

Israel discussing new limits on access to Al-Aqsa in Jerusalem

Jerusalem: The Israeli govt is discussing whether to increase restrictions on access to an important mosque in Jerusalem during the Islamic holy month of Ramzan, leading to predictions of unrest if the additional limits are enforced.

Cabinet ministers discussed on Sunday whether to bar some members of Israel's Arab minority from attending prayers at the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound during Ramzan, according to two officials briefed on the deliberations, who spoke on condition of anonymity. The office of PM Netanyahu said a decision on the matter had already been reached, without saying what it was. But the two officials said a final decision would be made only after the govt received recommendations from the security services in the coming days.

Israel has long limited access to Al-Aqsa for Palestinians from the Israeli-occupied West Bank, and since the start of the Israel-Hamas war, it has imposed extra restrictions on Arabs in Israel. But some had hoped those limits would be largely lifted for Ramzan, which starts in early March.

The mosque complex is sacred to both Muslims and



Getty Images

The Dome of the Rock at the Al-Aqsa mosque compound

At world court, Palestinians seek end to Israeli occupation

The Palestinian foreign minister Riad Malki on Monday accused Israel of apartheid and urged the UN's top court to declare that Israel's occupation of lands sought for a Palestinian state is illegal and must end. The remarks came at hearings into the legality of Israel's 57-year occupation. The case opened at the International Court of Justice, also known as the world court, against the backdrop of the Israel-Hamas war, which became a focal point of the day — even though the hearings were meant to centre on Israel's control over the occupied West Bank, the Gaza Strip and annexed east Jerusalem. AP

Jews, who call it the Temple Mount because it was the site of two Jewish temples in anti-

quity that remain central to Jewish identity. Tens of thousands of Muslims visit the mosque every day during Ramzan.

Israeli police raids at the site, riots there by young Palestinians and visits by far-right Jewish activists have often been a catalyst for wider violence, including a brief war between Israel and Hamas in 2021.

The move to further restrict access was promoted in the Israeli cabinet by Itamar Ben-Gvir, the far-right minister for national security, who has long pushed for greater Jewish control over the site and less Muslim access to it. In recent days, he had warned that Muslim worshippers might use access to the mosque to display support for Hamas.

Analysts say Netanyahu is wary of angering Ben-Gvir because his ruling coalition depends on Ben-Gvir's support. But Arab leaders as well as some Jewish Israelis have warned that by allowing Ben-Gvir to dictate policy at the mosque, Netanyahu could inflame an already volatile situation. Dan Harel, an ex-deputy chief of staff in the military, said the move would be "unnecessary and foolish" and might "ignite the entire Muslim world." NYT

Farm unions reject govt offer to link MSP & crop diversification

Call For 'Delhi Chalo' March To Resume

Neel.Kamal & Vishwa Mohan

Bathinda/New Delhi: Sanyukt Kisan Morcha (Non-Political) and Kisan Mazdoor Morcha, spearheading "Delhi Chalo" farm protests, rejected Monday a proposal by the Centre for a five-year contract with farmers to procure maize, cotton, and pulses — arhar/tur, masur, and urad dals

► Another farmer dies in Pjb during protest, P 16

— at minimum support price through cooperatives and promote crop diversification.

SKM's Jagjit Singh Dallewal and KMM's Sarvan Singh Pandher reiterated their demand for a legal guarantee of MSP on 23 crops,

'GUARANTEE MSP ON 23 CROPS'

Photo: Reuters



Farmers at Shambhu border on a modified tractor fitted with a fan to blow away smoke from tear gas shells lobbed by Haryana police

Govt Offer: Cooperative societies NCCF & Nafed to enter into contract with farmers growing tur, urad & masoor dal, maize & cotton for buying crops at MSP for next 5 yrs. No limit on quantity bought

Farmers' Reply: Legal guarantee of MSP on all 23 crops, following a C2+50% formula of profit over input cost, a must. **No word on farm loan waiver, public sector crop insurance scheme, no privatisation of electricity, ₹10K monthly pension to farmers above 60 years**

following a C2+50% formula of profit over input cost.

While Piyush Goyal, one of three ministers to have attended, fourth round talks with farmers Sunday, praised govt proposal as "out of the box" and emphasised its po-

tential to encourage crop diversification and improve groundwater levels in Punjab, Dallewal and Pandher likened it to contract farming.

After consulting protesters at Shambhu and Khanauri border points between Punj-

Not a long-term solution: Experts

Many agri scientists, experts and economists TOI spoke to over Centre's latest proposal remained sceptical, considering it as a temporary fix for current crisis and doubted its effectiveness as a long-term solution. While one emphasised need for MSP calculations for all 23 crops to ensure fair prices nationwide, another said, "Why is it called contract farming for five years? Is it an attempt to bring back (withdrawn) farm laws through backdoor?" **P 16**

ab and Haryana, the two announced plans for farmers to resume their march towards Delhi at 11am Wednesday. Over 20,000 protesters have been camping at these locations.

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China building villages on disputed Bhutan border

Beijing: China is reportedly pressing ahead with construction as well as expansion of border villages in disputed territories with Bhutan, despite ongoing border talks between the two countries, the Hong Kong-based South China Morning Post reported.

China has been pressing ahead with its plans to build well-furnished villages on both Indian and Bhutan borders. China's attempts to build a road in Doklam plateau — close to the Siliguri corridor — in 2017 had resulted in an India-China stand-off, which ended only after Beijing dropped its construction plans.

The rapid expansion began as a poverty alleviation scheme but serves a dual national security role, the report quoted Chinese Communist Party officials as saying.

On Dec 28 the first batch of people — made up of 38 households from the Tibetan city of Shigatse — moved into the newly expanded Tamalung



village, the report said, quoting a statement by Tibet Federation of Industry and Commerce. "The village is one of at least three built by China inside disputed zone. Local govts in Tibet Autonomous Region led a rapid expansion of border villages last year, with Tamalung doubling in size in the latter half of 2023," the report stated. Satellite imagery shows 147 new houses. The village expansion was designed to accommodate 235 households, in addition to the 200 people who were living there in just 70 homes in 2022.

To the east of Tamalung,

another border village, Gyala-phug, also doubled in size last year after 16 sq km was cleared to make way for more than 150 houses. Satellite imagery shows new homes sitting next to an existing four rows of dwellings and a Communist Party community centre with a small library and other amenities, the report said.

China and Bhutan do not have diplomatic relations but maintain contact through periodic visits by officials. While China has resolved its boundary disputes with its 12 other neighbours, India and Bhutan are the only two countries with whom it is yet to sign border agreements.

In recent years, China has stepped up efforts to establish full-fledged diplomatic ties with Bhutan and to expedite negotiations to settle the vexed border dispute, which was complicated by Beijing's attempts to claim Doklam despite Thimphu's assertions that the area belonged to it. ४११

Average wholesale onion prices up 40% at Lasalgaon

Tushar.Pawar@timesgroup.com

Nashik: Average wholesale prices of onions at Lasalgaon Agriculture Produce Market Committee (APMC) increased by 40% on Monday, a day after Union minister Bharati Pawar announced the Centre's decision to withdraw the ban on its export, subject to a cap that will be specified in a detailed notification soon.

Although the Centre is yet to come out with a formal notification on the withdrawal of export ban, Pawar, MoS and MP from Dindori (Nashik rural), said the decision was taken at a meeting of Union govt's group of ministers, led by home minister Amit Shah.

An APMC official said the development had a positive impact on the average prices at Lasalgaon, the country's largest wholesale onion market.

The average prices of the bulbs at Lasalgaon rose to Rs 1,800 per quintal on Monday from Saturday's Rs 1,280 per quintal. The minimum and maximum wholesale prices were recorded at Rs 1,000 and Rs 2,100 per quintal, respectively, during the day, when around 10,000 quintals of onions were auctioned.

Another APMC official said the onion exporters "have also started buying the produce for selling it in the overseas markets".

On Dec 7 last year, the Centre had imposed a ban on onion exports till March 31, 2024, in a bid to cater to the



Central govt is yet to come out with a formal notification on the withdrawal of export ban. On Dec 7 last year, the govt had imposed a ban on onion exports till March 31, 2024, in a bid to stabilise the wholesale prices

demand in the domestic markets and stabilise the wholesale prices.

Following the move, average wholesale onion prices had crashed by 67% in the past two-and-a-half months—from Rs 3,950 per quintal on Dec 6 last year to Rs 1,280 per quintal on Feb 17.

As the cost of onion production was Rs 1,800 per quintal, farmers said they incurred losses if the produce fetched rates below that. The onion growers claimed they had incurred heavy losses and could not recover production cost during the last two-and-a-half months.

Neighbours to get shipments, but no blanket plan to lift ban

Dipak.Dash@timesgroup.com

New Delhi: India is set to allow export of around 3 lakh tonne of onion till March end to neighbouring countries, including Bangladesh, Bhutan, Sri Lanka and Mauritius which have approached govt after it banned overseas shipment of the kitchen commodity. There is no blanket proposal to lift the ban.

Sources said the proposal for exporting onions to these countries was put before the group of ministers headed by home minister Amit Shah last week for approval. The countries had written to the external affairs ministry seeking import of onions to meet their domestic demand.

The modalities with "terms and conditions" for export will be notified in a week, sources said. Though the volumes will be less, it will send a positive message to farmers in Maharashtra who have been demanding a total lifting of the ban on exports. Govt had imposed a ban on December 7, 2023 and it's effective till Mar.

Data show that the retail prices have fallen to Rs 20 a kg from Rs 60 per kg in December last year due to the ban on export and arrival of kharif crop.

NITI Aayog pitches for tax reforms, mandatory saving plan, housing plan for elderly

NEW DELHI, Feb 19 (PTI)

GOVERNMENT think tank NITI Aayog has pitched for tax reforms, mandatory saving plan, and housing plan for elderly in India, as the population of senior citizens is projected to reach 19.5 per cent of the country's population by 2050.

In a report titled 'Senior Care Reforms in India - Reimagining the Senior Care Paradigm', NITI Aayog said a national portal for senior care must be developed for senior citizens to provide easy access of services to them.

"Since the social security framework in India



is limited, most seniors depend on the income generated from their savings. Variable interest rates result in the erosion of their income, sometimes even below sustenance levels.

"Therefore, a regulatory mechanism is required to set a viable base rate for the interest accrued on senior citizen deposits," the report said.

Lt Gen Upendra Dwivedi takes over as Army Vice Chief

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

New Delhi: Lt-General Upendra Dwivedi, who was commissioned into 18 Jammu & Kashmir Rifles in Dec 1984, on



Monday took over as the new Army Vice Chief. He will be the senior-most Lt-Gen in the 12-lakh

strong force when Gen Manoj Pande retires on May 31.

Lt-Gen M V Suchindra Kumar, who was commissioned into 1 Assam Regiment in June 1985, in turn, replaced Lt-Gen Dwivedi as the general officer commanding-in-chief of the crucial Udhampur-based Northern Command.

During his two-year tenure as GoC-in-C of Northern Command, Lt-Gen Dwivedi provided "strategic guidance and operational oversight" for planning and executing sustained operations along the northern and western borders with China and Pakistan, in addition to overseeing counter-terrorism operations in J&K. "During this period, Gen Dwivedi was actively engaged in the ongoing negotiations with China in resolving the vexed border issue. He was also involved in modernisation and equipping of the Army's largest command," a senior officer said.

Navy's MILAN 2024 joint exercise with 50 countries begins

NEW DELHI, Feb 19 (IANS)

THE 12th edition of the Naval exercise 'Milan' began on Monday in which more than 50 nations are taking part.

According to the Ministry of Defence, the theme of Milan this year is 'Forging Naval Alliances for a Secure Maritime Future'.

Navies from the US, Japan, Australia, France, Bangladesh, South Korea, Vietnam, Indonesia and Malaysia, among others, are participating in the 12th edition of the 'Milan' exercise that is aiming to bolster maritime cooperation among like-minded nations. The Indian Navy said that LCA Tejas 'Flying Bullets' of IAF announced their grand arrival at INS Dega, Visakhapatnam, for Milan 2024, hosted by the Sunrise Command of the Indian Navy.

Two aircraft carriers -- INS Vikrant and Vikramaditya -- will take part in the exercise.

"The exercise is a testament to the unbreakable bond between our armed forces across air and sea," the Navy said. Commenting on the joint naval exercise, the French forces deployed in the Indian Ocean and stationed in the UAE said, "Twenty-five years of strategic partnerships, lots of bilateral exercises and operational activities, and once again France and India come together for a multinational maritime exercise -- MILAN 24 -- with a maritime patrol aircraft Atlantique 2. Thanks to Indian Navy for the invite."

The Ministry of Defence said that the exercise aims to strengthen the collaboration among the participating navies.

One maritime patrol aircraft and 15 ships from friendly for-



The Sunrise Command of the Indian Navy welcomes the Russian cruiser Varyag 011, which has arrived to take part in Multilateral Naval Exercise MILAN 2024, in Visakhapatnam on Monday. (ANI)

eign countries, and nearly 20 ships from the Indian Navy will participate in the sea exercise. Nearly 50 aircraft, including MiG 29K and P8I, along with aircraft carriers Vikrant and Vikramaditya will also participate in the exercise.

The 12th edition of the MILAN exercise will continue till February 27. The exercise aims to provide a platform for the participating navies to share ideas to enhance security on the high seas and ensure safety of maritime commerce for growth and prosperity of all, an official said. During the sea phase from February 24-27, the participating navies will conduct advanced air defence, anti-submarine and anti-surface warfare drills. Gunnery shoots on aerial and surface targets, manoeuvres and underway replenishment would also be conducted.