal amount is Rs.6,903 crore.
- Bankers had met over the weekend to discuss Mr. Mallya's offer. However, they are yet to respond to it formally.
- The next hearing in the case is on April 7. Bankers also said they were not in a position to take a haircut to settle dues because of adverse public opinion.

Central Bank cuts repo rate by 25 bps

- The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) cut the benchmark repo rate by 25 basis points to 6.5 per cent, as widely expected, with Governor Raghuram Rajan assuring that the monetary stance will remain "accommodative."
- Bankers said the comment signals that the central bank is leaving the door open for further reductions.
- The rate cut could help lower the cost of loans for consumers, including automobile and home buyers.
- The RBI said easing price pressures had been a key factor in determining the policy stance.
- RBI also cited "government's effective supply side measures keeping a check on food prices, and the government's commendable commitment to fiscal consolidation."
- Retail inflation slowed to 5.18 per cent in February after accelerating for six consecutive months.

- The repo rate, which is at its lowest in five years, will help banks reduce borrowing costs, helping boost economic growth.
- The latest rate cut should be seen in the backdrop of banks reducing lending rates by 25 to 50 bps since adopting a new loan pricing mechanism — the marginal cost of funds based lending rate — in the first week of April, according to the RBI Governor.
- The RBI also announced measures to ease liquidity in the banking system.
- The daily requirement for maintaining cash reserve ratio has been reduced to 90 per cent from 95 per cent from April 16, the marginal standing facility rate (the penal rate at which banks borrow from the RBI) was cut by 75 basis points and the reverse repo rate (the rate banks earn when they park money with the RBI) raised by 25 bps.

Stand-up India campaign to provide entrepreneurship to SC,ST and women unveiled

- PM unveiled the 'Stand-up India' scheme to promote entrepreneurship among women, scheduled castes and tribes by enabling them secure easier loans and said this could be an engine of job creation for the youth.
- "Dalits and poor people, if given an opportunity, can bring in various reforms in the country. That's my vision for Stand-up India... This scheme is going to transform the lives of Dalit and tribal communities," Mr. Modi said
- Under the scheme, SC/ST and women entrepreneurs will be provided loans of between Rs.10 lakh and Rs.1 crore for setting up new enterprises.
- Mr. Modi said this will help in creating 2.5 lakh entrepreneurs throughout the country as every bank branch will be required to provide two such loans – to a Dalit or SC/ST person and a woman.
- The Prime Minister said the scheme, which was announced during his Independence Day speech last year, is being unveiled on April 5 to mark the birth anniversary of Congress Dalit Leader Babu Jagjivan Ram.
- Babu Jagjivan Ram did a lot to usher in the green revolution. During the 1971 war, which we won, he was the defence minister.
- The prime minister said the scheme aims to empower every Indian and enable them to stand on their feet. It seeks to convert "job-seekers into job-creators."
- Mr. Modi also distributed 5,100 e-rickshaws under the scheme and 151 women were among those who received the vehicles.

Group of joint secretaries to put substance and speed to flagship programmes

- NDA Government has constituted a group of joint secretaries from select ministries to evolve strategies to put more substance and speed into the action plans for flagship programmes such as Digital India, Swachh Bharat, Skill India and Make in India.
- The final presentations will be made to Prime Minister Narendra Modi
- The mandate of this group, is to devise such plans, is to finalise a strategy over the next month and a half to ensure these programmes deliver outcomes with a greater visible impact on the ground before the 2019 general election.
- Some new initiatives could be unveiled on the basis of these deliberations during the government's second anniversary celebrations.

- Marathon interactions are being held to evolve a fresh strategy for each of these that can be executed before the next general election.
- The group of joint secretaries has been tasked with formulating a blueprint for each programme. Initial presentations have been circulated to the respective nodal ministries for their comments and inputs.
- The ministers concerned have also been instructed to hold discussions with officials at the level of deputy secretary and above to finalise a strategy. The final presentations are to be made to the Prime Minister.
- It is a good move if it helps to improve the ease of doing business in these sectors and accelerates investment flows. Monitoring and setting up committees alone, however, will not work if the officials working at the ground level are not helpful.
- On the fourth Wednesday of every month, the Prime Minister usually meets secretaries of the Union government and chief secretaries of all State governments to review the progress of projects under implementation.
- These meetings are held over video-conference, using an ICT-based multi-modal monitoring system called PRAGATI (Pro-Active Governance and Timely Implementation).

Lagarde urged governments to take pro-growth reforms

- Global economy is losing momentum and governments should take action to preserve the recovery has cautioned.
- Advanced economies still face a hangover from the global financial crisis of 2007—2009 in terms of too much debt, low investment.
- A stronger dollar has weighed on growth in the United States, while China's economy has slowed.
- The global outlook for the next six months had weakened, suggesting that IMF may be revising its forecasts.
- In January, the IMF forecast global growth of 3.4 percent this year. Lagarde urged governments to take pro-growth reforms and to increase spending on public infrastructure.
- Mediocre growth that doesn't help ordinary people much risks political backlash that "has consequences for the social and political fabric in many countries," she said.
- She warned against turning to protectionism favouring domestic producers in competition with foreign firms as a response.

Governments tax collection exceeds budget and revised estimates

- The government collected Rs.14.6 lakh crore in taxes in financial year 2015-16, which is higher than the Budget Estimates and Revised Estimates for the year.
- The government data shows that the bulk of the growth in total tax revenues was due to the increase in indirect tax collections.
- Indirect tax revenue in FY 2015-16 stood at Rs.7.11 lakh crore, which is higher than the BE and RE by Rs.65,618 crore and Rs.9,885 crore, respectively.
- Indirect tax collections were 31.1 per cent higher than in the previous financial year.
- Direct tax collections grew 7.6 per cent in the fiscal year 2015-16 to Rs 7.48 lakh crore, marginally lower than the RE of Rs 7.52 lakh crore.
- The aggregate Budget Estimates (BE) for total direct and indirect tax revenues for the fiscal year 2015-16 was Rs 14.45 lakh crore, which was revised to Rs 14.55 lakh crore. The actual collection (provisional) is Rs 14.60 lakh crore.

- The direct tax collection, however, is lower than the RE of Rs 7.52 lakh crore.

Government looking for various measures to increase exports

- The government is considering several measures, such as offering incentives for small exporters and a package to revive Special Economic Zones (SEZs), to help reverse the trend of a prolonged contraction in merchant exports since December 2014.
 - Labour-intensive export sectors and organic food producers will get concessions and a package is on the anvil for SEZs so that they can utilize large tracts of unused land available with them.
 - Also being considered are steps such as categorising the entire export credit given by all lenders separately under priority sector lending without riders, ensuring better coordination with Indian missions overseas, as well as relaxing norms for the Exim Ban and ECGC to give them greater operational flexibility.
 - Setting up of three dedicated zones for manufacture of Active Pharmaceutical Ingredients (API or drug raw materials) and other pharmaceutical items, incentives for the bio-tech industry especially for skill development, sops for manufacture and export of electronic items.
 - These proposals will be taken up soon with other Ministries and regulatory authorities, Commerce & Industry Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said after the Board of Trade (BOT) meeting.
 - The 72-member Board is a government-industry panel looking into measures to boost exports. The recently reconstituted Board chaired by Sitharaman held its first meeting on Wednesday.
 - Indian exports have declined from \$314 billion in FY'14 to \$310 billion in FY'15. Exports in FY'16 are expected to shrink further to nearly \$260 billion.
 - Trade bodies demanded better infrastructure to shore up exports and called for tax benefits to be extended to small and medium units.
- Besides, greater participation of the States is also required to boost exports.

Energy Efficiency Services claim LED bulbs could lead to good savings

- Shifting to LED bulbs could save an average family around Rs. 4,000 a year on their power bills due to energy efficiency gains and lower replacement costs, according to Energy Efficiency Services (EESL), a government-run joint venture.
- The company's National Energy Efficient Fan Programme, is expected to help reduce household electricity bills and the country's overall carbon dioxide emissions.
- Taking an average of five bulb points per household and an assumption that five incandescent bulbs are replaced with LEDs, a household stands to have energy savings of 1.77 kWh per day and annually 649 kWh.
- Considering average tariff as Rs.4/ kWh, an average household stands to save approximately Rs.2,550 annually.
- These savings will proportionally increase for households with more light bulbs and for those located in States with higher power tariffs.
- The average electricity tariff in Delhi, for example, is Rs. 6.82 per unit, which works out to an annual saving of Rs. 4,400 if five incandescent are changed to LED.
- In addition, LED bulbs have the advantage of longevity — they do not need to be replaced nearly as much as incandescent or CFL bulbs are done.
- The life expectancy of an LED bulb is 25,000 hours (around two years and 10 months), compared to 8,000 hours for CFL bulbs and 1,200 hours for incandescent bulbs.

- Power Minister Piyush Goyal had repeatedly emphasised that the country would save 100 billion units of electricity a year by switching over to LED, which, he said, translated to a saving of Rs.40,000 crore across all households.
- Switching to LEDs also helps the government meet its carbon dioxide emission reduction targets, since lower power consumption will eventually result in lower power production and hydrocarbon use .
- According to the website of the Domestic Efficient Lighting Programme (DELP), the government has sold 9.17 crore LED bulbs as of April 6, the utilisation of which would result in a reduction of 26,451 tonnes of carbon dioxide per day, or almost 10 million tonnes a year.
- Under the Street Light National Programme, the government has converted 7,50,780 streetlights to LED, which, according to the programme website, has resulted in a saving of more than 2.72 lakh units of electricity per day.
- There are 35 crore inefficient fans across the country. If all of these are replaced with 5-star rated energy efficient fans, the country will have an expected annual energy savings of 47 billion KWh with a reduction of over 12,250 MW of electricity load.

Industry not in favour of increasing minimum monthly income of contract workers

- Labour Ministry has proposed a minimum monthly income of Rs.10,000 for contract workers, evoking strong reactions from the industry.
- The move will drastically increase the minimum wages of contract labourers from around Rs.6,000 per month that is paid to them in a few sectors at present.
- According to the plan the employers will need to pay Rs 10,000 as minimum monthly income to contract workers for all kinds of work.
- At present, employers give the fixed minimum wages to workers for 45 economic activities, as mentioned in the Minimum Wages Act, 1948.
- Although there are varying estimate of contract labour employed at present, the VV Giri National Labour Institute, an autonomous body of the Labour Ministry, estimated in a study there were 3.6 crore contract labourers in the country.
- However, out of them, only 60 lakh contract workers were covered under the Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act, 1970.
- The study also said that 30 per cent of all workers in private sector and around 32 per cent in the public sector are employed through contractors.
- As per the Contract Labour (Regulation & Abolition) Central Rules, 1971, the wages of the contract labour shall be according to the minimum wage prescribed under Minimum Wages Act, 1948 and it should be at par with the regular workers in cases where the contract worker perform the same kind of work as the former.
- Trade unions were divided on their move. While the RSS-affiliated Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS) appreciated the move, the Left-affiliated unions opposed it saying contract labour needs to be paid at par with regular workers
- The issue of wages to contract labour has led to increasing labour unrest in the past. In 2008, Graziano Trasmissioni CEO Lalit K Chaudhary was killed in mob violence incited by contract labours of the factory and one of their demands was higher wages.
- Even the Manesar plant of Maruti Suzuki had witnessed labour unrests due to various demands put forward by the contract labour including pay disparity.

Govt planning to amend EPF Scheme 1952 for sick PSUs

- The government will soon amend the Employees Provident Fund Scheme 1952 to enable loss-making public sector enterprises to continue to run their own PF scheme.
- Under the current rules, loss-making and sick public sector enterprises and private companies which have been recording losses for three consecutive years, cannot operate their own PF trusts.
- There are about 3,000 companies that manage employees' savings worth nearly Rs. 2.74 lakh crore through such PF trusts to give the staff speedier and simpler access to their retirement corpus at a lower cost.
- Public sector firms such as Oil and Natural Gas Corporation Limited (ONGC), Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited (BHEL) and Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) also have their own PF trusts.
- However, the PF trusts of firms incurring losses for three successive years are transferred to the state-run EPFO.
- EPFO manages PF savings of about 4 lakh establishments with a corpus of Rs. 6.34 lakh crores as on 31, March 2015 and regulates the company-run PF trusts.
- The proposed exemption for public sector undertakings or PSUs will benefit state power distribution companies making persistent losses and others such as MTNL which have been running at loss in the last five years.
- But there's no relief for private firms, including several multinational companies that suffer losses in their initial years in India.
- Public sector undertaking, statutory bodies and corporations fall within ambit and scope of 'State' as defined in Article 12 of the Constitution and there is a sovereign protection of the Trust Fund.

More than 500 crore FDI proposals cleared

- An inter-minister panel on Friday cleared 10 foreign direct investment (FDI) proposals worth Rs.505 crore, including that of Singapore-based Helix Investment.
- Foreign Investment Promotion Board (FIPB), chaired by Economic Affairs Secretary Shaktikanta Das, has approved 10 proposals out of 18 on the agenda.
- Helix Investment Pte proposal worth Rs.475 crore was approved by the Board.
- Of the 18, two proposals were rejected and 4 including that of Sharekhan was deferred.

Various reforms still needed to implement smart city programme

- Despite improvement in India's business environment, there is still a need for reforms at various levels to successfully implement the Smart Cities programme, the World Economic Forum said in a report.
- The government has announced plans for 100 smart cities and 500 Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT) cities. It also approved Rs. 1 lakh crore for the purpose .
- The WEF report castigated India's "archaic" bureaucratic processes, where "little value is added with each step", yet delays are common.
- The problems in the business environment stemmed from these bureaucratic processes, where obtaining licences and approvals takes a long time, and land acquisition is fraught with delays and uncertainties, according to the report.
- The dispute resolution system also adds to businesses' costs.

- In the report, WEF offers solutions for challenges in business environment, institutional setup, and sector-specific issues, all of which the government has to take cognisance of while going forward with the Smart Cities programme.
- “ULBs (urban local bodies) will play a crucial role in implementing the urban rejuvenation programmes, but they lack the resources to execute the programmes,” according to the report by the WEF and PwC.
- A survey on smart cities highlighted the fact that city governments are the least-prepared to execute the programmes from among all the stakeholders, which include the national government, state governments, the private sector, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and academic institutions.
- The revenue collected by ULBs in India is less than 0.9 per cent of the gross domestic product, significantly less than that of Brazil (7.4 per cent) and South Africa (6 per cent).
- The report also highlights sector-specific problems, such as water management, where around 50 per cent of water production is lost due to theft or leakages during the distribution process, the lack of metering, and low user charges.
- There are other infrastructural issues plaguing India’s urban centres, such as the unavailability of 100 per cent power, the poor quality of roads, and the paucity of social infrastructure in healthcare, and safety and security.

India thinks UK's new guidelines on ICTs are inconsistent with WTO agreement

- India has told Britain that by tightening norms for skilled foreign workers it was mixing up Intra Company Transfers (ICTs) with immigration and this could affect bilateral ties.
- The commerce ministry will seek legal advice on whether the new guidelines on ICTs discriminate against India and are inconsistent with the WTO General Agreement on Trade in Services.
- The move comes amid concerns by Indian tech firms which are worried that the tighter norms for foreign skilled workers would chip away at their bottom line.
- The Indian IT/ITeS sector is mainly affected by the stipulation that from April 2017 onwards a company (including India-based), looking to bring a worker into the U.K. for short duration, specifically to carry out the work of another organisation, will have to pay them a minimum annual salary of £41,500.
- This minimum threshold represents a 67 per cent increase from the extant limit of £24,800.
- Industry believes that these impacts will not achieve either of the government’s aims of a decrease in migration or an increase in U.K. skilled workers but negatively impact overall UK productivity.
- It was found that Indian IT workers account for over 90 per cent of migrants in the category known as “ICTs for third-party contracting”.
- Noting that skilled migrant workers have helped in boosting its economy and reducing the costs of companies, Britain, however, said the skilled worker visa “reforms” were taken to safeguard employment opportunities for its residents as well as to bring down the reliance of the U.K. enterprises on skilled labour from other countries.
- The new norms also state that from autumn 2016, all intra-company transferees will be required to pay the Immigration Health Surcharge.
- The U.K. will review the extent to which allowances may be counted as salary to ensure it has appropriate safeguards in place against undercutting of the resident labour market.
- However, to provide flexibility, the minimum salary threshold for intra-company transferees working in the U.K. for between five and nine years has been reduced from £155,300 to £120,000.

Unified Payments Interface digital wallet to be unveiled soon

- Having different digital wallets for different e-commerce sites could well be a thing of the past. Now, you can have only one wallet, which is essentially your bank account, from where all payments could be made for any transactions.
- It does not need the entry of bank account details and 11-character Indian Financial System (IFSC) code in every time transaction. All you need is an e-mail like Unified Payments Interface (UPI) address.
- In UPI, money transfer is possible in both send mode and collect mode. The present system of mobile payments offers only send mode.
- You can send money. But, one cannot pull the money from another account. Of course, approval from the person whose account will be debited, will be required to complete the transaction.
- A merchant or an individual can send a request to the UPI user for money which will be transferred after the user's approval. The difference with the present system is that, the person who is sending is not initiating the action.
- Also, one does not need to add any beneficiary account, unlike while transferring money through Internet banking. There is a limit of Rs.1 lakh per transaction through the UPI platform.
- One need not give a bank account number or any code to do a transaction. "Only using the virtual address of UPI, one can send money or allow someone to pull money. The individual can either choose a static pin or a one time password to carry out transactions.
- But the real game changer is that this would end the need to have different wallets for different e-commerce sites. Complete interoperability is what the UPI platform aims to achieve.
- There are about 35-36 wallets in the payments system, which the banking regulator has approved.

PMO wants govt to rely on Aadhaar for schemes

- The government has decided to stop issuing new smart cards to beneficiaries of government schemes as Aadhaar is now backed by a law
- The Prime Minister's Office (PMO) has issued strict instructions to the Information Technology Ministry to ensure that States and the Central government stop issuing smart cards for new programmes for beneficiaries, and to rely on the Aadhaar-based Direct Benefit Transfer platform instead.
- The move will impact ministries such as Labour, Social Justice and Health, which are in the process or have already rolled out smart cards.
- The government had said earlier that over 100 crore people, constituting 93 per cent of the adult population, had a unique identification (UID) number under the Aadhaar platform.
- Last month, Union Minister for Social Justice and Empowerment had announced that all differently abled persons would soon get a unique identity card to avail welfare schemes. .
- State governments had also planned to use smart card technology for welfare schemes. For instance, Odisha was mulling smart cards for construction workers in the State.
- The PMO sent a separate communiqué to Labour Secretary Shankar Aggarwal in the context of a proposal to issue 40 crore smart cards to informal sector workers, called the Unorganised Workers' Identification Number (U-WIN).
- The UWIN cards were to be used by these workers to access benefits under schemes such as Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana , Aam Aadmi Bima Yojana , Atal Pension Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojana and Jeevan Jyoti Bima Yojana.

- The PMO rejected the proposal noting that Aadhaar would act as a “universal unique identifier for each citizen.”
- A UWIN number would not only duplicate work, but also introduce further problems in linking up with other databases which have already been linked with Aadhaar.
- Smart cards work using cryptography, which is more fool-proof than biometrics. Biometrics allow for remote, covert and non-consensual identification.
- Smart card vendors, however, said the move may not impact their market.

Industry ready to provide greater market access to EU

- Indian industry is ready to grant greater market access to European Union firms in areas such as automobiles, wines and spirits in return for gains in garments, automobiles, automobile components and services sector in a bid to end a deadlock on the proposed EU Free Trade Agreement.
- During last month’s 13th India-EU Summit, which was attended by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and EU leaders, both the side failed to reach an agreement on free trade and a specific date to restart talks.
- The leaders welcomed the re-engagement of discussions for furthering the proposed pact.
- India is open to giving greater market access to EU firms by lowering duties for automobiles, wines and spirits under the FTA provided it gets in return what it wants in other sectors.
- The automobile industry body Society of Indian Automobile Manufacturers and the auto-component industry body Automotive Component Manufacturers Association are on the same page with the CII on this issue, he said.
- The talks on the FTA (officially known as the broad-based Bilateral Trade and Investment Agreement) had commenced in 2007 and both the sides had held 16 rounds of negotiations till 2013.
- Though India and the EU had held one stock-taking meeting each in the last three months on the FTA, formal negotiations are yet to re-start.
- The talks have been stalled as the negotiators have so far been unable to come up with a compromise solution to address the key demands of the EU — that India lower or eliminate duties on automobiles and wines & spirits.
- India's main demands on data security status, easier temporary movement of skilled professionals and seamless intra-corporate movement.
- While India looks into reducing or eliminating tariffs in sectors such as auto and liquor, the EU should do away with their non-tariff barriers that seem to have been erected mainly to protect some of their local firms but not as much for better safety or quality.
- The EU is learnt to have asked India to substantially bring down the “high” duties on automobiles as a pre-condition for resumption of the FTA negotiations. India's import duty on cars are between 60 and 120 per cent as against the EU's 10 per cent.
- India has also sought agricultural market access in the EU as well as disciplining of Sanitary and Phyto-sanitar and Technical Barriers to Trade to ensure that the concessions in the FTA that would be given by the EU result in effective market access.
- Since 2013, when the FTA talks were stalled, India has unilaterally undertaken several reforms such as allowing 49 per cent foreign investment in insurance and pension, easing of foreign investments norms in the banking, defence sectors.
- It has also allowed 100 per cent FDI in telecom, single-brand retail and in the market-place model of e-commerce.
- These reforms were cited during the stock-taking meeting and the EU was asked about their internal reforms that would similarly benefit India.

- The FTA negotiations were slated to restart in August 2015, but India deferred them saying it was disappointed and concerned over the EU imposing a ban on sale of around 700 pharmaceutical products clinically tested by GVK Biosciences.

India is ready to invest in Iran's petrochemical, fertiliser and LNG facilities

- India has offered to invest \$20 billion in Iran's petrochemical, fertilizer and liquefied natural gas (LNG) facilities and in return sought cheap natural gas and land to set up the units.
- Oil Minister Dharmendra Pradhan, who is in Iran with a delegation of industry executives for two days, discussed with his counterpart several outstanding issues related to the energy sector.
- He also urged Iran for a favourable treatment in the pricing of gas for India. The minister also wanted supply of gas at a competitive price and on a long-term basis for the life of the joint venture projects that Indian companies were interested in setting up.
- India was also keen to set up a gas cracker unit and a liquefied petroleum gas extraction unit in Chabahar and ways of transporting gas to India from Iran including through a planned Iran-Pakistan-India pipeline were discussed.
- The two sides also discussed the award of rights to Indian firms to develop Farzad-B gas fields and the pending payments by Indian refiners towards Iran's oil purchases.

NITI Aayog is working on sector-based medium term planning framework

- NITI Aayog, the government's policy think tank, is working on a sector-based medium-term planning framework.
- The new planning framework could replace five-year plans, the last of which is set to end in 2016—17.
- It was possible to synchronise with the finance commission cycle, the financial approval of schemes and projects of both the central and state government.
- The current financial year, 2016-17, is the last year of the 12th five-year plan.
- With the Planning Commission scrapped, the process for formulating a 13th five-year plan government has not been initiated, as a consequence of which the era of five-year plans is set to end in India this year.
- While medium-term growth is dependent on past performance, long-term growth, on the other hand, can only be enhanced by structural reforms and improving the productive capacity of the economy, he said.
- Union Finance Minister Arun Jaitley had announced in the Budget Speech that from the next financial year, the plan and non—plan distinction will be done away with for expenditure classification.
- The government had constituted a committee for proposing a new format of budget statements and accounts.
- The committee to be headed by Special Secretary Expenditure will co-opt state secretaries.
- The primary units of appropriation at both central and state levels are being revisited to create a clear distinction between revenue and capital items of expenditure so that accounts can be prepared in a bottoms-up manner.

Bankers hit sweet spot on IPO pricing amid volatility

- Companies and investment bankers seem to be getting the pulse of the market right more frequently when pricing shares meant for public issue.
- Shares of most entities that listed on the stock exchanges in 2015 and 2016 have stayed above the issue price even as the broader market has declined.
- According to stock exchange data, there have been 27 new listings since January 2015, and a little more than half — 15 to be precise — are trading above their respective issue prices.
- While there are still 12 companies that, in 2015 and 2016, dipped below their issue price, the trend is in sharp contrast to the earlier years when almost 65 per cent of the newly-listed companies traded below their issue prices shortly after their debut.
- This, even as the benchmark Sensex has lost 4.2 per cent this year, following a 5 per cent drop in 2015, according to data compiled by Bloomberg.
- The Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) had also taken a tough stand on the pricing of shares at the time of IPO.
- Specifically, only 42 out of 117 companies that made an IPO between 2008 and 2012 traded above their issue price at the end of that period. With SEBI cracking the whip, prices of shares from IPOs started doing better.
- Investment bankers say that IPO pricing is also a function of broader market direction along with the expected investor sentiment on the sector and the company fundamentals.
- Bankers also say that some amount of polarisation within the investment banking space has also led to this trend as most issues are being managed by leading domestic and foreign names that are typically known to be more cautious in pricing and due diligence.

Consumer price index fell to 4.83

- Consumer price inflation slowed to 4.83 per cent in March, the lowest reading in six months, government data showed.
- The decrease in consumer price index was mainly due to the marginal easing of prices across most sectors, the most significant of which were the 'food & beverages' and 'fuel & light' segments.
- India's industrial output as measured by the Index of Industrial Production (IIP) snapped a three-month losing streak to clock 2 per cent growth in February, the data revealed.
- The IIP moved to positive territory due to strong growth in infrastructure and consumer durables sectors.
- But experts said the industrial output numbers do not reflect sustainable recovery and the inflation trend could reverse in coming months.
- The IIP data assumes significance coming on the back of other indicators—such as the Index of Eight Core Industries and the Manufacturing Purchasing Managers' Index—also showing a pick-up in manufacturing activity.
- The Reserve Bank of India recently cut interest rates by 25 basis points to spur demand in the economy.
- The capital goods segment of the IIP continued to shrink in February for the fourth month in a row, declining 9.8 per cent. Similarly, output from the consumer non-durables sector dipped 4.2 per cent.
- The manufacturing segment of the IIP returned to growth in February recording 0.73 per cent, following three months of contraction.
- As has been the case over the past nine months, urban consumption growth has picked up and resulted in increased production of consumer durables.

- Electricity production, as measured in the IIP, grew by 9.6 per cent in February compared to 6.7 per cent in January.

Arvind Subramanian says India's trade policy is ambivalent

- There is ambivalence in India's trade policy and this is partly due to the disruption and dislocation that trade is causing across the world, Chief Economic Advisor Arvind Subramanian said.
- "We have had lot of reforms, the barriers have come down significantly, our trade has expanded, but when it comes to trade policy, there is a kind of genuine ambivalence on how rapidly India needs to open up domestically and to engage internationally whether it is the WTO or the TPP.
- This is a problem even in the U.S where presidential candidates are campaigning on anti-trade planks, he said.
- Carnegie senior associate Ashley J Tellis's new paper 'India as a leading power' argues that Prime Minister Narendra Modi's call for India to become a leading power represents a change in how the political leadership conceives of India's role in international politics.
- Mr Tellis' key argument is that Mr Modi's vision, when fulfilled, will mark the "third epoch in Indian foreign policy."
- In the first, India survived the U.S-Soviet cold war hostility through non-alignment, which was "essentially defensive;" and in the second, starting from 1991, India pursued strategic partnerships with more than 30 countries and emerged as a 'balancing power' that can influence outcomes in international debates.
- "Modi seeks to transform India from being merely an influential entity into one whose weight and preferences are defining for international politics," he said.
- "The currently tepid domestic economic liberalisation efforts" amounts to "forfeiting the possibilities of enhanced trade-driven growth," and blames domestic politics and fears of foreign domination for India's modest foreign trade, he said.

Possibility of Brexit hangs over India- EU FTA

- The negotiations on the proposed India-European Union (EU) Free Trade Agreement have been delayed due to the uncertainty over 'Brexit', or the possibility of Britain leaving the EU, according to official sources.
- The U.K. is slated to hold a referendum in June to decide whether it should stay as an EU member country.
- The EU's demand — that India must agree to eliminate the "high" duties on automobiles over a specified period of time, as a pre-condition for resuming the free trade agreement negotiations — seems to be a strategy to buy time till there is more clarity on the Brexit situation and its economic consequences.

Govt thinking about the right approach for WTO

- Inter-ministerial differences have cropped up on what should be India's strategy in dragging the U.S. to the WTO Dispute Settlement Body (DSB) in a matter involving renewable energy policies of several State governments in the U.S. "violating" the global trade body's norms.
- The renewable energy (solar & hydro power) policies in question allegedly have local content requirements and / or greater incentives to domestic manufacturers in the U.S. thereby "restricting and distorting" trade, and in turn "violating" WTO rules.

- The commerce ministry has opposed the power ministry's proposal that India should file sixteen separate cases against the U.S. with the WTO on the measures of different State governments there "providing protection" to the local renewable sector including solar panel producers.
- As per the commerce ministry, India will have better chances of winning the case if it, instead, files one comprehensive case incorporating the details of how all those states are "violating" the WTO norms using their "protectionist" policies, high-level government sources said, asking not to be identified.
- India had several years ago raised the matter before the WTO committees on Trade-Related Investment Measures (TRIMs) as well as on Subsidies & Countervailing Measures (SCM) by pointing out that the renewable energy schemes of many State governments in the U.S. had "very significant" domestic content requirements "violating" the US obligations under the WTO agreements on TRIMs and SCMs.
- It is learnt that the policies that India is looking into include that of California, Washington, Texas, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Massachusetts, South Carolina, Oregon and West Virginia.
- These policies apparently offer more incentives to domestically made items and components and/or to encourage local assembling of products used in the renewable sector.
- The government is also studying a report in this regard prepared by the Centre For WTO Studies at IIFT.
- The move comes close on the heels of India recently losing a case to the U.S. at the WTO pertaining to local content requirements in the Jawaharlal Nehru National Solar Mission for solar cells/modules.

Moody's investor services warn remittances decline could reduce economic growth

- Moody's Investor Services warned that a prolonged decline in inward remittances could dent India's economic growth though low oil prices are offsetting the negative impact for now.
- A report by Moody's Investors Service titled 'Falling remittances from the Gulf dampen benefits of lower oil prices' said that there is a direct correlation between oil prices and inward remittances and that low oil prices have affected remittances being sent to various countries.
- The report also finds that India—which saw its remittances grow at only 1-2 per cent per year since 2013, according to the World Bank—is relatively insulated to this slowdown due to the nature and sources of the remittances coming in.
- "For India, the Philippines, and Vietnam, diversified locations and vocations of overseas migrants could help to reduce the fall in worker remittances," the report said.

IMF says low oil prices helping countries with external sector

- The decline in oil prices has helped countries such as India improve their external positions, but low commodity prices have kept risks elevated in emerging market economies, the IMF said in its latest Global Financial Stability Report.
- The spill-over effects of the growing uncertainty about China's economy and setbacks to growth and confidence in advanced economies are other factors undermining global financial stability, according to the report.
- "These developments tightened financial conditions, reduced risk appetite, raised credit risks and stymied balance sheet repair," the IMF said in the report.
- The report warns that global output could decline 3.9 per cent by 2021 if action isn't taken to address the risks faced by the financial system.

- “The main message of this report is that additional measures are needed to deliver a more balanced and potent policy mix for improving the growth and inflation outlook and securing financial stability.
- In the absence of such measures, market turmoil may recur,” it said. However, if timely measures are taken, world output could expand by 1.7 percent, relative to the baseline, by 2018, the report said.
- The financial stability report assesses the risks faced by the global financial system and the current edition surveys the issues that surfaced since October 2015.
- IMF suggests that in advanced economies, banks must deal with bad assets and other legacy issues.
- Given the increasing role of China in the global financial system, “clear and timely communication of its policy decisions and transparency about its policy goals and strategies consistent with their achievement will be ever more important,” the IMF said.

Chinese growth within the planned growth for the year

- China recorded a growth rate of 6.7 per cent for the first quarter, slightly lower than the previous quarter’s figure but well within this year’s planned range, riding mainly on a fresh acceleration in the real estate and services sectors.
- Growth in the last quarter of 2015 was 6.8 per cent, but the marginal decline in the January-March quarter is in tune with the annual target of 6.5 per cent to 7 per cent GDP growth.
- Government is making transition from a low-end manufacturing and export-led model to a “supply-side” economy that focuses on consumption, services and manufacturing of hi-end products.
- There were other signs that the economy was moving into positive territory. On Wednesday, trade data released by the government showed that the import and export activity was higher than expected.
- Yet the surge in the real estate sector and a fresh dose of hefty lending partly explain the current expansion of the economy.
- The services sector expanded by 7.6 per cent till March, outpacing the 5.8 per cent GDP contribution by industry. However, services growth had dropped compared to its 8.3 per cent rise in the last quarter of 2015.
- The government may have to scale up financial stimulus, since higher housing and real estate demand is unlikely to push the economy to achieve the annual projected 6.5-7 per cent growth, according to some observers.
- Already, new bank loans and other forms of credit in March rose by \$351 billion—an amount that was surpassed by record lending in January. Rapid accumulation of debt is adding to the urgency of structural reforms in order to avoid a hard-landing in the future.
- There are signs of China’s economy “bottoming out”, but analysts warned of a persisting downward pressure on account of uncertainty in the global economy coupled with the difficulties in the country’s structural shift to consumption-driven growth and entrepreneurship.

Change in PF rules under consideration

- The Provident Fund office, following protest from trade unions, is considering to amend its new rules that restrict employees from taking out their entire PF balance till they turn 58, according to an official.
- Subscribers could be allowed to withdraw their entire savings in specific cases such as their own marriage, studying professional courses and illness.
- According to a February notification, EPFO subscribers can withdraw only their own share of PF deposit and the balance, comprising the employer’s contribution, only after the employee attains 58 years of age.

- The employer's share will continue to earn interest as the EPFO had recently approved a plan to credit interest even on inoperative accounts (those with no deposits for three consecutive years).
- The decision to place restrictions on withdrawing PF money was taken after it was found many workers took out all the money from the account immediately on quitting their jobs.
- However, this was opposed by the trade unions and over 1.2 lakh people signed an online petition to oppose the restrictions on withdrawals before retirement.
- The central trade unions had unanimously opposed the move at EPFO's Central Board of Trustees meeting held on March 29.
- At present, EPF accounts are mandatory for firms hiring 20 employees or more and are funded by employees paying 12 per cent of their salary to the EPFO with employers making a similar contribution.

Firm turnaround seen in the mining sector

- India's mining sector appears to be on a firm turnaround path after years of tumult with production of metallic minerals growing by nearly 20 per cent in the first eleven months of 2015-16 and total mineral output rising by 8.2 per cent, official data showed.
- While the value of the mineral production is lower than previous years owing to lower global prices, the recovery in quantum of output signals a higher demand for raw materials and augurs well for a sustainable industrial recovery.
- Mining sector output had contracted for three successive years till 2013-14, and made only a marginal recovery in 2014-15 as output of non-metallic minerals like limestone continued to shrink.
- In 2015-16, both metallic and non-metallic minerals reported robust growth. Mining has an over 14 per cent weightage in the Index of Industrial production or IIP, which has registered a 2.6 per cent growth between April 2015 and February 2016.
- Industrial output grew 2 per cent in February, after three months of contraction, largely driven by 10 per cent rise in the production of electricity and a 5 per cent increase in minerals.
- "Metallic minerals' output has grown from 14.24 crore metric tonnes to 17.05 crore metric tonnes between April 2015 and February 2016.
- Iron ore output has risen significantly as many of the mines that were shut in recent years have started opening again, in states like Goa and Odisha.
- The government expects mineral output to rise further in 2016-17 as six new mines allotted via auctions could start operations.
- Several more mines would be auctioned and some of the mines affected by the Supreme Court embargo could come back into production.
- Most blocks that didn't get any bids in the first round of auctions pertained to limestone mines.
- In 2011, the Supreme Court had banned all 168 iron ore mines in Karnataka for violating the law and damaging the environment.
- In 2013, the court allowed 117 mines involved in minor violations to re-start and cancelled licences for 51 mines where serious violations took place, requiring their permits to be auctioned.
- The state had told the SC that it will auction the permits for 15 such mines by 2015-16.
- The biggest growth in output was seen in chromite (36.1 per cent), lead concentrate (33.7 per cent), copper concentrate (31 per cent) and Bauxite (27.4 per cent).
- Non-metallic minerals output grew 2.1 per cent in the first eleven months of 2015-16, with phosphorite production rising nearly 12 per cent and limestone growing over 2 per cent, after years of decline.

Finance minister says Indian economy can do a lot better than this

- A bleak global economic outlook and the resultant export contraction are challenges to the Indian economy but good monsoon rains that are forecast this year would provide an impetus, Finance Minister Arun Jaitley said.
- Indian economy has been the fastest growing among major economies for the past three quarters, the minister said at a conference of the G20 finance ministers and central bank governors' meeting at the International Monetary Fund.
- He outlined the policy initiatives that the government was taking to capitalise on growth and said the Centre was re-examining existing fiscal policy approaches and increasing public investment.
- Mr. Jaitley, during his speeches and interactions in the U.S capital over the last two days, said India was doing better than many other countries, but admitted that more needed to be done.

Declining interest rates results in slowing deposit growth

- With interest rates declining, deposit growth in the country's banking system slowed to a 50-year low of 9.7 per cent in the last financial year, Reserve Bank of India data showed.
- Bank deposits increased by 12.1 per cent in the previous financial year. The central bank has reduced the repo rate or the policy rate by 150 bps to 6.5 per cent since January 2015. Banks followed suit by reducing deposit rates as well as lending rates.
- State Bank of India, the country's largest lender, for example offers 7.25 per cent for one-year deposits.
- RBI governor Raghuram Rajan had indicated during the monetary policy review earlier this month that in Jan-March quarter, certain developments like issuances of tax free bonds and a rush to cash in on small savings before old rates expire, were some of the reasons for slower deposit growth.

Twitter Seva to address queries related to start-ups

- As part of its steps to support budding entrepreneurs, the government on April 21 will launch a new service, Twitter Seva, to address various queries of start-ups in a timebound manner.
- "The process is on. We would have a place where you can virtually contact us, tell us your issues. We have a team that will divert the things or issues to the particular ministry and then come back to you and try to reply in 24 hrs," Commerce and Industry Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said.
- During an hour-long interaction, the minister heard their issues and responded to their queries.
- On the matters related to other departments, she assured them to take that up with the concerned ministries.

Indian government wants World Bank to continue its concessional financing

- Arun Jaitley has called on the World Bank to continue its concessional financing until 2030 and increase the development financing and non-concessional loans to \$100 billion over the next five years.
- During the 'Spring Meetings' interaction with various officials of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, Mr. Jaitley said the ongoing revision of environmental and social standards

required under the financing conditions must not “compromise the primacy of the development objective.”³

- The largest recipient of World Bank loans, India has so far received \$ 52.7 billion in commercial loans from the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) and \$49.4 billion from the International Development Association (IDA) which is the Bank’s assistance programme for developing countries.
- The finance minister said delivering the Bank’s SDG on development and reconstruction agenda would require large amounts of concessional and non-concessional finance.
- All these call for a bigger-than-ever grant contributions based IDA replenishment. In fact, we will need quite a few such strong replenishments until 2030 if we were to achieve the goals of eliminating extreme poverty and other SDGs in IDA countries.
- He called for increasing the current levels of \$50-\$60 billion per annum in concessional, non-concessional and private sector re- sources from the WB Group to \$100 billion a year over the next five years.
- IDA funds are meant for countries with per capita income up to \$1,260 adjusted for purchasing power, and going by this technical definition India is no longer eligible for continued support.
- This year, the 45-odd developed countries that contribute to the kitty are set to replenish it, as it happens once in three years. Amid global economic un- certainties support for India under this plan has ignited a debate in the Bank.
- The framework will have significant implications for India that is grappling with environmental and social questions alongside its push for rapid economic development.
- The ESF requires borrowing governments to ad- dress certain environmental and social risks in order to receive Bank’s financing for development projects.
- Seeking reforms in IMF and World Bank to reflect a larger say for economies like India, Mr Jaitley has said the voting share of developing and transition countries (DTCs) in the multi—lateral lending agencies IBRD and IFC must be raised to 50 per cent, from the current 45.06 per cent in IBRD and 39.41 per cent in IFC.

Huge jump in FDI inflow in 2015

- Foreign direct investment (FDI) into the country increased by 37 per cent to \$39.32 billion during 2015.
- The foreign investment inflows stood at \$28.78 billion in 2014, according to data by the Department of Industrial Policy and Promotion (DIPP).
- Computer hardware and software sector attracted the highest FDI, followed by services, trading business, automobile industry and chemicals.
- Singapore emerged as the biggest FDI source, followed by Mauritius, US, Netherlands and Japan.
- The government has taken several steps to promote investments through a liberal FDI policy. It has relaxed norms in sever- al sectors, including single brand retail, e-commerce and construction.

World economic outlook says India needs to be cautious about fiscal management

- While several demand and supply side factors have resulted in a sharp fall in inflation and have given the RBI space to cut interest rates, there are several factors that could drive inflation up again, World Economic Outlook (WEO) says.

- The government must continue on its fiscal consolidation path and focus on reforms, especially in the labour and infrastructure sectors, the report said.
- It said India's current account deficit would widen sharply to \$94.7 billion by 2021.
- The report does not indicate how the IMF has arrived at the figure. Consumer inflation would be at 5.3 per cent for the next two years and would ease by 2021.
- The report said India would achieve its inflation target of 5 per cent in the first half of 2017, though it warned that an unfavourable monsoon and the effect of public sector wage increases could pose risks.
- However, India Meteorological Department has said it is expecting an above-normal monsoon, with rainfall at 106 per cent of the long-term average. This, economists agree, should boost economic growth and keep inflation in check.
- The WEO data show India's CAD, which was at \$26.2 billion or 1.3 per cent of GDP in 2015, will widen to \$51.8 billion (2.1 per cent of GDP) by 2017. The CAD is projected to hit \$94.7 billion by 2021.
- The IMF has retained its GDP growth forecast for India, adding that the main driver of this growth will be private consumption and investment.
- While the IMF predicted that India's GDP growth rate will be at 7.5 per cent in 2016 and 2017 (a shade higher than the 7.4 per cent predicted by the Asian Development Bank recently), it projected that this would accelerate to 7.8 per cent by 2021.

WPI inflation in negative territory for seventeenth consecutive month

- The rate of wholesale price inflation remained negative for the seventeenth consecutive month, coming in at (-)0.85 per cent in March, compared to (-)0.91 per cent in February.
- Inflation in the primary articles segment of the index raced to 2.1 per cent in March, up from 1.6 per cent in February.
- The food segment saw a rate of inflation of 3.7 per cent in March compared to 3.35 per cent in the previous month.
- The fuel & power segment continued to pull back the rate of inflation, coming in at (-)8.3 per cent in March from (-)6.4 per cent in February.
- The manufacturing sector registered its 13th month of a negative rate of inflation, coming in at (-)0.13 in March, compared to (-)0.6 per cent in February.

Asian governments must integrate a more robust resilience says ADB

- Widening income inequality, slower growth and the growing dominance of China and India in the region has meant that Asian governments must integrate a more robust resilience into their national plans, according to an independent evaluation of the Asian Development Bank's operations in South Asia.
- The report also finds that the Asia and Pacific regions now account for 51 per cent of the world's poor.
- The report says, while the Asia-Pacific region in 1990 accounted for 1.5 billion people living in poverty, or 80 per cent of the global total, this proportion has come down to 51 per cent as of 2012, or 456 million people.

- Within the region, South Asia accounts for 34 per cent of this 456 million poor people. The report defines the poor as those living below \$1.9 a day.

Weak overseas demand reduce exports by 15.9 percent

- Merchandise exports shrank 15.9 per cent in 2015-16 to \$261.13 billion amid weak overseas demand, a slump in commodity prices and currency volatility.
- Reflecting a slowdown in the domestic economy, especially in the manufacturing sector, goods imports contracted 15.3 per cent to \$379.6 billion.
- The commerce ministry said: “The trend of falling exports is in tandem with other major world economies.”
- Global trade is projected to grow 2.8 percent this year, lower than a previous forecast of 3.9 percent, the World Trade Organization said.
- The WTO said risks to its latest forecasts were still mostly on the downside, including a sharper than expected slowing of China’s economy, worsening financial market volatility and exposure of countries with large foreign debts to sharp exchange rate movements.
- Goods exports also contracted for the sixteenth straight month in March, when it fell 5.47 per cent to \$22.7 billion, while imports also fell 21.5 per cent to \$27.8 billion.
- The silver lining in the trade data was the contraction in oil imports, which shrank 40.2 per cent for the full year to \$82.6 billion, while non-oil imports fell 4.1 per cent in the period to \$297 billion.
- This helped narrow the trade deficit to a five-year-low of \$118.45 billion for fiscal 2015-16.
- There has also been a minor recovery on the exports front in the last four months, with the pace of contraction in goods exports slowing from April-November, when it had shrunk 18.46 per cent.

Raghuram Rajan says currency will be used to reduce volatility

- The Reserve Bank of India will continue to use currency intervention to reduce volatility in the country's exchange rates, the bank's governor said.
- India will intervene in the currency market when there's a sustainable risk in global markets and the country sees a flood of capital coming in, he said.
- India's foreign exchange reserves swelled to a record high of \$360 billion for the week ended April 1, largely on account of the central bank's dollar purchases to rein in the rupee's strength as foreign funds poured into Indian financial markets.
- Rajan confirmed that India's reserve build-up was a result of the central bank's intervention.
- India's central bank governor said he was closely watching inflation developments as well as monsoon rain forecasts in terms of impact on monetary policy.

Report says India’s power infrastructure is outdated

- India’s outdated grid infrastructure is incompatible with the storage technology that private investors are looking to install and is holding back the emergence of the electricity storage sector.
- The government’s push for the adoption of renewable energy sources such as solar and wind will increasingly rely on power storage since supply from such sources is irregular.
- Power storage facilities are critical for the government’s rural electrification programme as well.
- This segment is taking time to scale up because there needs to be a large scale overhaul (in the existing grid infrastructure). Some states like Gujarat and Rajasthan are better than others.

- Solar energy suffers from a periodicity in supply due to there being no supply during night-time while wind energy is irregular more due to seasonal factors.

Finance minister says global situation is worrisome

- The global economic situation is “grim” and “worrisome” and that has prompted the nations to put up “firewalls” around their own systems to save themselves from the slowdown and grow within the limitations, Finance Minister said.
- “I don’t think anybody has been able for sure to hazard even a significant guess,” Mr. Jaitley said when asked what his prognosis is for the global economy for the next couple of years.
- He said given the challenging global economic situation, the level of ambition in nations is such that even a one—two per cent economic growth is considered “good growth under the circumstances”.
- He said the Chinese were “reasonably optimistic” because in the first quarter their economy had picked up 6.7 per cent.
- He said like the rest of the world, China too has its own challenges “because a transformation is taking place in China with their emphasis towards domestic consumption and services in play.”

Vinod Rai says cacophony of uninformed should not impact decision making process

- Former Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) Vinod Rai said not all defaulters are wilful and the ‘cacophony of uninformed voices should not impact decision making process of bank executives.’
- “Not all loan defaults are wilful and not all lending activity, even if it is to salvage such stressed accounts, can be branded as corrupt practice or criminal misconduct,” Mr. Rai said.
- He said borrowers comprise a small minority and cannot become the barometer of decision-making. Unfortunately, the legal system does not permit easy and rapid resolution of stressed assets issue of banks.
- Mr. Rai, now the chairman of Banks Board Bureau, also said uninformed voices should not affect the decision making capability of bank executives.
- The former CAG also said the fear psychosis among public sector bank executives of being hounded by vigilance agencies when they decide to advance loans or settle stressed loans was being unfairly projected.
- “An adequate reward structure around ESOPS, performance-linked incentives and other benefits can surely be designed to attract the best talent to the public sector,” he said.
- He also said the Banks Board Bureau will work on providing incentives to ensure a level-playing field for top executives in public sector banks.

India’s renewable energy sector increased 6.9 GW capacity in the previous year

- India’s renewable energy sector may add 8.8 GW of new capacity in 2016-17 on the back of a record capacity increase of 6.9 GW in the previous year.
- The new renewable capacities in 2015-16 were chiefly driven by significant increases in solar and wind capacity, which grew by 3 GW and 3.3 GW respectively.

- “Overall, ICRA estimates the capacity addition in the RE (renewable energy) sector to increase to 8.8 GW in 2016-2017 as against the 6.9 GW seen during 2015-2016, primarily led by the higher capacity addition in the solar segment,” report said.
- However, it predicted that there could be a decline in new capacity addition in the wind sector due to a substantial reduction in preferential tariff for new wind energy projects to be commissioned in Madhya Pradesh.

Union Govt targeting to add 16 km more highways per day

- The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government has set an ambitious target of constructing 41 km of national highways every day in 2016-17, up from more than 16 km per day of highways it built in 2015-16.
- The Road Transport and Highways Ministry will award contracts for 25,000 km national highway projects, two-and-a-half times more than the projects it had sanctioned in the previous year.
- It has set a target of constructing 15,000 km of national highways in 2016-17 as against 6,000 km built last year, a statement issued by the Ministry, headed by Mr. Nitin Gadkari, said on Wednesday.
- It also said that the construction of roads quickened by 36 per cent in 2015-16, due to several policy interventions.
- Some of the measures included more project approvals, enhanced inter-ministerial coordination, exit policy for developers, promoting the Hybrid Annuity Model, among others.
- The government had met bankers and road contractors in January this year in a bid to move forward over stalled highway projects worth Rs 40,000 crore.
- Mr. Gadkari had said that the number of stalled projects had come down from 384 to 74.
- To resolve disputes over such projects, the minister had recently proposed to the Finance Ministry that a four-member panel led by a former High Court judge be formed.

India became top destination for foreign direct investment

- India has replaced China as top destination for foreign direct investment by attracting \$63 billion worth FDI projects in 2015, says a report.
- “India was the highest ranked country by capital investment in 2015, with \$63 billion-worth of FDI projects announced,” according to fDi Intelligence, a division of The Financial Times Ltd.
- Also there was an 8 per cent increase in project numbers to 697.
- Major companies such as Foxconn and SunEdison have agreed to invest in projects valued at \$5 billion and \$4 billion, respectively, in India in 2015, it said.
- Report said the biggest change in greenfield FDI in 2015 was the near tripling of greenfield FDI into India, with an estimated \$63 billion.
- “In 2015, India was for the first time the leading country in the world for FDI, overtaking the US (which had USD 59.6 billion of greenfield FDI) and China (USD 56.6 billion),” the report noted.
- Of the top 10 destination states for FDI in 2015, India claims five places.

Non-software services sector exports drop sharply

- India’s trade surplus in services has been contracting, mainly due to a sharp drop in non-software services exports which shows that the global economic slowdown is finally beginning to affect India’s services sector.

- In addition, though the overall trade deficit has been decreasing due to low commodity prices, India's trade deficit with China is worsening which is a worrying trend.
- On a 12-month rolling sum basis, the services trade balance has fallen to 3.4 per cent of GDP in February 2016 from 3.9 per cent in February 2014.
- Although a drop in software services exports was a driver of the decline, receipts from transportation, financial services and other business services were also much lower, and together these non-software categories comprised 73 per cent of the moderation in services exports between Q4 2013 and Q4 2015.
- A research paper by Crisil found that India's trade deficit with China has been worsening at an alarming rate.
- Between fiscals 2006 and 2016, it compounded at an annual 30 per cent, or thrice as fast as India's overall trade deficit.
- The reason behind this is that China's ongoing economic slowdown has meant that it requires lower quantities of the raw materials that it imports from India.
- On the other hand, India's imports from China have not been affected to any large degree,
- However, there is a possibility that this trend could be short-lived, especially if the rupee appreciates in the near term and medium-term.

The Mumbai Cricket Association moved Supreme Court against Bombay HC order

- The Mumbai Cricket Association and Maharashtra Cricket Association in a joint Special Leave Petition have moved the SC against the Bombay HC's decision to move the Indian Premier League matches scheduled in Maharashtra out of the state.
- Last week's verdict had forced the IPL authorities to find alternative venues for 13 of the 20 matches, which were scheduled to be staged in Maharashtra, due to severe drought in the state.
- The petition is understood to have strongly objected to the maintainability of the order issued by the Bombay HC.
- The BCCI had not only decided to challenge the High Court directive but also in consultation with the affected home franchises — Mumbai Indians and Rising Pune Supergiants.
- During the hearing of the PIL both state associations had promised to use sewage water for maintaining the Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai and the Maharashtra Cricket Association's stadium at Gahunje, on the outskirts of Pune.

With consultation about to finish new civil aviation policy to released soon

- With long-drawn consultations now in final stages, the Civil Aviation Ministry expects to come out with the new civil aviation policy next month.
- The inter-ministerial consultations on the revised draft policy are progressing and once these are completed, the ministry hopes to give the final touches.
- The draft policy, unveiled in October 2015, seeks to bolster the country's aviation sector which has high growth potential.
- It has suggested tax incentives for airlines, maintenance and repair works of aircraft, increasing FDI limit for foreign airlines, setting up of no-frills airports and providing viability gap funding for carriers to bolster regional air connectivity.

- The ministry has held extensive consultations with various stakeholders, including ministries, airlines, airport operators and ground—handling agencies.
- The issue of 5/20 international flying norm has witnessed extensive debates with legacy carriers opposing any changes to the rule, while start—up airlines are against continuing with the requirement. Under 5/20 rule, carriers having five years of operational experience and a fleet of at least 20 planes would be allowed to fly overseas.

Niti Aayog CEO says that US should open service sector more

- The U.S. must open up its market for services to Indian firms, just as India has liberalised foreign direct investment in many sectors such as railways and defence for the benefit of American firms, Niti Aayog CEO Amitabh Kant said.
- “India has opened up every sector of the economy in the last two years. While India is becoming more and more open, America must also open its services sector for Indians to go and work there. It can’t be a halfway house,” Mr Kant said
- The Indo-US relationship will only flourish further when there’s reciprocity in market access, Mr Kant said.
- India has allowed American companies to come in and flourish otherwise GE would have never got the biggest contract to build locomotives for the Railways. Similarly, America must welcome Indian services and software companies to work there.”
- Richard Verma, the US Ambassador to India, said that the US has more government-level engagement with India than any other country in the world.
- Bilateral trade is about to touch 108 billion dollars. Indian companies investing into the U.S. touched a record in 2015. Defence trade has touched \$14 billion, 1.1 million visas were issued to Indian travellers in 2015 — the highest ever
- The Niti Aayog chief executive officer said that the biggest foreign direct investment into India in recent times was American Tower Corporation’s purchase of a 51 per cent controlling stake in Viom Network.

Randstad award survey says salary and employee benefits are major criteria for workers

- Salary and employee benefits, long-term job security and financial health of the company are the top three priorities among the Indian workforce while choosing an employer, says the Randstad Award survey.
- The Randstad public opinion survey on employer branding, independently conducted with more than two lakh respondents across 25 countries worldwide.
- Survey also revealed that salary and employee benefit continued to be top driver with (48 per cent), long-term job security (46 per cent), financial health of the company (43 per cent), pleasant working atmosphere (40 per cent) and good work- life balance (38 per cent).
- However, the importance of salary has decreased from 2015 (six per cent).
- The survey findings also reflected that the Indian workforce prefers to work or move to sectors such as IT and Communication (70 per cent), followed by automobiles (66 per cent) and FMCG, re- tail and e-commerce (64 per cent).
- It is a proven fact that companies that are capable of attracting the right talent for the right job simply perform better.

GST will help resolve various taxation issues

- Implementation of GST will help resolve various issues concerning taxation and logistics with regard to e-commerce business, which has been recording rapid growth in the country, says a study.
- The e-commerce space has rapidly evolved but several challenges have surfaced primarily in areas of taxation, logistics, payments, internet penetration and skilled man power
- In taxation, for example, the lack of a uniform tax structure leads to several issues such as double-taxation or impediments in the free flow of goods across the country.
- However, the ensuing Goods and Services Tax (GST) is expected to help in overcoming these challenges through a uniform tax structure.
- Clearly defined rules for e-commerce transactions in GST and a consultative approach while framing these rules will be favourable to both, the government as well as e-commerce companies.

Negative interest rates may not provide desired benefit

- Europe and Japan's central bank policies of negative interest rates are a "horror" and will run counter to the desired effect, Mr.Jefrey Gundlach, the widely followed investor said.
- Mr.Gundlach, said negative rates would not help fight deflation but withdraw liquidity from the market because people would rather hoard cash than invest or deposit it in a bank account.
- Last year, Mr.Gundlach predicted that oil prices would plunge, junk bonds would live up to their name and China's slowing economy would pressure emerging markets.
- In 2014, he correctly forecast that U.S. Treasury yields would fall, not rise as many others had expected.

Labour ministry wants central bank to look for the possibility of workers bank

- The Labour Ministry has asked the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) to form a panel headed by a former Deputy Governor of the central bank to look into a proposal of creating a Workers' Bank using Employees' Provident Fund (EPF).
- The proposal was mooted by the trade unions about a decade ago and has been discussed by Labour Ministry and Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) for several years now.
- In 2004, the Congress-affiliated Indian National Trade Union Congress (Intuc) had first submitted a theme paper to the government on setting up 'Workers' Capital Trust' to improve the earnings of Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) by investing its corpus in various instruments.
- The idea was modelled on similar experiences in countries like Canada, Netherland, Switzerland and South Africa where a collective pension fund system invests worker's savings in equities of domestic and global markets.
- As on 31 March 2015, EPFO's total corpus stood at Rs.6.34 lakh crore.
- Various committees set up to review the proposal had suggested that EPFO should concentrate on its core activities and were not in favour of the Workers' Bank.
- However, the idea was revived after the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government took charge in May 2014.

World awaits the fed policy decision

- U.S. Federal Reserve policymakers are expected to hold interest rates steady but they might tweak description of the economic outlook to reflect more benign conditions.
- Fed raised its policy rates in last decision for the first time in a decade when market volatility finally subsided in the wake of Chinese economy scare.
- Similarly early this year markets wobbled on worries about a slowdown in global economic growth and weak U.S. corporate earnings, leading to expectations for further Fed rates rises to be revised down.
- Many Fed officials remain spooked by the steep stock market drop earlier this year and by weak first-quarter U.S. economic data.
- Concrete signs of higher inflation and growth may be needed before the FOMC, the Fed's policy committee, continues with the projected gradual path toward more normal levels of interest rates.
- Though the U.S. economy is generating jobs and consumer prices have risen, providing support for a Fed interest rate rise, weakness in retail sales and international trade, as well as concern about China's economy, are reasons to worry.

India registers record FDI inflow

- India received \$51 billion in foreign direct investment (FDI), the highest-ever FDI inflow in a fiscal, during April-February FY16.
- The increased FDI inflow was the result of the government's efforts to improve the ease of doing business and initiatives such as 'Make In India.'
- According to data from the DIPP, the previous highest FDI inflow was in FY12 when the country received \$46.55 billion, which was a 34 per cent increase over \$34.8 billion it got in FY11.
- However, India recorded its largest-ever percentage increase in FDI when it received \$22.8 billion in FY07, representing a 155 per cent increase over the \$8.9 billion in FY06. This includes equity, re-invested earnings and other capital.
- Computer software and hardware sectors received \$5.3 billion while services sector accounted for \$4.2 billion. \
- Automobile and telecom sectors received \$1.7 billion and \$1.07 billion respectively. Region-wise, the National Capital Territory (comprising Delhi, part of Uttar Pradesh and Haryana) received \$10.6 billion while Mumbai got \$5.2 billion.
- In order to boost the investment environment and bring in foreign investments, the government had brought in FDI-related reforms and liberalisation touching upon 15 major sectors of the economy by putting more FDI proposals in the automatic route.

Central bank to simplify registration process for NBFC's

- Reserve Bank of India (RBI) will simplify the registration process for non-banking finance companies (NBFCs), Deputy Governor R. Gandhi said.
- The new application forms will be simpler and the number of documents required to be submitted will be reduced. The entire process could be made online for ease, speed and transparency. RBI resumed issuing licences to NBFCs last year.
- Totally exempting small NBFCs from regulations may not be feasible from the customer service point of view, he said.
- 'Make in India' and 'Start Up' businesses could offer fresh opportunities to NBFCs for growth.
- The deputy governor also said the central bank would come out with a discussion paper on peer-to-peer lending (P2P).

- P2P is where consumers lend and borrow from each other with the help of an intermediary.
- Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) had come up with a discussion paper exploring the securities aspect of the business.
- However, RBI is yet to come up with its own discussion paper from the lending and borrowing side. The banking regulator will consult SEBI before finalising the norms.

LPG subsidy for high income consumers goes

- Oil and Gas Minister Dharmendra Pradhan told Parliament that his Ministry is “excluding” people earning more than Rs.10 lakh a year from LPG subsidies.
- The government has decided to rationalise the subsidy outgo by excluding such LPG consumers from the purview of subsidy, whose or whose spouse have taxable income of Rs.10 lakh above during the previous financial year computed as per the Income Tax Act, 1961 with effect from January 1, 2016.
- Joint Secretary Ashutosh Jindal said the Ministry had identified about 3 lakh people earning more than Rs.10 lakh a year.

Moody's warns against risk of sovereign debt levels

- India faces the risk of sovereign debt levels climbing higher if economic growth isn't robust enough and could ultimately put pressure on the government's ability to fund itself, Moody's Investors Service has warned.
- India's government debt to GDP ratio, which we forecast to fall to 65.7 per cent in 2016 from 67.5 per cent in 2015, is well above the median for Baa-rated sovereigns but in a gradual declining trend.
- “Debt interest payments as a proportion of revenues are more than double the median for similarly rated peers, at over 20 per cent. This reflects the government's narrow revenue base.”
- However, robust private savings, capital controls and bank liquidity requirements allow India to sustain debt that is higher than its peers, the credit ratings agency said.
- While policy moves are likely to enhance India's medium-term economic strength, the constrained fiscal space available with the government puts India at risk in the event of slower-than-expected growth, the report notes.
- “In the absence of robust growth, India's debt could start to climb, and ultimately put pressure on the government's ability to fund itself.” Regarding India's corporate sector
- Moody's observed that although the growth of private debt was modest, the level of non-performing assets was leading to increased stress on state-owned bank balance sheets.
- The main threat to the sovereign credit profile would be via a significant and prolonged worsening in asset quality at state-owned banks, beyond the recognition of bad loans currently underway, that causes contingent liabilities to crystallise on the government's balance sheet.

EU looking to gradually solve India's contention to BTIA

- The European Union has said that it offered India the possibility of asymmetric and gradual elimination of tariffs in the car and car parts and wines and spirits sectors as part of the negotiations on the bilateral free trade agreement known as the BTIA.
- A continuing absence of agreement in these sectors has contributed to the lack of progress on the trade deal despite last month's summit level talks between India and the EU.
- “In terms of the car sector, in some cases, EU exporters face Indian import duties of up to 100 per cent on car and car parts,” a European Commission spokesperson for trade said.

- “We suggested or agreed on long transitional periods for their elimination or even going as far as accepting an asymmetric elimination of these duties in favour of India.”
- “The same goes for wines and spirits where our exporters face duties of up to 150 per cent and the proposal made in 2013 was for a gradual if not complete elimination of these duties, again taking into account Indian sensitivities,” Mr. Rosario said.
- High on India’s priority list has been access to European markets for Indian service professionals (such as from the IT sector). This however does not seem imminent.
- India has also been keen to obtain ‘data secure’ nation status from the EU, a classification that is crucial for the development of its IT and ITES sectors in Europe.

Apex Court wants Govt to explain recovery mechanism for bad loans

- The Supreme Court asked the government to explain threadbare the mechanism followed to recover bad loans while making a preliminary remark that the present system for recovery does not seem perfect.
- “Tell us about mechanism for recovering the dues. There may be some mechanism to deal with it. There is also a need of amendments. Suggest the ways and means by which these things can be prevented,” a bench said.
- Solicitor-General Ranjit Kumar, appearing for the Centre, said the government was in the process of amending laws to safeguard banks against write-offs and non-performing assets. The matter was fixed for further hearing on July 19.

Finance minister expects good rain will take country towards 8.5 % growth rate

- The economy is expected to grow over eight per cent this fiscal with the forecast of an above-normal monsoon raising hopes of the agriculture sector’s revival after two successive drought years, said Niti Aayog vice-chairman Arvind Panagariya.
- He said the economic growth in the current fiscal could be even higher in view of policy and monetary interventions by the government and the Reserve Bank, which would ultimately push the sluggish industrial growth.
- Finance Minister Arun Jaitley had also expressed hope that good rains would propel India’s economic growth to 8.5 per cent during the current fiscal, higher than the Central Statistics Office advance estimates of 7.6 per cent for 2015-16.
- According to IMD, there are 94 per cent chances of country receiving “normal to above normal” rainfall, while there is only 1 per cent probability of “deficient” rainfall.
- Agriculture, which contributes 15 per cent to India’s GDP and employs about 60 per cent of the country’s population, is heavily dependent on monsoon as only 40 per cent of the cultivable area is under irrigation.
- The interest regime is also conducive to economic growth now, as the Reserve Bank has cut the key interest rate by 0.25 per cent and introduced a host of measures to smoothen liquidity supply.
- The repo rate, at which RBI lends to the financial system, has come down to 6.5 per cent. This will also push economic activities.

Special 301 report puts India on the priority watch again

- The US Trade Representative's annual Special 301 report, that identifies trade barriers to U.S. companies and products due to a foreign government's intellectual property regime, has placed India on the Priority Watch List, the same as last year.
- The report identified many measures taken by the government as encouraging in terms of providing a better IP protection regime.
- Report also raised multiple concerns, particularly related to the potential erosion in IP standards due to its push for promoting domestic manufacturing.]
- "From movies and music to green technology and pharmaceuticals, U.S. creators and innovators have a significant competitive advantage in the area of intellectual property," said U.S. Trade Representative Michael Froman.
- The government of India does not engage with the process as it considers it an infringement on the country's sovereignty.
- "India has taken positive steps to address or avoid further erosions of the IPR regime. India's courts retain their reputation for providing fair and deliberate treatment of both foreign and domestic litigants," according to the report.
- The report said India's domestic policy goals of increasing investment and stimulating innovation must be "through, not at the expense of, IPR protection and enforcement."
- Welcoming the efforts undertaken by the government to promote IPR within India, the report said initiatives such as "Make in India" and "Start-up India" have linked the realization of development goals to IPR creation and protection.
- The report pegged losses from piracy of music and movies in India at approximately \$4 billion per year and the commercial value of unlicensed software at \$3 billion
- The USTR report said the U.S continues to monitor India's application of its compulsory licensing law.

Labour and Finance Ministry tussle over EPF rate

- Union Labour Minister Bandaru Dattatreya justified his decision to declare an 8.8 per cent return on EPF savings saying it cannot be compared with PPF or other small savings schemes.
- Mr. Dattatreya met Mr. P.K. Mishra to discuss issues related to the ministry, including the finance ministry's latest decision to lower the Employees' Provident Fund (EPF) rate for 2015-16 to 8.70 per cent.
- The EPF rate is a function of the return on its investments.
- "The EPFO is sticking to its stand of 8.8 per cent interest rate. But nothing is final till a notification is issued. Internal discussions are going on and a decision will be taken at the highest level," said a senior EPFO official.
- RSS-affiliated Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS) delegates also met the labour minister.
- Last week, the finance ministry approved a lower EPF rate of 8.70 per cent from 8.80 per cent announced by the Labour Ministry.
- It had argued that a lower interest rate would allow EPFO to keep surplus of over Rs. 1,000 crore. However, an interest rate of 8.80 per cent would lower the reserves to Rs. 673 crore, it had said.
- The ministry also said that an adequate surplus is needed following its latest decision to credit interest on inoperative accounts, which have not received deposits for three consecutive years, from the current financial year.
- However, the EPFO had categorically contested the finance ministry's justifications.
- The move to cut interest rates on EPF deposits evoked strong reactions from central trade unions.
- Recently, the government's moves to tweak EPF norms triggered protests from the working class, leading to a rollback of the decision.

- First, the government's Budget proposal to tax EPF withdrawals was scrapped followed by a complete rollback on another decision to bar workers from withdrawing employer's contribution to EPF.
- In both the cases, the PMO had to intervene.

International Tobacco Growers Association urged Govt to promote balanced regulations

- The International Tobacco Growers Association (ITGA) has urged the government to promote balanced regulations to protect the interest and livelihood of small farmers and rural workers.
- "We believe that the regulation of tobacco products must take into account the impact on tobacco production and the livelihoods of farmers and labourers," according to a statement issued by ITGA President Francois van derMerwe.
- The Forum, a congregation of growers' organisations from India, Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam, adopted a declaration on protection of livelihood and transparency in regulations.
- It suggested that India, as the host country for the forthcoming Conference of Parties of the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) to be held in November 2016, could use the opportunity to leave its footprint on global policy by promoting balanced regulations.
- Fresh regulations by the government on pictorial warnings covering 80 per cent of the cigarette packets led to an industry-wide closure.
- As much as 80 per cent pictorial warnings on cigarette packets had led to an industry-wide closure of manufacturing units earlier this month.
- According to the ITGA declaration, growers felt that quite often NGOs and other anti-tobacco activists adopted a stance based on "misleading" data to influence government organisations.
- It appealed to the government to conduct its own independent studies. According to ITGA, tobacco was an important crop in many Asian countries and India was the world's second largest tobacco producer.

The cost of 238 major projects have almost doubled to Rs. 4.6 lakh crore

- The cost of 238 major projects of the union government have almost doubled from the original estimate of Rs.2.4 lakh crore to Rs. 4.6 lakh crore, according to latest official data.
- The number of projects exceeding the budget surged 43 per cent by March 2016 over a period of four years, the data on projects costing Rs.150 crore or more showed.
- "The causes for time and cost overruns are project-specific, depend on a variety of technical, financial and administrative reasons, and differ from project to project," V.K. Singh informed the Lok Sabha.
- The number of Central projects that have overshot their deadline for completion increased by 31 per cent, from 260 as on April 1, 2012 to 341 as on March 1, 2016.
- The data showed while 166 central projects had overshot their budget as on April 1, 2012, it increased to 238 as on March 1, 2016.
- However, while the absolute number of projects which overshot their targets had increased over time, their proportion in the total number of projects had declined, showing an improvement in this regard.
- While projects exceeding their budgets made up 30 per cent of total projects above Rs.150 crore as on April 1, 2012, that proportion fell to 22 per cent by March 1, 2016.

- Most cost and time-overruns pertained to the infrastructure sector with the Railways contributing 68.5 per cent of projects overshooting the budget as on March 1, 2016, up from 56 per cent four years ago.
- The power sector contributed the next-highest with 9.4 per cent as on March 1, 2016, down marginally from the 10.5 per cent as on April 1, 2012.
- The road sector contributed 7.7 per cent of projects facing cost-overruns as on March 1, 2016. As many as 39 per cent of the projects were running behind schedule compared with 32 per cent four years ago.
- At the end of the 11th Plan period, the projects overshooting their budgets needed an extra Rs.1.2 lakh crore which rose to Rs.2.2 lakh crore by March 1, 2016.

India's employment growth is beginning to show signs of a slowdown

- India's employment growth is beginning to show signs of a slowdown even as official data showed a pick up in GDP growth, according to a study by Care Ratings.
- Jobs growth slowed to near-zero during 2014-15 in a sample of 1,072 companies. These companies created only 12,760 jobs in 2014-15. In the previous year, they had added 188,371 jobs.
- Employment growth in the sample slowed to 0.3%, the slowest in four years, an analysis of the annual reports of the companies surveyed in the sample by the ratings agency showed.
- The number of jobs in manufacturing sector companies in the sample, despite the government's 'Make In India' push, declined. Employment growth in the manufacturing companies plunged to (-) 5.2% in 2014-15 from 3.2% in 2013-14.
- Manufacturing accounted for more than 40 per cent of the jobs, the highest share in employment, followed by banking (23.0 per cent) and IT (18.4 per cent).
- The study on trends in employment in the last four years is based on employment numbers provided by companies in their balance sheets. It does not include the impact of outsourcing.
- One reason the study gives for job creation not showing on the books of companies is the possibility of more jobs getting outsourced—in which case it would be accounted for elsewhere in the suppliers' registers.
- Jobs that were performed by employees such as security, administrative functions and back office, are increasingly being outsourced in many companies.
- However, the findings of the latest quarterly survey by the Labour Bureau in the Ministry of Labour and Employment do not support this argument.
- The survey released last month shows a decline of 21,000 in contractual jobs during January-September 2015, against an increase of 1.20 lakh in the corresponding period of 2014.

After tussle between labour and finance ministry govt rolls back EPF interest rates

- The Finance Ministry backtracked from its attempt to lower the payout on Employees' Provident Fund (EPF) savings for 2015-16 to 8.70 per cent, after a tussle with the Labour Ministry, which had announced 8.80 per cent returns.
- This marks the third time, in little over 50 days, that the government has rolled back contentious policy decisions pertaining to retirement savings of the working class.
- The labour ministry will "immediately" notify 8.80 per cent interest rate to EPF subscribers.

- The Finance Ministry had asked the EPFO to keep a surplus of over Rs 1,000 crore to give interest to inoperative EPF accounts that were not getting interest credits since 2011.

India resumed publishing its income tax data

- India on Friday resumed publishing its income tax data, which was suspended in 2000 owing to staffing and technical issues.
- Prime Minister Narendra Modi said that it is a big step towards transparency and informed policy-making was expected to assist researchers and analysts.
- The decision comes three months after French economist Thomas Piketty remarked in a lecture that India could be vastly under-estimating inequality levels in the country in the absence of this data.
- In the absence of data, he said, it was not possible to show the evolution of wealth in India as a result of which “we could be vastly underestimating inequality.”
- India had first started publishing its income tax statistics in 1961. The driving force behind the revival of this practice is Chief Economic Advisor (CEA) Arvind Subramanian.
- He demonstrated the usefulness of the data in the Economic Survey in a chapter titled “Fiscal Capacity for the 21st Century”.
- Conclusions based on analyses of the data were reported in the chapter, the crux of which was that just four per cent of India’s voters are taxpayers, though it should be closer to 23 per cent, and 85 per cent of the net national income falling outside the tax net.
- On Friday, the Income Tax Department put up income tax data from the year 2000, on its website. Along with it, the department also released the State-wise breakup from 2008-09.

Direct tax collection sees highest growth in Gujrat

- The precipitous drop in the growth rate of direct tax collections was accompanied by an equally dire slowdown in the growth of corporate tax.
- Corporate tax grew at an average annual rate of 7.1 per cent between assessment years 2011-12 and 2015-16, down from the heady 15.6 per cent seen in the previous five years.
- The personal income tax data on the other hand, barely witnessed a change in growth rates in this period, growing at an annual average of 9.1 per cent between 2011 and 2015.
- Interestingly, the data shows that there were 13.3 lakh individuals declaring an income of more than Rs 10 lakh a year — the section of people the government has excluded from the LPG subsidy.
- Among the states, Gujarat saw the fastest growth in its direct tax collections, growing 185 per cent in FY2014-15 to Rs 12,577 crore compared to its level in FY2008-09.
- Tamil Nadu saw the next-fastest growth in the period, with its direct tax collections growing 116 per cent to Rs 20,651 crore in FY2014-15.
- Maharashtra (112 per cent) and West Bengal (105 per cent) were the other states seeing rapid growth in their direct tax collections.
- The State-wise data also revealed some anomalies. For example, Mizoram recorded Rs 39.8 crore of direct tax collections in FY2014-15, which is more than double what it collected in the previous year.

Scientists have discovered a rare triple-star system

- Scientists have discovered a rare triple-star system with a gas giant planet similar in size to Jupiter.
- Known planets with three stars appearing in their sky are rare — the new discovery is just the fourth and the closest one to Earth yet, allowing a better look than has been possible.
- The main star is also brighter than the other two, making it easier for astronomers to study both the star and the planet.
- The newly found planet, called KELT-4Ab, orbits one star. It takes three days to make its way around the star KELT-A, which serves as its sun.
- The view from KELT-4Ab would likely to be one where its sun, KELT-A, would appear roughly forty times as big as our Sun when it is viewed from Earth. This is because the main star is close to KELT-4Ab.
- On the other hand, the two other orbiting stars would appear much dimmer due to their great distance, shining no brighter than our Moon, the researchers said.
- Scientists have known of the existence of the KELT system for several years, but it was thought that the binary stars were actually just one star.
- The triple-star system offers a unique opportunity for scientists trying to understand how it is that gas giants, such as KELT-4Ab, manage to orbit so close to their star.

Comets and asteroids might have helped Mars to be more conducive to life

- Large comets and asteroids that bombarded Mars some 4 billion years ago likely enhanced climate conditions enough to make the red planet more conducive to life, at least for a time, a new study has found.
- If early Mars was as barren and cold as it is today, massive asteroid impacts would have produced heat to melt subsurface ice, said Stephen Mojzsis, a professor at University of Colorado Boulder in the U.S.
- Scientists have long known there was once running water on Mars, as evidenced by ancient river valleys, deltas and parts of lake beds.
- In addition to producing hydrothermal regions in portions of Mars' fractured and melted crust, a massive impact could have temporarily increased the planet's atmospheric pressure, periodically heating Mars up enough to "re-start" a dormant water cycle.
- Much of the action on Mars occurred during a period known as the Late Heavy Bombardment about 3.9 billion years ago when the developing solar system was a shooting gallery of comets, asteroids, moons and planets.

Scientists developed technology to read and interpret genomes

- Scientists have developed a novel technology that allows them to read and interpret the human genome, a breakthrough that may pave the way for new drug targets to treat many genetic diseases.

- The computational method, called TargetFinder, can predict where non-coding DNA — the DNA that does not code for proteins — interacts with genes.
- This technology helps researchers connect mutations in the so-called genomic “dark matter” with the genes they affect, potentially showing new therapeutic targets for genetic disorders.
- Genes can be separated from their enhancers by long stretches of DNA that contain many other genes.
- Most genetic mutations that are associated with disease occur in enhancers, making them an incredibly important area of study.
- Scientists originally believed that enhancers mostly affect the gene nearest to them. The new study showed that, on a strand of DNA, enhancers can be millions of letters away from the gene they influence, skipping over the genes in between.
- They discovered several patterns that exist on the loops that connect enhancers to genes. This pattern accurately predicted whether a gene-enhancer interaction occurred 85 per cent of the time.
- The new computational approach is a much cheaper and less time-consuming way to identify gene-enhancer connections in the genome.
- The technology also provides insight into how DNA loops form and how they might break in disease.

India to buy surveillance drones from US

- India is in talks with the United States to purchase 40 Predator surveillance drones, officials said, a possible first step towards acquiring the armed version of the aircraft and a development likely to annoy Pakistan.
- India is trying to equip the military with more unmanned technologies to gather intelligence as well as boost its firepower along the vast land borders with Pakistan and China. It also wants a closer eye on the Indian Ocean.
- New Delhi has already acquired surveillance drones from Israel to monitor the mountains of Kashmir, a region disputed by the nuclear-armed South Asian rivals and the cause of two of their three wars.
- As defence ties deepen with the United States, which sees India as a counterweight to China in the region, New Delhi has asked Washington for the Predator series of unmanned planes built by privately-held General Atomics, military officials said.
- The U.S. government late last year cleared General Atomics’ proposal to market the unarmed Predator XP in India.

Expandable habitat on the ISS

- For the first time, the International Space Station (ISS) will be equipped with an expandable habitable structure that has the potential to revolutionise work on the orbital laboratory.
- SpaceX’s Dragon capsule, launched on a Falcon 9 rocket, is delivering almost 3,175kg of cargo, including the Bigelow Expandable Activity Module (BEAM), to the ISS.
- BEAM will arrive in Dragon’s unpressurised trunk and, after about five days, will be removed and attached to the station. Expansion is targeted for the end of May.
- Expandable habitats are designed to take up less room on a rocket, but provide greater volume once expanded.
- This first in situ test of the module will allow researchers to gauge how well the habitat protects against solar radiation, space debris and contamination.
- BEAM is a 21st-century reincarnation of NASA’s TransHab, which never got beyond blueprints and ground mock-ups in the 1990s.

A new state of matter detected

- An international team of scientists has successfully detected a mysterious new state of matter that causes electrons, thought to be nature's indivisible building blocks, to break into pieces.
- The state, known as a quantum spin liquid, was found in a two-dimensional material with a structure similar to graphene.
- First predicted 40 years ago, quantum spin liquids were thought to be hiding in certain magnetic materials, but had not been conclusively sighted in nature.
- In a typical magnetic material, electrons each behave like tiny bar magnets. When a material is cooled to a low enough temperature, they will order themselves so that all the north magnetic poles point in the same direction.
- But in a material containing a spin liquid state, even if cooled to absolute zero, the bar magnets would not align but form an entangled soup .
- The researchers used neutron scattering techniques to look for experimental evidence of fractionalisation in crystals of ruthenium chloride (RuCl₃) to measure the first signatures of fractional particles known as Majorana fermions.

SpaceX's Dragon cargo ship arrived at International Space station

- SpaceX's unmanned Dragon cargo ship, carrying lettuce seeds, laboratory mice and an inflatable pop-up room, arrived at a crowded International Space Station where six spacecraft are now docked.
- British astronaut Tim Peake reached out with the station's robotic arm and grappled the Dragon, packed with 3,175 kilograms of supplies.
- Four Russian spaceships — two Progress cargo carriers and two Soyuz capsules which ferry astronauts — are docked at the space station, along with Orbital ATK's Cygnus cargo ship and SpaceX's Dragon.
- Not since 2011, during the final flight of the space shuttle Discovery, have there been six vehicles parked at the ISS at the same time, NASA said.
- Included in the Dragon's cargo is an expandable room that will be attached to the orbiting outpost.
- The cargo also contains Chinese cabbage seeds which astronauts will grow in space, and lab mice that will test whether certain drugs can help prevent muscle and bone loss in microgravity.
- The Dragon will remain at the station for a month before returning to Earth with science samples.

Research shows ribose may have formed on comets

- In a first, researchers have shown that ribose — a sugar that is one of the building blocks of genetic material in living organisms — may have formed in ice on comets.
- The genetic material of all living organisms on Earth, as well as of viruses, is made up of nucleic acids, DNA and RNA.
- Scientists have long wondered about the origin of these biological compounds.
- Now, by simulating the evolution of the interstellar ice making up comets in the laboratory, French research teams have successfully obtained ribose — a key step in understanding the origin of RNA and of life.

Greenland loosing ice cover faster than ever

- The seasonal melting of Greenland's vast ice sheet reached record levels this week, data from the Danish Meteorological Institute (DMI) showed.
- Around 12 percent of the ice sheet was melting, almost one month earlier than the previous top three dates for when more than 10 percent of the ice had begun to melt
- The record coincided with unusually warm weather in the Arctic territory, with temperatures at some weather stations on the ice reaching 10 degrees Celsius (50 degrees Fahrenheit).
- The warm weather also affected regions outside the ice sheet: In Kangerlussuaq on Greenland's west coast, the mercury reached 17.8 degrees Celsius, one of the highest April temperatures in Greenland since records began in 1873.
- Rain and meltwater at this time of the year typically runs back into the snow and freezes again, but by warming the snow further down it reduces the amount of heating needed to prompt the melting to start again later in the season.
- The Greenland ice sheet, a potentially massive contributor to rising sea levels, lost mass twice as fast between 2003 and 2010 as during the entire 20th century, researchers said in December.
- Greenland ice loss contributed to a global average sea level rise of 25 millimetres (about an inch) between 1990 and 2010 -- mainly from surface melt.

Arctic link to the monsoon

- In the chill climes of polar waters, scientists are looking for specific oceanographic factors that could influence Indian monsoon.
- IndARC, the country's first moored-underwater observatory in the Arctic, had recently been deployed for the continuous monitoring of the oceanographic parameters from various depths.
- IndARC is expected to provide significant inputs in the understanding of the Arctic climate and its possible link to tropical processes, specifically the Indian monsoon.
- The observatory is presently anchored about 1100 km away from the North Pole at a depth of 192 metres.
- The observatory carries with it an array of high-end oceanographic sensors strategically positioned at discrete depths in the water column.
- The sensors are programmed to collect real-time data on seawater temperature, salinity, current and other vital parameters of the fjord (creek),
- Climate change is felt first and fastest in the Arctic. It manifests as rising temperatures, loss of sea-ice and the melting of ice sheets.

Carbon sharing between trees

- A chance discovery in a mixed forest in Switzerland reveals that tree-to-tree interaction in forests goes beyond mere competition for resources.
- Forest trees are even more interconnected than thought, suggests a new study, which showed that around 40 per cent of the carbon in fine roots of spruce trees came from neighbouring trees.
- This level of sharing can be crucial for forests, especially under stress conditions like wildfires.
- Human-driven activities have been releasing vast amounts of CO₂ into the atmosphere since industrialisation began two hundred years ago.
- Consequently, there is a lot of interest in understanding to what degree forests the largest terrestrial pool of biological carbon, are able to absorb this amount, thereby mitigating climate change.

- Much about the magnitude, direction and the regulation of these transfers is yet unclear.
- Since all the trees in the study were healthy, and stress-free the authors acknowledged the possibility that the labelled trees were transferring its excess carbon below ground and, in turn, triggering mycorrhizal growth and activity.

China will launch core module in 2018

- China will launch a “core module” for its first space station some time around 2018,, part of a plan to have a permanent manned space station in service around 2022.
- Advancing Chinas space programme is a priority for Beijing, with President Xi Jinping calling for the country to establish itself as a space power, and apart from its civilian ambitions Beijing has tested anti-satellite missiles.
- China insists its space programme is for peaceful purposes, but the U.S. Defence Department has highlighted its increasing space capabilities, saying it was pursuing activities aimed to prevent adversaries from using space-based assets in a crisis.
- The “core module” for the space station would be called the “Tianhe-1”, the Chinese word for galaxy or Milky Way, Wang Zhongyang,
- If the International Space Station, which has extended its service, is retired by 2024, China's new space station will be the only operational one in outer space.

India’s own Regional Navigation Satellite System, the IRNSS, is all set to be completed

- India’s own Regional Navigation Satellite System, the IRNSS, is all set to be completed in space next week when the seventh and last of its spacecraft gets placed in orbit.
- The 1,425-kg spacecraft, IRNSS-1G, will be launched at 12.50 p.m. on April 28, Indian Space Research Organisation said.
- IRNSS will be to the subcontinent what the U.S. Global Positioning System, GPS, is to its users worldwide, but with far greater precision and in Indian control, according to ISRO.
- It will drive both everyday uses as a 24/7 standard service for air, sea, ship transport and will also be used for missile-related applications as an encrypted and restricted service.
- IRNSS-1G is slated to be launched from the PSLV-C33 from Sriharikota and will be the 35th PSLV flight in the last two decades.
- Over the next three to six months, all the IRNSS satellites in the fleet would be stabilised as a constellation, their signals and performance verified and later put to use.
- The fleet has two spare satellites ready in case of an emergency, a full-fledged ground control centre in Bengaluru and tracking stations across the country.

Plant breeders focussing on disease-resistant fruits

- To promote organic cultivation of fruits, plant breeders are now focussing on developing disease-resistant fruit varieties which can be grown without using pesticides.
- Even as efforts are on to develop various cultivation practices to reduce pest attack, scientists now feel that developing varieties which are resistant to major diseases will go a long way in promoting organic cultivation.

- About 120 plant breeders and horticulturalists from across the country are deliberating on issues related to development of disease-resistant varieties of fruits, among other things.
- A symposium on 'Fruit breeding in tropics and sub-tropics: an Indian perspective' being jointly organised by the Indian Council of Agricultural Research and Indian Institute of Horticultural Research (IIHR).
- organic fruits are not just healthier, but would also fetch additional income to farmers, especially in the export market. The symposium would look at conservation of indigenous fruit varieties.

NASA's Hubble Space Telescope has spotted a small, dark dwarf planet

- NASA's Hubble Space Telescope has spotted a small, dark moon orbiting the second brightest icy dwarf planet after Pluto in the Kuiper Belt.
- Nicknamed "MK 2", the 100-mile wide moon was seen approximately 13,000 miles from the dwarf planet called "Makemake" which is 870-mile wide.
- The dwarf planet, discovered in 2005, is named after a creation deity of the RapaNui people of Easter Island.
- The Kuiper Belt is a vast reservoir of leftover frozen material from the construction of the solar system 4.5 billion years ago
- The team used the same Hubble technique to observe the moon as they did for finding the small satellites of Pluto in 2005, 2011 and 2012.
- A moon's discovery can provide valuable information on the dwarf-planet system.
- By measuring the moon's orbit, astronomers can calculate a mass for the system and gain insight into its evolution. The discovery was announced in the journal Minor Planet Electronic Circular.

Smarac Citizen to grant Architects construction permits within a few minutes

- Architects and real estate developers who plan to construct buildings close to national monuments can soon download a new mobile app named Smarac Citizen, which will grant them construction permits within a few minutes.
- Based on a proposal from the National Monuments Authority (NMA), the app has been developed by the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), containing the maps of 3,686 Centrally-protected monuments across the country.
- Earlier, the NMA had to send teams to the areas close to historic monuments, where developers sought construction permits.
- The teams had to ensure that permits were granted only to projects beyond 300 metres from the outer boundary of a monument.
- Apart from easing the process of obtaining construction permits, the app will help the NMA keep a tab on encroachments around monuments.
- "The app will tell you how far new constructions are from any particular protected monument. The app will help decide the height of the buildings according to the air rules set by the Airports Authority.

India finishes set-up for India's own navigational system

- India's own navigational system, completed with the launch of the seventh and final satellite, will be called NAVIC (Navigation with Indian Constellation), Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced after the launch.
- The seventh and final satellite of the Indian Regional Navigation Satellite System, the IRNSS 1G, was launched into a sub geosynchronous transfer orbit with a perigee (nearest point to earth) of 284 km and an apogee (farthest point to earth) of 20,657 km.
- With this launch, the IRNSS constellation of seven satellites is now complete.
- This will allow the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) to focus on the process of designing front end chips which will receive the navigational signals sent out by the satellites.
- The system will be similar to the Global Positioning System (GPS) operated by the United States with 24 satellites and the Glonass, Galileo and BeiDou systems of Russia, Europe and China respectively.
- All satellites will undergo stabilisation testing and verification of their performance over the next few months before being pushed into use.
- An area of 1,500 km from Indian boundaries will be covered under the navigational system.
- The Prime Minister invited other countries to make use of this system as well. "We have seven neighbours who rely on technology provided by other countries. They can use Indian services if they want," he said in a video message addressed to ISRO engineers.
- With an accuracy of better than 20 m being claimed by ISRO, the navigation system will be offered as an open or Standard Positioning Service and a superior, coded military Restricted Service.
- Explaining the name NAVIC, Mr. Modi said the system was dedicated to India's mariners and fishermen who have been navigating using the sun and stars as waypoints for hundreds of years.
- "They have shown strength and determination in venturing out to sea for so many years. We have named this system for them, the 'naviks' (mariners)," he said.

In a major breakthrough skin cells transformed into heart cells and brain cells

- In a major breakthrough, a team of researchers, including an Indian origin scientist, has transformed skin cells into heart cells and brain cells using a combination of chemicals.
- The team used chemical cocktails to gradually coax skin cells to change into organ-specific stem cell-like cells and, ultimately, into heart or brain cells.
- Reprogramming a patient's own cells could provide the safest and most efficient way to regenerate dying or diseased heart muscle.
- The research lays the groundwork for one day being able to regenerate lost or damaged cells with pharmaceutical drugs.
- The researchers used genes to convert scar-forming cells in the heart of animals into new muscle that improved the function of the heart, using a chemical reprogramming approach.
- The team conducted two studies using a cocktail of nine chemicals to change human skin cells into beating heart cells and brain cells.
- They began the process by changing the cells into a state resembling multi-potent stem cells, which can turn into many different types of cells in a particular organ.
- With this method, more than 97 per cent of the cells began beating and they also responded appropriately to hormones, and molecularly, they resembled heart muscle cells, not skin cells.
- When the cells were transplanted into a mouse heart early in the process, they developed into healthy-looking heart muscle cells within the organ.

India lost in semifinals

- No team has won a Twenty20 International at the Wankhede Stadium after losing the toss.
- India made a strong case to reverse the trend, but Lendl Simmons had other ideas. West Indies won the World Twenty20 semifinal encounter by seven wickets and two balls to spare.
- Man-of-the-match Simmons, who led a charmed life — twice out on a no ball — led the charge with a 51-ball 83 not out. His knock included seven fours and five sixes.
- Andre Russell 43 (20b, 3x5, 4x6), who hit the winning run, gave Simmons good company from the 14th over when the West Indies was 116 for three.

Saina reaches semifinals of Indian open, while Sindhu exits

- Saina Nehwal just about managed to survive an 82-minute test against Korea's Sung Ji Hyun for a place in the semifinals of the India Open before a vociferous bunch of supporters at the Siri Fort Indoor Stadium.
- Saina, defending champion and second seed, overcame the loss of the first game to win 19- 21, 21-14, 21-19 in a match that witnessed long rallies and court-craft from both players until their tiring limbs filled the home-stretch with a series of unforced errors.
- However, P.V. Sindhu failed to double India's joy.
- In the day's last match that lasted 80 minutes, Korea's BaeYeon Ju made light of the loss of the first game to win 15-21, 21- 15, 21-15.

West Indies win both men and women T20 title

- Darren Sammy's men as their own and found ecstasy in a last over of pulsating thrills. The West Indies, known for its hoary past, won the ICC World Twenty20 title.
- Marlon Samuels (85 n.o., 66b, 9x4, 2x6) anchored the chase and Carlos Brathwaite (34 n.o.) mocked the 19 runs required from the final six deliveries.
- The burly Brathwaite's riposte — 6, 6, 6 and 6 — stunned England and forced a hapless Ben Stokes, the bowler, on to his haunches.
- The West Indies won by four wickets, scoring 161 for six in 19.4 overs while in pursuit of England's 155 for nine.
- In racing towards the victor's podium, the West Indies became the only squad so far to win the World Twenty20 title twice, having secured it last in 2012.
- The exuberant Caribbean celebrations were back on the cricket field as the West Indian women declared themselves the best in the world.
- West Indies women convincingly outsmarted the seemingly invincible Australians to win the maiden ICC World T20 women's title here at the Eden Gardens.

Virat Kohli became WC T20 player of the tournament

- Virat Kohli has been named as the player of the tournament. He has fend off completion from Badree of West Indies, Joe root of England etc.
- He said “Although I am disappointed that we were not able to make it throughto the final and win the ICC World Twenty20 title on home soil,I am proud to be named Player-of-the-tournament”

SC raps BCCI for not implementing Lodha committee report

- Noting that the BCCI has done nothing to fulfil its mandate to develop cricket on an equal basis across the country, the Supreme Court said cricket bosses have transformed the Board into a “mutual benefit society,” which allocates “huge” amounts to members without bothering to ask how they spend it.
- A Special Bench of Chief Justice of India T.S. Thakur and Justice F.M.I. Kalifulla asked whether the ‘no-questions-asked’ policy of the BCCI was a ploy to influence voting patterns.
- The Bench was hearing objections raised by the BCCI to several recommendations made by the Supreme Court-appointed committee, led by former Chief Justice of India R.M. Lodha, to overhaul and bring transparency into Indian cricket administration.

IPL chief says it's difficult to move matches in the eleventh hour

- Indian Premier League (IPL) chairman Rajeev Shukla is confident the controversy over the usage of water for the matches scheduled in Maharashtra will be resolved soon.
- Mr Shukla said, “We will try to convince the court that it’s very difficult to move the matches outside the State in the eleventh hour, and that we will try all other options to make sure that water is not wasted and only non-potable water is used.
- The former Union Cabinet Minister is surprised that no one raised the issue during the ICC World Twenty20.
- Meanwhile, Rising Pune Supergiants skipper MS Dhoni felt one should look at long-term solutions to address the water scarcity in the State rather than finding a quick-fix solution for the duration of the IPL.

SC mooted proposal that Govt should take over public functions of BCCI

- The Supreme Court mooted a proposal to have the government take over the “public functions” of the BCCI amid objections from the Board’s members that this will be a direct affront to the cricketing body’s identity as a private registered society.
- A Bench of Chief Justice of India T.S. Thakur and Justice F.M.I. Kalifulla asked whether selection of players for the national team, tours and organising of matches should be taken up by a committee operating under the aegis of a law.
- Senior advocate Kapil Sibal, appearing for the Baroda Cricket Association and a BCCI member protesting the implementation of the Justice Lodha panel recommendations to overhaul the Board, said such a move by the judiciary would be a violation of the BCCI’s fundamental right under Article 19 of the Constitution.
- The Mumbai Cricket Association rejected Justice Lodha’s recommendation to bar Ministers and government servants from becoming cricket administrators.

- The association said the “reality” is that their involvement aids the smooth functioning of sporting bodies as their influence is of help while organising big sporting events.

India reached Azlan Shah cup finals

- India produced an inspiring performance to beat host Malaysia 6-1 in a must win match.
- This assured India’s seventh appearance in final of the sultan Azlan shah hockey tournament.
- India’s opponent in the title encounter will be World champion Australia, which prevailed 3-0 over Canada to complete an all-win record in the preliminary league.

India lost finals to Australia

- India suffered a 0-4 drubbing at the hands of World champion Australia to settle for a silver medal, its best finish in six years, in the Sultan Azlan Shah Cup hockey tournament.
- This was Australia’s ninth title win as it continued its stranglehold over the tournament.
- India last won the tournament in 2010, its fifth title, when it was a joint-winner with South Korea. In 2012 and 2015 it was the bronze medallist.

Indian Olympic association has signed Salman Khan as goodwill ambassador

- The Indian Olympic Association (IOA) has signed actor Salman Khan as the good- will ambassador for the Indian contingent bound for the Rio Olympics.
- The announcement was made in the presence of Olympic medallists and Rio star athletes boxer M.C. Mary Kom, hockey captain Sardar Singh, and shooter ApurviChandela, among others.
- And, in its long-term goal towards becoming financially independent, the Indian Olympic Association has roped in three sponsors.

Sania Mirza and Martina Hingis suffered a shock defeat in the final of the Stuttgart Open

- Sania Mirza and Martina Hingis suffered a shock defeat in the final of the Stuttgart Open tennis tournament, losing in three sets to Caroline Garcia and Kristina Mladenovic.
- The top-seeded Indo-Swiss pair was beaten 6-2, 1-6, [6-10] in an hour and 21 minutes by the second-seeded French combination.
- Sania and Hingis have fumbled in recent tournaments, bowing out in the second-round of the Miami Masters and the first round at Indian Wells.

The Boxing Federation of India will have current and former players

- In a first for boxing administration in India, the proposed new federation will have representation from current and former pugilists by including them in the Executive Committee after elections.

- The Boxing Federation of India (BFI) is expected to take shape, under guidelines by the International Boxing Association (AIBA), failing which the country's boxers might be barred from this August's Olympic Games to be held in Rio de Janeiro.
- Four boxers — two men and two women — will now be duly elected in BFI's Executive Committee independently.
- The former boxers — one male and one female — in the committee will be picked through elections after registering all the retired pugilists via an athletes commission.
- The active members will be elected during the National Championships that will be held after BFI takes charge.
- The process to have the new federation in place by May 14 is picking up pace with the Sports Ministry deciding to give its No Objection Certificate (NOC) for BFI's registration.

SUYOG EDUCATION

SUYOG EDUCATION