

Hamas must release hostages for Gaza to get more aid, says US

Hamas must release more hostages in return for a significant increase in aid to Gaza and a pause in fighting, one of the US' top Middle East envoys said on Saturday.

"The surge in humanitarian relief, the surge in fuel, the pause in fighting will come when hostages are released," said Brett McGurk, who's Joe Biden's coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa. McGurk, speaking at the IISS Manama Dialogue, a regional security conference in Bahrain, said the US' approach has helped hostage negotiations so far.

Only four of the hostages have been released so far, including two American citizens. Israel has freed another, while a few are known to have died, according to Hamas and Israeli officials.

The US president spoke to Qatar's ruling emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, on Friday about trying to ensure Hamas lets go of more

Israeli march for release of hostages reaches Jerusalem

Thousands of Israelis including friends and relatives of hostages taken by Hamas arrived Saturday in Jerusalem, capping a four-day march to pressure the government to secure the captives' release. Since Hamas militants surged out of Gaza six weeks ago and, according to Israel, seized some 240 hostages, their loved ones have waged a determined publicity campaign for their freedom. A column of thousands of demonstrators draped in Israeli flags, reached PM Benjamin Netanyahu's office in Jerusalem after a 60kilometre walk. "Bring them home now," they chanted. AFP

people. Qatar hosts members of Hamas' political leadership and has been key to the negotiations. BLOOMBERG

Lanka releases 22 fishermen after Sitharaman steps in

TIMES NEWS NETWORK



Madurai: Sri Lankan authorities on Saturday night released 22 dhow (country boat) fishermen from Tamil Nadu detained by them earlier in the day on charges of poaching in their territorial waters after Union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman intervened in the matter. The two dhows seized by the Lankan side were also released and the fishermen allowed to sail back on their crafts.

Sitharaman had come to Rameswaram on Saturday night to distribute welfare measures under the Prime Minister's SVANidhi (The PM Street Vendors' Atmanirbarnidhi) the next day. Knowing about it, fishermen leaders led by the district president of Country Boat Fishermen Welfare Association SP Rayappan met her and urged her to intervene in the matter.

Sitharaman contacted officials of the external affairs ministry and urged them to step in. "She called important people, including some in Sri Lanka, on Saturday night itself and assured us that the arrested fishermen would be released. We were doubtful in the beginning but our fishermen called from Sri Lanka around midnight to tell us that they were re-

Sitharaman contacted MEA officials to secure the release of the 22 from TN detained on charges of poaching in Sri Lanka's territorial waters

leased. We can't thank her enough," said Rayappan.

The Sri Lankan side, which usually doesn't harass country boat fishermen in the Gulf of Mannar and Palk Bay, decided to release them as a goodwill gesture. The Sri Lankan Navy brought the released fishermen to the International Maritime Boundary Line (IMBL) and handed them over to the Indian Coast Guard.

The fishing boats arrived at Pamban on Sunday afternoon much to the relief of boat owners Francis Cassier and K Raj as well as the fishermen's families.

Local BJP functionaries received them at the coast.

Earlier, MDMK chief secretary Durai Vaiko condemned Sri Lanka for arresting 22 fishermen and demanded the Centre's intervention.

Private sector plays vital role in boosting IAF's capability: IAF chief

BENGALURU, Nov 19 (PTI)

PRIVATE industries will play a very important role not only in enhancing Indian Air Force capabilities but also in increasing the productivity and production ability of defence public sector units, Air Chief Marshal Vivek Ram Chaudhari said on Sunday.

Responding to a question during a session at the Synergia Conclave 2023, he said the private industry also needs to ensure that they match up with the production capability to ensure that the rollout of fighters that the Air Force orders takes place on time.



Vivek Ram Chaudhari

He said there is definitely a huge role for the private industry to enhance IAF's capability

by helping the lead integrators roll out aircraft.

"Without doubt, the private industry will play a very important role, not only in enhancing our capability but also in enhancing the productivity or the production capability of the defence PSUs," the IAF chief said. "What we have to understand is that though we place the order on the defence PSU for any equipment, they (the private sector) will perform primarily the role of being lead integrators.

"The large number of components and spare parts that go into making the aircraft as a whole come from many pri-

vate industries in the country," he added. Responding to a question on the indigenous capacity of India, he said huge steps are being taken to ensure the indigenisation of key components. He said the ongoing indigenisation efforts cover key components such as radars, avionics systems and Electronic Warfare (EW) systems, fostering self-reliance.

"The reliance on some foreign OEMs (original equipment manufacturers) will probably remain for a few years... Hopefully after that we should be completely independent of the foreign OEMs for niche technologies also," he said.

India's international stature has grown after Modi became PM: Rajnath

JAIPUR, Nov 19 (PTI)

DEFENCE Minister Rajnath Singh on Sunday said India's international stature has grown after Narendra Modi became Prime Minister and attacked the Congress Government in Rajasthan over recruitment exam paper leaks and law-and-order situation.

Anyone who can't give security to mothers and sisters has no right to rule, he said while referring to the Ashok Gehlot Government at an election ral-

ly in Shahpura. Singh said elections are fought not only to form government but also to build the society and country. "Government should not be run based on caste, creed and religion but should be run based on humanity," he said.

The Defence Minister said that "Bharat is no longer weak and the world listens carefully to what it says".

"India's international stature has grown after Narendra Modi became Prime Minister," Singh added.

'Women accorded top priority under PM Mudra Yojana scheme'

RAMESWARAM, TN, Nov 19 (PTI)

UNION Finance and Corporate Affairs Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Sunday said women entrepreneurs are accorded first priority under the Centre's flagship Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana scheme which offers financial assistance to beneficiaries.

Distributing sanction letters to beneficiaries under the PM SVANidhi Se Samridhi programme which offers loans to street vendors, here, she said officials of the municipalities should identify the uncovered street vendors and help them avail benefits of this scheme.

SVANidhi Se Samridhi is an



Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman hands over a Chandrayaan 3 model to students of various government schools of Ramanathapuram district during an outreach programme, in Rameswaram, on Sunday. (PTI)

additional component of the PMSVANidhi scheme to facilitate access to eight Central Government schemes to eligible PM SVANidhi beneficiaries and their family members for their holistic development and socio-economic upliftment.

Recalling the launch of Jan Dhan-Aadhaar-Mobile Trinity, Sitharaman said through the JAM Trinity, AADHAR card was provided to a beneficiary after which he or she can open a bank account and directly the financial aid from the Centre has been transferred to the accounts of a beneficiary thereby avoiding 'middlemen'.

Indian cyberspace seeing incidents at higher rate than global average: Nair

BENGALURU, Nov 19 (PTI)

THE Indian cyberspace has seen nearly double the number of cyber incidents as compared to the global average, National Cybersecurity Coordinator M U Nair said on Sunday.

Addressing a session on 'Aligning Technologies to Future Conflicts' at the Synergia Conclave 2023, Nair said ransomware attack payments of nearly USD 1.54 billion have been made on an average over the past 10 months, which has doubled since 2022.

"These payments are just the tip of an iceberg since several of these incidents go unreported," he said. Nair said the Indian cyberspace has seen cyber incidents at an average

of 2127 times during the past six months, which is much more than the global average of 1108. Nair said it's time for countries to rally together to contain and limit disruptive practices on cyberspace.

"There are a large number of initiatives in this direction under the UN and regional forums where nations are looking for solutions to cyberspace which is not confined to national boundaries," he said.

Nair said several international initiatives are addressing the evolving challenges of cybersecurity. One notable effort is the UN Group of Governmental Experts (UN GGE) on advancing responsible state behaviour in cyberspace, appointed by the UNGA, he said.

Robust purchase may burden govt with 2x rice buffer stock

Need To Take Steps To Offload Surplus Grain, Say Officials

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New Delhi: The government is likely to face the "problem of plenty" of rice stock once again, barely five months after it stopped selling the food staple from its buffer stock to state governments, citing that the move was aimed at putting a check on prices.

With robust paddy procurement during the current kharif marketing season (KMS) and very little sale of rice from FCI stock in the open market, the agency is likely to be saddled with more than twice the buffer requirement by the end of current procurement season, as per estimates.

To handle increasing stock, and that too of fortified rice, the government will need to take measures to offload the grain, officials said. The elections next year may give the government an opportunity to allocate more foodgrain to the poor, they added.

TOI has learnt that the



PADDY PROBLEM: Since e-auction of rice started in July, the FCI has sold barely 1 lakh tonne in the open market, making the target to sell 25 lakh tonnes to bulk buyers by next March almost unattainable

Centre's decision in June to scrap the policy of allowing states to buy rice from FCI under 'open market sale scheme' (OMSS) for their own programmes has impacted the offloading of excess rice. Moreover, putting on hold the sale of rice to grain-based ethanol plants has also contributed to this. Since the e-auction of rice started in July, FCI has sold barely one lakh tonne of rice

in the open market, making the target to sell 25 lakh tonnes to bulk buyers by next March almost unattainable.

Government data show that so far FCI and state government agencies have purchased about 170 lakh tonnes of rice in the current procurement season that commenced last month. Officials said they are confident of the procurement crossing 500 lakh tonnes as the purchase in some states

such as Odisha and Jharkhand has not yet started. Currently, FCI has 194 lakh tonnes of rice, against the buffer requirement of 76 lakh tonnes for January 1. This stock excludes 230 tonnes of rice which is yet to be received from the millers. Moreover, during the next Rabi marketing season the government expects the rice procurement to be around 50-60 lakh tonnes.

Officials said even the opening stock of rice with FCI as on October 1 was 221 lakh tonnes and this was more than double the required buffer stock. They added that the good pace of procurement in the current season will push the stock further.

As per government estimates, the Centre needs around 400 lakh tonnes of rice annually to meet the free ration scheme, Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana under which nearly 81 crore people get five kg foodgrain every month.