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## Climate and Security

Not too long after his predecessor, Donald Trump, had accorded the short shrift to such close-to-the-bone issues as climate change, President Joe Biden and his deputy, Vice-President Kamala Harris have given the appropriate priority to the raging climate crisis as a "core element of our national security and foreign policy". The report that was unveiled on Thursday is explicit on the point that the "climate crisis is reshaping our physical world". The climate of the Earth, to which the generally impervious world belongs, is reshaping the physical world, with "the Earth's climate changing faster than at any point in modern history and extreme weather events becoming more frequent and severe". The document from Washington will hopefully be an appropriate template for the next round of jaw-jaw in Glasgow, after the infructuous meetings in Paris, Copenhagen and Cancun.

In 2021, for example, wildfires raged across the western United States, throughout the Mediterranean region, and eastern Russia, Europe and China. Nearer home, India had to contend with murderous floods in parallel to parts of the world which suffered unprecedented levels of drought. The world is already experiencing the devastating impacts that climate has wreaked on almost every aspect of our lives, from food and water insecurity to infrastructure and public health. Verily has this crisis exacerbated inequalities of gender, race, ethnicity, and economic security. To quote the report, "we have reached a point where we cannot reverse some of the changes to the climate system".

The Biden administration's parameters and analysis can form the core of the national security and foreign policy components of the US Government, in coordination with the National Security Council. It has the potential to serve as a foundation for "our critical work on climate and security moving forward". Thursday's announcements fulfill key requirements of both the January 27 Executive Order (EO) 14008 on Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad to put the climate crisis at the centre of U.S. foreign policy and national security and the February 29 Executive Order (EO) 14013 on Rebuilding and Enhancing Programs to Resettle Refugees and Planning for the Impact of Climate Change on Migration.

The announcements also reinforce President Biden's commitment to evidence-based decisions guided by the best available science and data. While national security agencies led the development of these analyses, the nation's premier science agencies played a central role in ensuring that the best available science and data were included in each product. Climate change will increasingly exacerbate a number of risks to U.S. national security interests, from physical impacts that could cascade into security challenges, to how countries respond to the climate challenge. The fear has been expressed and that no country will be spared from challenges directly related to climate change.

## Checkmate in Prague

The Czech Republic is headed for a change at the helm with the centrist party led by Prime Minister Andrej Babis losing the parliamentary election. The outcome is a surprising development that could mean the eclipse of the popular billionaire's tenure in power. For the head of government, the election to fill 200 seats in the Lower House of the nation's parliament was held at an unpropitious time, specifically after the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists exposed details of the Prime Minister's overseas financial dealings in a project named as the "Pandora Papers". The 67-year-old Babis has denied any wrongdoing. Almost all the votes have been counted and the party named "Together", a three-party coalition, has captured 27.8 per cent of the votes. It has defeated Babis' ANO (Yes) party, which won 27.1 per cent of the votes. The psephological swing, therefore, has an anti-incumbency connotation.

In yet another setback for the populist leader, another centre-left-liberal coalition of the Pirate Party and STAN, a group of mayors, received 15.6 per cent of the vote to occupy the third slot. The two democratic coalitions have gained a majority and thus have a chance to form a majority government, according to Petr Fiala, Together's leader and its candidate for Prime Minister. Five Opposition parties with policies closer to the European Union's mainstream compared with the populist Babis, had put aside their differences in this election to set up the two coalitions. They are straining every nerve to oust the eurosceptic Prime Minister from power.

The result implies a major change of politics in the Czech Republic, just as it probably will in Angela Merkel's Germany. The outcome will hopefully stabilize the country's position in the Western camp. Unfortunately, however, the Czech President, Milos Zeman, was rushed to hospital the day after the country held the parliamentary election. The President has a key role in putting in place a new government. The Czech presidency is a largely ceremonial post, but the President has the right to choose the political leader who can try to form the next government.

Shortly before he was hospitalised, President Zeman met Babis, his close ally. While the winning coalition got a majority of 108 seats in the 200-seat House and pledged to work together, President Zeman indicated that he would first appoint the leader of the strongest party - not the strongest coalition - to try to form the next government. Despite the clear-cut margin of victory, the Czech Republic seems headed for a bout of political uncertainty. With the President in hospital, formation of an effective government might get delayed. If Babis is allowed the first chance to form government, he will need to be defeated in Parliament before the coalition can come to power.

# Least we can do

This year's Nobel Prize, for findings that disprove the perception that increased minimum wages cost jobs, should spur the government to make the Code on Wages more effective



This year's Nobel Prize to David Card for his experimental work with Alan Krueger - on empirical findings disapproving the common perception that raising minimum wages will cost jobs - is a clarion call for developing economies such as India to urgently review their minimum wages system. "Everyone knew" raising minimum wages would result in no money being left with employers to meet increasing costs with adverse impacts on employment generation. But the study that brought the Nobel Prize found no evidence that raising the minimum wage costs jobs. According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), "minimum wages are the minimum amount of remuneration that an employer is required to pay wage earners for the work performed during a given period, which cannot be reduced by collective agreement or an individual contract. The purpose of minimum wages is to protect workers against unduly low pay".

India is known as being one of the first developing countries to pioneer regulations related to minimum wages and payment of wages even before its independence. India's minimum wages system got strengthened with the introduction of the Minimum Wages Act, 1948 that served the country from 1948 till the recent introduction of the Code on Wages, 2019. In a judgment, the Hon'ble Supreme Court (1992 AIR 504) held that employers have no right to be in business if they are not capable of paying the minimum wage. The minimum wage is both the entry and exit level wage for unduly low paid workers of all age groups and it is the only means of survival for them and their families. An appropriate setting up of minimum wages by policymakers and their enforcement can bring a significant change in the lives of numerous wage earners in India. There are a total of 50 crore workers in India, of whom 90 per cent are categorized as unorganized and around 10 per cent as organised. This shows the potential of using minimum wage as a policy tool to revive the consumption-led economy to boost aggregate demand.

In India, the Minimum Wages Act 1948 made minimum wages applicable for "scheduled employments". This means employment specified in the schedule or any process or branch of work forming part of such employment. The fixation of minimum wage and its applicability to schedule of employment falls within the jurisdiction of both State Governments/UTs and the Central Government. That has amounted to as many as 429 scheduled employments (45 in the Central sphere) and 1,915 scheduled job categories for unskilled workers (GOI, 2018). Therefore, the enforcement of so many categories of minimum wages

became quite difficult and to some extent impossible. The revision of minimum wages, especially in States and Union Territories, has not been seen as a periodical affair; rather the issue has been left unattended for quite some time. The minimum wages are also not correlated with the cost-of-living index from time to time by many States/UTs. That has resulted in (as per the Economic Survey, 2018-19) major variations in the number of scheduled employments, for example three in Mizoram and 102 in Assam. Similarly, Nagaland has the lowest minimum wage of Rs 115/day which goes up to Rs 538/day in Delhi. And the highest minimum wage is seen at Rs 135/day in Nagaland against Rs 1192/day in Kerala.

There are two concepts relating to minimum wage that exist in India, i.e. the minimum wage, and the national floor-level minimum wage. The national floor-level minimum wage is a concept mooted in 1992 by the Central Government to reduce the disparities in minimum wages among States and Union Territories. However, it was indicative in nature and not binding on states. Since June 2017, the national floor-level minimum wage has not been updated with the cost of living and has been left untouched at Rs 176/day. Interestingly, these numbers relating to minimum wages of States and the national floor-level minimum wage (NFLMW) lack a proper scientific methodology for fixation at the base level. It has been observed that the present minimum wages fall short of an adequate value for taking care of the needs of workers and their families even in scheduled employment. Employment such as domestic work which is not even covered under the Minimum Wages Act, 1948 have less than the prevailing minimum wages of scheduled employment. Therefore, the Code on Wages, 2019 made the provisions of the applicability of minimum wages universal; however, there is an absence of an appropriate scientific methodology which considers both the domestic and international scenarios as well as covers the guidelines referred to by ILO. The guidelines of the ILO especially "the Minimum Wage Fixing Convention, 1971 (No. 131)" are quite clear and helpful in setting the minimum wage at a reasonable level. The convention has provided a minimum wage level that takes into account the needs of workers and their families as well as economic factors, and the role of collective bargaining.

An expert committee for determining the methodology for fixing the national minimum wage was set up by the Ministry of Labour and Employment. It suggested a scientific methodology based on balanced diet approach to calculate minimum wages in India with a nationally representative food basket for all regions. It suggested a national minimum wage of Rs 375/day at July 2018 prices (Rs. 9750/month) irrespective of sectors, skills, occupations and rural-urban location. The estimation was based on the consumption expenditure survey 2011-12 while minimum wages at regional levels were also estimated with the same basket considering regional prices. The basket considered a 2400 kcal diet, with 50-gram proteins, 30-gram fats as well as non-food items, both essential and others. This included 3.6 consumption units considering the average household size of India. An average additional city compensatory allowance of Rs 55 per day for urban workers over and above the national minimum wage was also recommended. But the recommendations have not been accepted yet. It has been further highlighted (Satpathy and Mallick, 2020) that the common criticism of minimum wage setting and its adjustments interfering with market forces in wage setting and raising labour costs, resulting in layoffs of workers, is not true. This seems to be an invalid consideration when minimum wages were set and adjusted reasonably with the appropriate methodology. However, fears that

minimum wages per se led to employment losses appear to lack empirical verification. Instead, a growing number of studies nationally and internationally including an ILO publication of 2008 indicate that the relationship between the minimum wage and employment is not necessarily negative. And if minimum wage is set at a reasonable level, it can increase the number of workers with access to decent wages and reduce the gender pay gap with little or no adverse impact on employment.

Further, there is no evidence found on any potential displacing employment effect of minimum wages in the case of India (Belsler and Rani, 2011). The research supports the assumption that minimum wages redistribute incomes without hurting employment. It has also been highlighted that standard neo-classical economics has overly emphasized the adverse effects of minimum wages on employment. They also state that based on an

assessment of recent academic literature more than 650 economists and five Nobel prize winners and six past presidents of the American Economic Association issued a statement that higher minimum wages can significantly improve the lives of unduly low paid workers and their families. A recent brief of ILO (Sharma and Estupinan, 2021) on "Impact of minimum wages on wages and employment in selected Indian states" revealed that more than 50 per cent proportion of workers in states such as Chhattisgarh (73.19), Madhya Pradesh (69.81) and Uttar Pradesh (59.05) are not receiving minimum wages. States such as Delhi (49.88) and Odisha (48.79) are close to that mark. States such as Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh show 13.61 and 15.80 state-wise proportion of workers not receiving the minimum wages as per the PLFS Survey 2017-18 and 2018-19.

The sectors where nearly half the workers do not receive minimum wages are food product and beverages, construction, wholesale and retail trade, and repair and maintenance of motor vehicles. The findings on the impact of minimum wages show that minimum wages in most Indian states are low enough to catalyze positive impacts on employment if raised. It further shows that a one per cent increase in minimum wages increases employment by 0.623 per cent and 0.582 per cent (accounting for both district and state fixed effects). The result also provides evidence that minimum wages impact positively both wages and employment in industrial groups such as the manufacture of food products and beverage; textile and apparel; water supply; sewage; waste management; construction; wholesale and retail trade, and repair of motor vehicles.

The Swedish academy's Nobel Prize for experiments and findings against the idea that imposing or increasing the minimum wage would cost jobs is another testimony to urgently emphasise on fixation, adjustment and enforcement of minimum wages in India by making the Code on Wages, 2019 effective. This is also the right time to raise minimum wages appropriately and adequately in all occupations in all states and adjust it with the cost of living from time to time.

The Central Government may also urgently update the present NFLMW and may further recommend a national minimum wage with its newly set up committee for handholding of the states with respect to fixing and determining a robust scientific methodology for this purpose. Awareness among large numbers of illiterate and low-paid unorganized workers can also be emphasised adequately for a visible working of the minimum wages system in the country.



A MEMBER OF THE ANN ASIA NEWS NETWORK

ASIAN VOICES

## Girls are fighting for a better tomorrow

The Asia-Pacific region is increasingly a "Tale of Two Cities" for young women leaders working to increase gender equality. The situation for girls and young women in several countries is slipping backwards because of violence and discrimination. Disturbing headlines continue to come out of Myanmar and Afghanistan. Meanwhile, other countries continue to boldly move forward in pursuit of greater equality and opportunities for girls. This year we have seen thousands of women political activists arrested, discriminated against and socially marginalised in the region. In Afghanistan and Myanmar, the situation may be even more dire, making many fear for the status and opportunities of girls and young women who grew up with the expectation of personal freedom. What is happening in many countries is a stark reminder that gender equality can only flourish when there are strong laws and enabling environments, allowing space for the respect of girls' rights, voices and choices. Thankfully those examples are not representative of the entire Asia-Pacific region, where the situation of girls is improving in many countries. Indexes in our report reveal that a generation of girl leaders are discovering new ways to lead social change.

This should come as no surprise. Think of Malala Yousafzai or Greta Thunberg. Young women are often at the front of societal change. Compared to the Asia Girls' Leadership Index from 2019, our findings indicate that in 12 countries, the climate for girls has improved. In four countries, it has declined, and in three countries, the opportunities for girls have remained static.

Our findings also show that despite many girls and women in the region facing different contextual challenges, they increasingly share similar experiences in the fight for gender equality. Across the region, an important story not captured by the media is a story of girls opposing when they are told they have no rights. It's the story

## The Jakarta Post

of an accelerating pushback against gender inequality that girls across the region have been waiting for. Our report is geared at these two audiences: the girls and young women who are empowered by the lessons of other girls in the region, and the region's policymakers, who we hope will hear girls speaking to them and become more responsive to the need for structural reforms. We publish these reports because we believe it is a girls' right to grow up in environments free from discrimination and harassment. Through research and measurements on girls' leadership opportunities, we want to demonstrate that when girls are allowed to thrive, they have the power to change the world.

At the same time, these changes aren't happening fast enough. Girls and young women are often excluded from decision-making positions. Even in countries whose Girls' Leadership Index scores have improved, governments still fail to promote and respect girls' rights to participation. Many are failing to engage and consult girls and young women on the very policies and programmes that affect them most.

To rectify this dynamic, Plan International calls on countries throughout the region to invest in Adolescent Girls' Development Frameworks. Such frameworks are a way of articulating the steps countries should take to ensure priority areas are identified, resources are invested correctly, and progress is measured. Without these investments, countries in the region will not be able to advance gender equality and fulfill their 2030 commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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## Rooted in ideology

SIR, This refers to the editorial, "Rapid Decline" (22 October). The overwhelming victory of DMK in the rural body elections is a sign of the great expectations that the people of Tamil Nadu have from the state government. Though it did not look like a cakewalk during the campaign with the Opposition AIADMK going all out to malign the DMK, accusing it of taking the people for a ride by dish-

ing out false promises during the Assembly elections, the party pulled it off convincingly, even capturing AIADMK strongholds.

One reason for it was the government making a colourful start with a few popular schemes like making bus rides free for women, reducing milk prices and tackling the coronavirus pandemic, whose second wave was at its peak when it was sworn in. Despite the Oppo-

sition, particularly the AIADMK and the vociferous BJP, targeting the government, the DMK managed to send across the message that it had indeed done a magnificent job in a short span of time. Obviously, the electorate has bought the DMK's claim that it had fulfilled 202 of the 505 promises given to the people.

On October 17, the AIADMK that ruled Tamil Nadu for three decades entered its golden jubilee year. The party floated by the legendary M G Ramachandran in 1972 to take on the then all-powerful DMK, especially his friend-turned-foe M Karunanidhi, is truly at a crossroads. Out of

## NOT CHILD'S PLAY

SIR, This refers to the unconditional 'Apology' tendered by the Editor of The Statesman for having published the article by P K Vasudeva on October 10, under the title 'Farm Divide', which turned out to be a 'cut and paste' of the article published by The Hindu Business Line on September 30, by R Srinivasan. How can Vasudeva, a retired Senior Professor, indulge in outright plagiarism? Writing an article is not child's play, as it involves a lot of labour.

Hence, how can anyone claim an article written by another as his own? This is nothing but an act of copying in the examination hall. For this, you have had to tender an apology. In so doing, while you have exhibited your statesmanship. In order that plagiarism does not creep into The Statesman, the least that you should do is to blacklist the likes of Vasudeva.

Yours, etc., V S Jayaraman, Chennai, 22 October.

power after being at the helm for two successive terms, the AIADMK may be facing its worst-ever crisis. The intense power struggle between Edappadi K Palaniswami and O Panneerselvam on who gets to control

the party has dipped the morale of the cadre, to say the least. The DMK exemplifies itself as the inheritor of the Dravidian legacy through a plethora of announcements like declaring Periyar EV Ramasamy's birth anni-

versary as social justice day. It made many believe that the present dispensation is rooted to its basic ideology, thus regaining the confidence of traditional voters. Yours, etc., S S Paul, Nadia, 22 October.