

Newspaper Analysis

(19.06.2024)



Strategic imperative and environment concern in Great Nicobar project

NIKHIL GHANEKAR
NEW DELHI, JUNE 18

THE CONGRESS party has described the proposed Rs 72,000-crore infra upgrade at the Great Nicobar Island as a “grave threat” to the island’s indigenous inhabitants and fragile ecosystem, and demanded “immediate suspension of all clearances” and a “thorough, impartial review of the proposed project, including by the Parliamentary committees concerned”.

Great Nicobar is the southernmost and largest of the Nicobar Islands, a sparsely inhabited 910-sq-km patch of mainly tropical rainforest in southeastern Bay of Bengal. Indira Point on the island, India’s southernmost point, is only 90 nautical miles (less than 170 km) from Sabang at the northern tip of Sumatra, the largest island of the Indonesian archipelago.

Great Nicobar has two national parks, a biosphere reserve, small populations of the Shompen and Nicobarese tribal peoples, and a few thousand non-tribal settlers.

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands are a cluster of 836 islands, split into two groups — the Andaman Islands to the north and the Nicobar Islands to the south — by the 150-km wide Ten Degree Channel.

So why does India want to develop Great Nicobar, and why has the proposed three-phase, 30-year project faced sustained criticism from conservationists, wildlife biologists, and some local tribal councils?

The infra project

The mega infrastructure project — which is being implemented by the Andaman and Nicobar Islands Integrated Development Corporation (ANIIDCO) — is proposed to include an International Container Transshipment Terminal (ICTT), a greenfield international airport with a peak hour capacity to handle 4,000 passengers, a township, and a gas and solar based power plant spread across 16,610 hectares.

The project for the “holistic development” of Great Nicobar Island was implemented after a report by NITI Aayog. A pre-feasibility report flagged the opportunity to leverage the

strategic location of the island, which is roughly equidistant from Colombo in Sri Lanka to the southwest and Port Klang (Malaysia) and Singapore to the southeast.

It is close to the Malacca Strait, the main waterway that connects the Indian Ocean to the Pacific, and the ICTT is expected to “allow Great Nicobar to participate in the regional and global maritime economy by becoming



a major player in cargo transshipment”. A proposed “greenfield city” will tap into both the maritime and tourism potential of the island.

The site for the proposed ICTT and power plant is Galathea Bay on the southeastern corner of Great Nicobar Island, where there is no human habitation. The project was granted in-principle forest clearance and environmental clearance in October 2022. A detailed project report (DPR) has been prepared, and the union government is likely

to invite bids for the initial phase of construction of the terminal in the coming months.

Strategic importance

The Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean region are of vital strategic and security interest to India as the Chinese People’s Liberation Army Navy seeks to expand its footprint across the region. India is wary of a build-up of Chinese maritime forces at the Indo-Pacific choke points of especially

Malacca, Sunda, and Lombok. China’s attempts to expand its footprint in the region includes building a military facility at Coco Islands (Myanmar) lying just 55 km to the north of the Andaman & Nicobar Islands.

In April this year, *The Indian Express* reported that a major military infrastructure upgrade was underway at the Andaman & Nicobar Islands, including revamping airfields and jetties and building additional logistics and storage facilities, a base for military personnel, and a robust surveillance infrastructure. The upgrade is aimed at facilitating the deployment of additional military forces, larger and more warships, aircraft, missile batteries, and troops.

Close surveillance of the entire area around the archipelago, and the building up of a strong military deterrence at Great Nicobar is crucial for India’s national security.

Environmental concerns

The proposed infra upgrade has been opposed on grounds of the threat it poses to the ecology of the islands. The opposition — by wildlife conservation researchers, anthropologists, scholars, and civil society apart from the Congress — has focused on the potentially devastating impact on the Shompen, a particularly vulnerable tribal group (PVTG) of hunter-gatherers with an estimated population of a few hundred individuals who live in

a tribal reserve on the island.

It has been alleged that the project violates the rights of the tribal population, and will impact the island’s ecology with the felling of nearly a million trees. It is feared that the port project will destroy coral reefs with spinoff effects on the local marine ecosystem, and pose a threat to the terrestrial Nicobar Megapode bird and leatherback turtles who nest in the Galathea Bay area.

The Congress statement, issued by senior leader and former Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh, has also pointed out that the proposed port is in a seismically volatile zone that saw permanent subsidence of about 15 ft during the 2004 tsunami. The statement has accused the local administration of not consulting the Tribal Council of Great and Little Nicobar Islands adequately as per legal requirements. In November 2022, the tribal council revoked a no-objection certificate it had issued for diversion of about 160 sq km of forest land, saying they had not been given full information.

In April 2023, the Kolkata Bench of the National Green Tribunal (NGT) declined to interfere with the environmental and forest clearance granted to the project. The Tribunal, however, ordered that a high-power committee should be constituted to look into the clearances. An appeal against the NGT’s order was dismissed in 2023.

**EXPLAINED
POLICY**



The Congress party has raised concerns over the proposed Rs 72,000-crore infrastructure upgrade on Great Nicobar Island, describing it as a significant threat to the island's indigenous inhabitants and fragile ecosystem. The party has demanded the immediate suspension of all clearances and a thorough review of the project.

Context and Background of the Article

Great Nicobar Island, part of the Nicobar Islands in the southeastern Bay of Bengal, is set to undergo a major infrastructure upgrade, including an International Container Transshipment Terminal (ICTT), a greenfield international airport, a township, and a gas and solar power plant. This project, led by the Andaman and Nicobar Islands Integrated Development Corporation (ANIIDCO), aims to leverage the strategic location of the island. However, it has faced significant opposition from conservationists, wildlife biologists, local tribal councils, and the Congress party due to environmental and social concerns.

How it is Relevant for BPS Exam

- **Environment and Ecology:** The article highlights critical issues related to environmental conservation, the impact of large-scale projects on fragile ecosystems, and the importance of sustainable development, which are essential for environmental studies.
- **Current Affairs:** The ongoing debate about the project, its strategic importance, and opposition by various stakeholders is pertinent for current events.
- **Public Administration:** Insights into the administrative and legal aspects of project clearances and the role of various governmental and non-governmental bodies provide valuable knowledge for public administration topics.
- **Geopolitics and National Security:** The strategic importance of the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean region, as well as India's efforts to counter China's influence, are relevant for geopolitics and national security discussions.

Summary of the Article (Value addition)

- **Details of the Proposed Project**
 - **Infrastructure Development:**
 - The project includes an International Container Transshipment Terminal (ICTT), a greenfield international airport with a capacity to handle 4,000 passengers per hour, a township, and a gas and solar-based power plant.
 - Spread across 16,610 hectares, the project aims to tap into the island's strategic location near major shipping routes and enhance its maritime and tourism potential.
 - **Strategic Importance:**
 - Great Nicobar's location near the Malacca Strait, a key maritime choke point, positions it as a crucial area for regional and global maritime economy participation.

- The project aligns with India's strategic interests in countering Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean region, including China's military facilities near the region.
- Environmental and Social Concerns
 - Impact on Indigenous Tribes:
 - The Shompen and Nicobarese tribes, who inhabit the island, face potential displacement and disruption of their traditional lifestyles.
 - Allegations that the project violates tribal rights and lacks adequate consultation with local tribal councils have been raised.
 - Ecological Impact:
 - The project threatens the island's biodiversity, including the felling of nearly a million trees and destruction of coral reefs in Galathea Bay.
 - Endangered species such as the Nicobar Megapode bird and leatherback turtles are at risk due to habitat disruption.
 - Seismic Vulnerability:
 - The proposed port is in a seismically active zone that experienced significant subsidence during the 2004 tsunami, raising concerns about the project's safety and sustainability.
- Political and Legal Reactions
 - Congress Party's Stand:
 - Former Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh has demanded an immediate suspension of clearances and a comprehensive review by Parliamentary committees.
 - The Congress party emphasizes the need for a balanced approach that considers environmental sustainability and tribal rights.
 - Legal Challenges:
 - In April 2023, the National Green Tribunal (NGT) ordered the formation of a high-power committee to review the project's environmental and forest clearances.
 - Despite opposition, the project has received preliminary approvals, and the government is moving forward with the planning and bidding process.
- Need for Reforms in Infrastructure Development
 - Sustainable Development Practices:
 - Integrating sustainable development practices into large-scale projects is crucial to balance economic growth with environmental preservation.
 - Conducting thorough Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) and ensuring genuine consultation with affected communities can help mitigate negative impacts.
 - Strengthening Legal Frameworks:
 - Enhancing legal frameworks to protect vulnerable ecosystems and indigenous rights is necessary.
 - Regular reviews and stringent enforcement of environmental laws can prevent ecological degradation and ensure accountability.
 - Innovative and Eco-friendly Solutions:

- Adopting innovative technologies and eco-friendly solutions, such as renewable energy sources and sustainable construction practices, can reduce the ecological footprint of development projects.
- Encouraging community participation in project planning and implementation fosters transparency and inclusivity.

Conclusion

The proposed infrastructure upgrade on Great Nicobar Island highlights the complex interplay between development, environmental conservation, and social equity. While the project promises strategic and economic benefits, it poses significant risks to the island's fragile ecosystem and indigenous communities. A balanced and sustainable approach, incorporating robust environmental safeguards and genuine stakeholder engagement, is essential to ensure that development does not come at the cost of ecological and social well-being.

Disinflation process facing resistance from stubborn food inflation: RBI Governor

ENS ECONOMIC BUREAU
MUMBAI, JUNE 18

RESERVE BANK of India Governor Shaktikanta Das on Tuesday said although inflation has eased, the pace of moderation is very slow mainly due to sticky food inflation.

Das, however, said he is confident of achieving the 4 per cent target for consumer price-based inflation (CPI).

In May, retail inflation eased to a one-year low of 4.75 per cent, from 4.83 per cent in April 2024. It was 4.31 per cent in May 2023. While core inflation stood at 3 per cent, food inflation was at 7.9 per cent in May.

"The disinflation process is getting a lot of resistance from food inflation remaining stubborn and very high, primarily because of supply-side factors which are affected by the weather conditions. The extreme heat in the last summer has affected cultivation



File

of pulses and vegetable production," Das said at an event.

The Governor said in the last six to seven months, food inflation stood at an average of about 8 per cent. The last mile of the disinflation journey is proving to be very sticky, arduous and very slow, he said, adding that the RBI is carefully watching the situation.

Earlier this month, the RBI's

“There is a clamour that one should change the (policy) stance but we want clear evidence that inflation should moderate and perhaps a little faster. At this point in time, we should avoid any form of adventurism ...”

— SHAKTIKANTA DAS
GOVERNOR, RESERVE BANK OF INDIA

six-member Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) decided to leave the repo rate, the key policy rate, unchanged at 6.5 per cent for the eight consecutive policies due to concerns around food inflation.

For FY25, the RBI has projected CPI at 4.5 per cent. It has estimated inflation for Q1 at 4.9 per cent, Q2 at 3.8 per cent, Q3 at 4.6 per cent and Q4 at 4.5 per cent.

When asked if the RBI may look at changing the policy stance of withdrawal of accommodation, the Governor said it would be premature to talk about it.

"There is a clamour that one should change the stance but we want clear evidence that inflation should moderate and perhaps a little faster. At this point in time, we should avoid any form of adventurism. It is better to stay the course, be watchful and play ball by ball," he said. In the June monetary policy, the RBI revised the real gross domestic product (GDP) growth projection for FY25 to 7.2 per cent, as against an earlier forecast of 7 per cent.

Das said the factors that led to the upward revision of the GDP projection for FY25 included strong momentum in economic activity, a pick up in rural demand and improvement in the external sector.

He said that in the January-March quarter (Q4 FY25), the mo-

mentum of economic activity was strong. The RBI data for April, May and June (till the third week) shows that the same momentum has continued into the first quarter of this year, he said.

The Governor said the rural consumption, which was lagging since the Covid, started to improve from the first half of the previous year. The FMCG (fast-moving consumer goods) sales in the rural sector have increased, the demand for Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee scheme labour has gone down and the agricultural season also looks very optimistic because of the projections of above normal monsoon this year.

"All our analysis indicates that the rural demand will hold," he said.

Das said as the expenditure from the government side and the private investment start picking up, rural demand will be well sustained this year.



Industry seeks removal of 'Angel Tax'; to greatly aid capital formation, says CII

RAVIDUTTA MISHRA
NEW DELHI, JUNE 18

AMID A sharp decline in funding for startups and consequent job losses, Indian Inc has sought the removal of Angel Tax that has been a subject of heated debate between the industry and the government ever since the scope of the controversial tax was expanded in the Finance Bill 2023.

The Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) in its Union Budget recommendation on Tuesday suggested the removal of Section 56(2)(viib) of the Income-tax Act colloquially known as the 'angel Tax' stating that the step "would greatly aid capital formation in the country".

Angel Tax was first introduced in 2012 to deter the generation and use of unaccounted money through the subscription of shares of a closely held company at a value that is higher than the fair market value of the firm's shares.

The industry has argued that the government is wrong in citing the difference between valuations and actual performance as a sign of money laundering, adding that investors fund startup based on their future potential. Taxes levied on the difference between issue price of

EXPLAINED E What is Angel Tax?

ANGEL TAX – which is income tax at the rate of 30.6 per cent – is levied when an unlisted company issues shares to an investor at a price higher than its fair market value. Earlier, it was imposed only on investments made by a resident investor. However the Finance Act 2023 proposed to extend Angel Tax even to non-resident investors from April 1, 2024.

unlisted securities and its fair market value (FMV) has hurt funding, it said. The changes in the Angel Tax provisions came at a time when an estimated 100 Indian startups laid off over 15,000 employees in 2023, as funding winter that began in 2022 persisted. Moreover, Indian startups witnessed over 60 per cent decline in funding in terms of value in 2023.

The Finance Act, 2023, had amended Section 56(2)(viib) of the Income-tax Act. The provi-

sion stated that when an unlisted company, such as a start-up, receives equity investment from a resident for issue of shares that exceeds the face value of such shares, it will be counted as income for the start-up and be subject to income tax under the head 'Income from other sources' for the relevant financial year.

With the latest amendment, the government had proposed to also include foreign investors in the ambit, meaning that when a start-up raises funding from a foreign investor, that too will now be counted as income and be taxable.

The Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT)-recognised startups were excluded from the Angel Tax levy.

However, after pushback from the industry and reports of decline in funding, the Finance Ministry exempted investors from 21 countries including the US, UK and France from the levy of Angel Tax for non-resident investment in unlisted Indian start-ups.

But the list excluded investment from countries like Singapore, Netherlands and Mauritius – which have traditionally been key geographies for start-ups to raise money.





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To get back on track

West Bengal train accident highlights need for review of misplaced priorities of past two decades



ALOK KUMAR VERMA

LEARNING BY ACCIDENT

Train collision in West Bengal, its high toll, raises important questions over railway safety, accountability, policy priorities

WITH AT LEAST nine people having lost their lives, the collision involving the Sealdah-bound Kanchanjunga Express and a goods train in West Bengal's Darjeeling district has registered the highest toll in a railway accident since Balasore, Odisha last year. Initial reports point towards the possibility of human error, but the precise cause of the crash will only be known after the investigation by the Commissioner of Railways Safety is complete. For now, it is critical that the tragedy prompts the Railways to shine an unsparing light within.

It must investigate why accidents happen, and precious lives are lost, in a system that has, over the years, shown improvement across safety parameters. Kavach, an indigenously developed, automatic train protection system, has been deployed on 1,465 route km and 139 locomotives on South Central Railway as on February 2024. Kavach tenders have also been awarded for several thousand route kilometers. Reportedly, the railway ministry took steps in the aftermath of the Balasore train accident to remove obstacles in carrying out work in safety areas like signalling and interlocking. But it must be asked whether more steps need to be taken, and more urgency shown, for a faster Kavach roll-out. While funding now appears to be less of a constraint — in 2023-24, the capital outlay of Indian Railways was pegged at Rs 2.4 lakh crore, nine times the outlay in 2013-14 — it must be asked if there has been a disproportionate political and policy focus on the more eye-catching aspects of modernisation such as Vande Bharat, and whether it is taking a toll on other critical aspects of the system. There are other questions too. Are the communication and feedback mechanisms that are central to operational safety functional and robust? Will responsibility for such accidents be fixed in a system that all too often finds ways to dilute it?

While every life lost is one too many, the number of consequential train accidents has fallen from 473 in 2000-01 to 48 in 2022-23. Over the same period, the number of derailments has also fallen from 350 to 36. The accident in West Bengal, and the toll it has taken, however, underlines that much more needs to be done. As it transports millions of passengers and tonnes of cargo across the length and breadth of the country every day, the Indian Railways is an integral part of the country's logistical frame. Upgrading infrastructure would mean little unless it translates to greater safety for those who travel. But safety is not an isolated aspect. It is embedded in every function and operation of the Railways. Improving it calls for a more encompassing and comprehensive approach.

IT TAKES TWO

Without Russia, Ukraine peace meet is unlikely to be of significance in the long term

GOING BY NUMBERS alone, it would seem that the Ukraine peace summit held in Switzerland over the weekend made significant headway. Of the 90

THE INDIAN RAILWAYS is back in the news after a freight train rammed into a passenger train on Sunday, June 16, near Siliguri in West Bengal, which left at least nine people dead and more than 40 injured. Since 1995, the country has witnessed seven deadly train accidents, five of which took more than 200 lives — the highest number of deaths, 358, was recorded in the Firozabad collision of 1995. The multiple train collision at Balasore in Odisha, about a year ago, claimed 287 lives. Together, these seven accidents took more than 1,600 lives.

Among railway planners, it is widely held that a large, densely populated developing country like India should have a strong railway system that can compete with road and air transport to serve the needs of the people and economy. Neither the Railway Board nor the Centre has ever denied this imperative. In fact, plans have been repeatedly announced to double the speed of trains while improving safety and drastically increasing line capacity, as most trunk routes have faced acute congestion. But the results have been very discouraging.

The Indian Railways has consistently lost market share in both passenger and freight streams. In fact, since 2010-12, the total volume of both freight and passenger traffic has stagnated or declined, while air and road modes have seen growth of 6-12 per cent each year. Between 2014-15 and 2019-20, passenger traffic declined from 995 billion pass-km to 914 billion pass-km, and freight stagnated between 682 and 739 billion net tonne-km. For the period after 2019-20 to the present, the Railways has not made these traffic figures public.

It is no exaggeration that the Indian Railways (IR), which enjoys a monopoly on rail transportation, is facing a severe crisis. If the present trend of declining market share continues for another decade, which

The Indian Railways is back in the news after a freight train rammed into a passenger train on Sunday, June 16, near Siliguri in West Bengal, which left at least nine people dead and more than 40 injured. Since 1995, the country has witnessed seven deadly train accidents, five of which took more than 200 lives — the highest number of deaths, 358, was recorded in the Firozabad collision of 1995. The multiple train collision at Balasore in Odisha, about a year ago, claimed 287 lives. Together, these seven accidents took more than 1,600 lives.

seems likely in view of the failure to raise speed, increase line capacity, and improve safety to the required standards, IR could be relegated to a secondary role where it primarily carries heavy freight and some slow-moving passenger trains, as in large, thinly populated, economically advanced countries like the US, Canada, and Australia. Surely, with its high population density, a large developing country like India can't afford such a decline in rail transport.

Rail safety must be viewed in this larger context. Over the past two decades, the Railway Board, the highest administrative body under the Union Minister of Railways, has been a rudderless ship, marked by abrupt changes in policies and plans for the future growth and expansion of the IR network. It has failed to raise the speed of its excruciatingly slow trains, the punctuality of trains has shown no improvement, and safety has continued to be an issue.

The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India has recently issued two important reports on safety, speed, and punctuality on IR. The report on speed and punctuality for the years 2019-20 says that between 2014 and 2019, there has been no increase in the average speed of mail and express trains — this has remained at 50 to 51 kmph, contrary to claims of achieving an average speed of 75 kmph under Mission Raftar, which has appeared in some form every five to seven years since 2005. As for freight trains, the average speed actually declined marginally, contrary to the Board's claims of doubling the speed. It is pertinent to mention that 20 years ago, IR acquired technology and manufacturing capabilities to build coaches and locomotives to raise the maximum operational speed from 110-130 kmph to 160-200 kmph.

The second CAG report, which is on accidents, is equally sobering. Though there has been a reduction in the number of acci-

dents, it is largely a result of the manning of unmanned railroad crossings. And the improvement with respect to derailments and collisions is not good enough. The report has expressed serious concerns about the continuing high rate of asset failures, particularly signal failures and rail fractures. Some of the worst accidents on IR have been due to these. Last year's multiple train collision at Balasore was caused by a signal failure. The essence of these two CAG reports is that this high asset failure rate, coupled with numerous speed and capacity bottlenecks in the existing IR network, has led to inadequate safety and punctuality and stagnant speed.

While the IR's existing network was caught in a downward spiral, with increasing intensity every passing year, the country was inundated by big plans for extremely costly projects with seriously questionable financial viability. This included, for example, plans for several standalone bullet-train lines which would be cut off from the main broad gauge network because these lines would be built on standard gauge, and dedicated freight corridors (DFCs), exclusive to heavier and longer trains.

Construction of the first bullet-train line started in 2017. Earlier, in 2012, construction of two DFCs had begun. In the past three years, the nation has seen the introduction of about 50 pairs of "semi-highspeed" Vande Bharat trains, which are more about luxury and cosmetics than speed.

Clearly, a thorough review of the misplaced priorities of the past two decades that are driving IR to a continuing decline is absolutely required. Will the new government pick up the gauntlet?

The writer a former Railway Chief Engineer



A tragic rail accident occurred on June 17, near New Jalpaiguri station in West Bengal's Darjeeling district, when a goods train collided with the Sealdah-bound Kanchanjunga Express from Agartala. The incident resulted in nine fatalities and over 40 injuries.

Context and Background of the Article

The collision took place at 8:55 am, 11 km from New Jalpaiguri station. The impact derailed three coaches of the Kanchanjunga Express and trapped passengers, making rescue operations challenging. The deceased included seven passengers, the loco pilot of the goods train, and another railway staff member. Initial investigations suggest human error and signal failures as potential causes.

How it is Relevant for BPSC Exam

- **Disaster Management:** Understanding the causes and response to rail accidents is crucial for disaster management sections.
- **Public Administration:** Insights into railway safety protocols and administrative responses to accidents can be relevant for public administration topics.
- **Infrastructure and Safety:** The discussion on signal systems and safety measures in railways is important for infrastructure-related questions.

Summary of the Article (Value addition)

- **Need for Reforms in Railway Infrastructure**
 - **Modernizing Signal Systems:**
 - The accident underscores the critical need to modernize India's railway signalling systems. Outdated and malfunctioning signals can lead to severe accidents, as seen in this incident where the automatic signalling system was down, and trains were given 'paper line clearance'.
 - Implementation of advanced digital signalling and automatic train control systems can prevent human errors and enhance safety.
 - **Upgrading Track Infrastructure:**
 - Regular maintenance and upgrading of railway tracks are essential to ensure safe and smooth train operations. Poor track conditions can contribute to derailments and accidents.
 - Investment in high-quality tracks and modern track-laying technologies can improve the overall reliability of the railway network.
 - **Enhanced Safety Protocols:**
 - Strengthening safety protocols and ensuring strict adherence can minimize the risk of accidents. This includes regular safety drills, comprehensive training for railway staff, and stringent checks on compliance with safety standards.

- Adoption of international best practices in railway safety can help India improve its safety record.
- Investment in Technology:
 - Embracing new technologies such as predictive maintenance, real-time monitoring of train operations, and AI-driven safety systems can significantly reduce the likelihood of accidents.
 - Technologies like drones and satellite imagery can be used for regular inspection and monitoring of railway infrastructure.
- Human Resource Development:
 - Continuous training and skill development for railway personnel are crucial. Ensuring that all staff are well-versed with the latest safety procedures and technologies can enhance the overall safety of train operations.
 - Establishing a culture of safety within the railway organization, where safety is prioritized at all levels, is necessary.
- Public-Private Partnerships:
 - Encouraging public-private partnerships can bring in additional investment and expertise to modernize railway infrastructure.
 - Collaboration with private firms can lead to the adoption of innovative solutions and efficient management practices.

Conclusion

The tragic collision between the Kanchanjunga Express and a goods train near New Jalpaiguri highlights critical issues in railway safety and signal management. The incident underscores the need for rigorous safety protocols and effective disaster response mechanisms to prevent such accidents in the future. Implementing comprehensive reforms in railway infrastructure, including modernizing signal systems, upgrading tracks, enhancing safety protocols, investing in technology, and developing human resources, is crucial to ensuring the safety and efficiency of India's railway network.

Location in news

Israel deepens Rafah op as US envoy visits Lebanon to stave off wider war

US envoy says situation serious, urges Hamas to accept truce deal

REUTERS
CAIRO, BEIRUT, JUNE 18

ISRAELI AIRSTRIKES Tuesday killed at least 17 Palestinians in two of the Gaza Strip's historic refugee camps and Israeli tanks pushed deeper into the enclave's southern city of Rafah, residents and medics said.

Residents reported heavy bombardments from tanks and planes in several areas of Rafah, where more than a million people had taken refuge before May. Most of the population has fled northwards since then as Israeli forces invaded the city.

In the central Gaza Strip, two separate Israeli air strikes on two houses killed 17 Palestinians in Al-Nuseirat and Al-Bureij, two designated refugee camps that are home to families and descendants of people who fled to Gaza in the 1948 war around the creation of Israel, medics said.

The United States is trying to avert a greater war between Israel and Lebanon's Hezbollah movement, US envoy Amos Hochstein said on Tuesday, following an escalation in cross-border fire between the foes along Lebanon's southern frontier. Iran-backed Hezbollah has been trading fire with Israel for the last eight months in parallel



People take part in a protest against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government, demanding new elections and the release of the hostages held in the Gaza Strip by the Hamas, in Jerusalem on Monday. AP

with the Gaza war. Last week, the group fired the largest volleys of rockets and drones of the hostilities so far at Israeli military site. Hochstein, special envoy to US President Joe Biden, said he had been dispatched to Lebanon immediately following a brief trip to Israel because the situation was "serious". He had met with the head of Lebanon's army earlier on Tuesday morning and spoke to reporters following a meeting with parliament speaker Nabih Berri, who heads the armed Amal movement,

which is allied to Hezbollah and has also fired rockets on Israel in recent months. Hochstein urged Hamas to accept a US-backed proposal for a ceasefire in Gaza. Hochstein also met caretaker Lebanese PM Najib Mikati, who told him that "Lebanon does not seek escalation".

Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that US Secretary of State Antony Blinken had assured him that the Biden administration was working to cancel restrictions on arms deliveries to Israel.

Anti-govt protesters rally in Jerusalem, seek new polls

Jerusalem: Anti-government protesters took to the streets of Jerusalem on Monday, clashing with police near the house of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and calling for new elections. Israel's wartime unity government fell apart a week ago when two centrist former generals, Benny Gantz and Gadi Eisenkot, quit. Following this,

opposition groups declared a week of street protests.

By sundown, a crowd of thousands had gathered outside the Knesset, Israel's parliament, before marching to Netanyahu's home. Some of the protesters broke off and tried to break through barriers set up by the police. Nine people were arrested for attacking police. AP





Black Sea

Caspian Sea

Aegean Sea

Mediterranean Sea

Persian Gulf

Gulf of Oman

Red Sea

Arabian Sea

Gulf of Aden

TURKEY

SYRIA

IRAQ

IRAN

SAUDI ARABIA

EGYPT

SUDAN

YEMEN

ANKARA

ATHENS

NICOSIA

BEIRUT

JERUSALEM

CAIRO

AMMAN

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Herat

An Najaf

Isfahan

Yazd

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Ras Sharbatat

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Suez Canal

Gulf of Suez

Cape Banas

Nile

Nile

Dongola

Atbara

Seni

Mekele

Assab

Bab el Mandeb

Ra's al Had

Gardagez Bay

Turkmenbasy

Bukhara

Nukus

Ras Sharbatat

Raas Fartak

Bab el Mandeb

Assab

Mekele

Seni

Atbara

Dongola

Nile

Cape Banas

Luxor

Asyut

El Faiyum

Alexandria

Bur Saïd

Gaza

PALESTINE

Ramallah

Tabuk

Basra

Shatt al Arab

Kirkuk

Mosul

Tabriz

Tbilisi

Batumi

Samsun

Istanbul

Bursa

Izmir

Konya

Adana

Aleppo

Al Furat

Euphrates

Tigris

Dicle

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China accuses Philippines supply ship of hitting its vessel in South China Sea

REUTERS

BEIJING, JUNE 17

CHINA AND the Philippines traded accusations over a maritime collision in the South China Sea on Monday, the latest in a series of confrontations over the disputed waters.

Meanwhile, hours later, the United States said it had com-

pleted joint naval exercises in the Philippines' exclusive economic zone (EEZ) with its treaty ally as well as Japan and Canada.

China's Coast Guard said a Philippine supply ship "deliberately and dangerously" approached a Chinese ship resulting in a collision after it "illegally intruded" near Second Thomas Shoal, a charge Manila rejected as "deceptive and misleading".

Manila declined to comment directly on the incident, but lashed out at Beijing after a Chinese coast guard statement said the Philippine transport and replenishment ship ignored China's repeated solemn warnings. "We will not dignify the deceptive and misleading claims of the China Coast Guard (CCG)," said Xerxes Trinidad, chief of the Philippine armed forces' public affairs office.



