

Centre calls for talks; farmers want better offer

Union ministers Arjun Munda, Piyush Goyal, Nityanand Rai to lead discussions with farmers

Protesters have been stopped by a myriad of obstacles at Haryana's boundary since Tuesday

Police resort to use of tear gas and water cannons to disperse agitating farmers

Vikas Vasudeva
CHANDIGARH

As protesting farmers from Punjab continue to camp at different locations along the boundary with Haryana, farmer representatives and Union Ministers are preparing to hold another round of talks today. However, the farmers asserted that the meeting would be fruitful only if the government had something 'positive' to offer.

In Punjab's Rajpura, farmer leaders said the Centre invited them to Chandigarh for deliberations on their demands. The meeting would be held with Union Ministers Arjun Munda, Piyush Goyal and Nityanand Rai.

"We are camping peacefully at inter-State boundaries with Haryana. We conveyed to the Centre that we are not averse to the meeting, although we

expect that the government should first create a positive atmosphere. On the one hand, the government in Haryana is resorting to the use of tear gas and water cannon and on the other, they are speaking about talks. They have assured us that the situation would be normalised," Jagjit Singh Dallewal, a senior SKM(NP) leader, told *The Hindu*.

This would be the third meeting over their long list of demands, including a legal guarantee on Minimum Support Price.

On Tuesday, scores of farmers from different parts of Punjab started their 'tractor-trolley' march to lay siege to Delhi to press for fulfilment of their demands. As farmers reached Haryana's Shambhu village near Ambala and Khanauri-Jind, the boundary with Punjab, they were stopped from entering the State. The Haryana



Farmers advancing towards Delhi en masse, at Shambhu Barrier in Punjab. SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

government had put in place elaborate security arrangements with multi-layer barricades; since then, the farmers have been camping near the boundary. Police resorted to the use of tear gas to disperse them on Wednesday.

Haryana Director General of Police Shatrughit Kapoor said Section 144 had been imposed in 15 districts of the State. Con-

sidering the present situation, 64 companies of paramilitary forces and 50 companies of the Haryana Police were deployed, he added.

emergency services are being provided 24x7. Punjab Health and Family Welfare Minister Balbir Singh said at least 40 injured were admitted to the Rajpura civil hospital; two of them had sustained serious head injuries and were undergoing treatment.

He condemned the Haryana government for "unprovoked police action at

Centre uses British-era Act to block Internet

NEW DELHI

The Union government invoked its powers under a British-era law to suspend mobile Internet in certain districts of Punjab last week, citing a public emergency and public safety. This is the first time the Union government has issued such orders to block the Internet, outside of the national capital. » PAGE 5

unconstitutional and illegal. The Minister urged the BJP-led Haryana government to let the farmers reach the national capital.

Haryana Home Minister Anil Vij blamed the Punjab government for intending to create chaos in Delhi by not making any effort to stop farmers. "When these groups [farmers] marched from Amritsar, the Punjab government did not make any effort to stop them anywhere on the way. This means they want to create chaos in Delhi," he said in a statement. Coming in support of the ongoing protest, the Bharatiya Kisan Union (Ugrahan), one of the largest outfits in Punjab, announced it would block rail traffic at seven places in Punjab on Thursday from noon to 4 p.m.

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Kerala passes resolution requesting Union govt. to amend wildlife Act

The Hindu Bureau
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

The Kerala Assembly on Wednesday adopted a unanimous resolution urging the Centre to suitably amend the Wildlife Protection Act to mitigate human-wildlife conflicts.

Forest Minister A.K. Saseendran tabled the resolution for discussion as per rule 118 of the Assembly's Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business.

Members across the aisle supported the resolution aimed at eliminating wildlife that trespass on human habitations, imperilling the life and property of citizens, destroying crops and preying on livestock.



Mitigating conflict: A wild elephant attacking a grocery shop at Chokkanad in Idukki district of Kerala. FILE PHOTO

UDF MLAs Manjilamkuzhi Ali, T. Siddique, Sunny Joseph and I.C. Balakrishnan suggested certain amendments.

Wildlife intrusions in habitations abutting forests and lethal attacks on

residents had impelled the government to request the Centre to make the law more contemporary. The resolution demanded that the Central law empower Chief Forest Conservators to use lethal force to liqui-

date wild animals that trespass on residential localities and pose an imminent threat to human life. It also requested the Centre to initiate scientific and humane measures to control the wildlife population.

The State had come under attack from the Opposition for allegedly failing to protect the life and property of nearly 50 lakh families, a majority of them settler farmers living near forests in the State.

The wild elephant attack that claimed the life of an agriculture worker, Ajeesh, in Mananthavady on Saturday caused public outrage, putting the State on the defence ahead of the Lok Sabha elections.

Farming consensus

The Centre must address grievances of farmers through talks

Farmers from Punjab, in their thousands, have assembled at three points along the border with Haryana, where they have been stopped from marching to Delhi. The protesters are demanding legally guaranteed MSP for crops, debt waiver, cancellation of international agreements impacting the agriculture sector, and a minimum pension of ₹5,000 for farmers and agriculture labour. Some of these demands were raised during their earlier protest in 2021-22, which was called off after the BJP-led central government withdrew three controversial laws that had sought to reform the agriculture sector. The protest now is spearheaded by the SKM (non-political), a splinter group of the body that had led the earlier protest. The split signifies fissures in the interest groups across Haryana, Punjab and western U.P. and Rajasthan. There are at least three other strands of protests gathering strength. Farmers in western U.P. affected by the Jewar airport project and Yamuna Expressway are up in arms. In Haryana's Sonapat, farmers are protesting land acquisition for power cables. The original SKM and several trade unions have called for a national rural and industrial strike on February 16, with overlapping and additional demands that include the repeal of four labour codes.

The government has opened talks with the Punjab farmers, but a legal guarantee of MSP appears unlikely. The police in Haryana and Delhi have stopped the farmers more than 200 km away from Delhi as they are resolute that the farmers will not be allowed near the border of the national capital where they had laid siege in 2021-22. The MSP-based procurement by the FCI has been the bedrock of food security, but the case for its reform is strong. Surplus producers of grain have benefited from the MSP scheme, but the scheme bypasses subsistence farmers in poorer regions. This uneven geographical spread of procurement has also led to unsustainable farm practices in some areas, while farmers in other regions of the country are always on the edge of penury. All this calls for a revamping of the public support for farming, which is essential for reasons that include national food security. This can be achieved better through wide political consultation and by encouraging the beneficiaries of the current system to diversify production and increase productivity. The political undertones of the protest on the eve of the Lok Sabha election also cannot be overlooked. The farm sector needs a new model of public support. It cannot be left to the mercy of the market. The government should lead the efforts to create a national consensus on this question.

Pension concerns

A hike in minimum pension will help the lower strata among the retired

The recommendation of the Central Board of Trustees of the Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) for a 0.1-percentage-point increase in provident fund (PF) deposits for 2023-24 should not be surprising, as it is in tune with what the EPFO did last year. However, the recommended rate of 8.25% is 0.4-percentage points lower than in 2018-19, a pre-election year like 2023-24. If cleared by the Union Finance Ministry, it will involve the transfer of a record ₹1,07,000 crore to EPF members. But the development has not pleased those with a long-standing demand for an increase in the minimum pension of ₹1,000. When in the opposition, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party had demanded that the pension be raised to ₹3,000 (the UPA government had proposed ₹1,000 a month). On coming to power in 2014, the BJP carried out faithfully, with effect from September 2014, what was finalised by its predecessor, benefiting approximately 20.5 lakh pensioners. Months ago, the Finance Ministry had rejected a proposal to double the minimum pension amount, citing a "huge rise" in the budgetary support needed under the Employees' Pension Scheme (EPS), 1995. There is one more component in the budgetary support which refers to the Central government's contribution at 1.16% of wages up to an amount of ₹15,000 a month. For FY2024-25, the Ministry has projected ₹10,950 crore as budgetary support against the revised estimate of ₹9,760 crore for the current year. The Finance Ministry calculates that a 100% rise in the minimum pension would be more than the proportionate increase in the overall budgetary support as numerous pensioners had received much less than ₹1,000 as monthly pension till 2014.

Describing the EPS as a "Defined Contribution-Defined Benefit" social security scheme, the government said in the Rajya Sabha that all benefits were paid out of accumulations through contributions, and as per the fund's valuation as on March 31, 2019, there was "an actuarial deficit." However, this argument has been virtually demolished in the EPFO's annual report (2022-23). Notwithstanding its reasons not to hike the minimum pension, the government must note that the difference between the minimum and original pension was about ₹970 crore for 2022-23. So, the doubling of minimum pension is no strain. There are other key issues too such as equating the amount of spouse pension on a par with what a member-pensioner gets. In the case of higher PF pension, the rules have been framed after the 2022 Supreme Court judgment wherein most of the pre-2014 retirees would not be covered; there are around four lakh such applications for higher pension. A more expansive approach to PF pension matters will help senior citizens.

Musk's platform X feeds monetisation of misinformation in a time of war

Following Elon Musk's turbulent acquisition of X, formerly Twitter, the site has restored thousands of once-banned accounts and introduced a paid verification system that critics say has boosted conspiracy theorists; X has seen a tsunami of falsehoods since war began between Israel and Hamas

Agence France-Presse
WASHINGTON

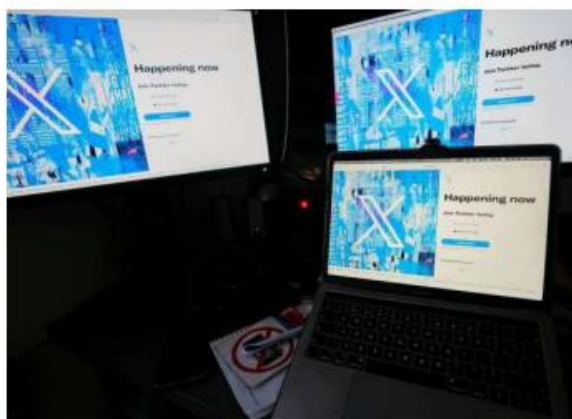
Influencers on social media platform X are monetising misinformation about conflicts in West Asia, leveraging the platform's contentious policies that researchers say prioritise engagement over accuracy.

Since Elon Musk's turbulent 2022 acquisition of X, formerly Twitter, the site has restored thousands of once-banned accounts and introduced a paid verification system that critics say has boosted conspiracy theorists.

X also rolled out an ad revenue-sharing programme for verified users, who often peddle hateful and false information to profit from the platform.

"Cynical pay-for-play controversialists today deliberately induce anger for engagement to game Mr. Musk's platform into giving them more visibility, and therefore more revenue for their views," Imran Ahmed, chief executive of the Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH), said.

X has seen a tsunami of falsehoods about the ongoing war between Israel and the Palestinian militant group Hamas, fuelled partly by prominent U.S. influencers such as Jackson Hinkle, who last month falsely claimed a video showed Iran bombing



Search for reach: X has rolled out an ad revenue-sharing programme for verified users, who analysts say, often peddle hateful and false information to profit from the platform. FILE PHOTO

American military bases in Iraq.

The incendiary post came amid widespread concerns about a wider conflagration in West Asia.

Using a reverse image search, AFP fact-checkers found the video actually depicted an attack in Iraq's Kurdistan region.

In another provocative post debunked by AFP, Mr. Hinkle wrongly claimed that Yemen had declared "war with Israel" in support of Palestinians.

While Yemen's Houthi rebels have targeted Israel with missiles and drones, neither they nor the coun-

try's internationally recognised government has formally declared war.

In addition to raising tens of thousands of dollars on crowdfunding sites, Mr. Hinkle offers "premium content" to subscribers on X for \$3 per month.

"Your support helps me continue exposing the deep state after I was banned & demonetised by YouTube, Twitch, PayPal & Venmo," his appeal says.

When reached by AFP, Mr. Hinkle – whose posts have garnered millions of views – refused to say how much revenue he was generating on X, instead criti-

cising coverage of the wars in Ukraine and West Asia.

Mr. Hinkle makes at least \$3,000 a month from paid subscribers, according to a rough CCDH estimate based on the engagement data of his subscriber-only posts.

Last August, Mr. Hinkle disclosed on X that he also earned \$1,693 through the ad revenue-sharing scheme, while complaining that other users with smaller engagement were getting bigger payouts.

Britain-based creator Sulaiman Ahmed and Danish physician Anastasia Maria Loupis – both of whom

AFP has repeatedly fact-checked for war-related misinformation – are also reaping the benefits of X's verification and paid subscriber programmes.

Neither responded to requests for comment.

Mr. Ahmed from CCDH said Mr. Musk has "created a topsy-turvy platform on which authoritative sources struggle to be heard above the noise – while liars and hate actors are put on a pedestal, generating revenue for themselves and the platform."

X did not respond to requests for comment.

To be eligible for ad revenue sharing, users must meet requirements such as subscribing to X's \$8 per month premium subscription and having at least 500 followers.

Community Notes

Last year, Mr. Musk said posts with Community Notes – an X feature that allows users to refute claims and offer additional context – would be "ineligible for revenue share."

"The idea is to maximise the incentive for accuracy over sensationalism," Mr. Musk wrote on X.

But Jack Brewster, from the media watchdog NewsGuard, said that "viral posts advancing misinformation frequently do not get flagged by Community Notes."

In October, NewsGuard

analysed 250 of the most popular posts promoting one of 10 prominent false or unsubstantiated narratives about the Israel-Hamas war.

Only 32% of them had been flagged by a Community Note, it found.

The following month, NewsGuard identified ads from 86 major companies – including top brands, governments, and non-profits – on viral posts advancing "false or egregiously misleading claims about the Israel-Hamas war."

That included an ad for the FBI on a post from Mr. Hinkle that falsely claimed a video that showed an Israeli military helicopter firing on its own citizens.

The video actually showed Israeli war planes over Gaza, NewsGuard said, adding that the post – viewed nearly two million times – did not have a Community Note.

"Community Notes as currently structured is not a system that scales to cover all contexts," Jacob Shapiro, a Princeton University professor who served on the programme's advisory group before Mr. Musk's acquisition, said.

"To expect volunteer labour alone to capture... deceptive content as a defence against allowing people to monetise that content reflects unrealistic expectations for what the tool can do."

'MSP guarantee across crops can raise income and demand'

Ratings firm CRISIL estimates that the 'real cost' to the government of such a guarantee would be around ₹21,000 cr. in Marketing Year 2023; a MSP guarantee across crops will also nudge farmers to diversify beyond paddy and wheat, it adds

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Guaranteeing a Minimum Support Price (MSP) across crops would support farm incomes and spur consumption demand, CRISIL Market Intelligence & Analytics said on Wednesday, estimating the "real cost" of such a guarantee at around ₹21,000 crore, based on Marketing Year (MY) 2023 trends.

While MSP-based procurement is done in only a few States, the firm said a guarantee will percolate its

Broader support

A guaranteed MSP across crops can benefit farmers and address crop imbalances, argues CRISIL

- A broader, guaranteed MSP will offer cash support to farmers when prices plummet below MSP, the ratings firm says
- It will also give farmers the freedom to sow crops of their choice and to be more amenable to their local conditions
- The government will have to procure only those crops whose mandi prices are lower than the MSP, notes CRISIL



benefit to other regions. CRISIL's analysis focused on 16 of the 23 crops for whom MSPs are announced, which account

for over 90% of India's farm output.

"Our calculations show it will need a working capital of around ₹6 lakh crore

in Marketing Year (MY) 2023. The real cost to the government, though, will be the difference between MSP and mandi prices," Mr. Sharma said.

In MY 2023, when half the 16 crops traded above MSP and half below it, that would add up to ₹21,000 crore. The cost could be higher if the government offloads the commodities in mandis because then prices could fall further than what was seen in those markets in 2022-23, CRISIL reckoned.

"For farmers, it would mean cash support during

times when prices plummet... (and) give them the freedom to sow crops of their choice," Mr. Sharma said, stressing that meaningful procurement only takes place in paddy (41% of produce) and wheat (24% of output), which account for 60% of India's crop produce.

In kharif 2022 and rabi 2023, just 9% of mustard production was procured, and 3% of five other crops. "In this milieu, guaranteeing MSP for all crops can lead to farmers moving to crops other than paddy and wheat," he said.

EVA STALIN IAS