

Direct tax kitty crosses 80% of 2023-24 target

Net collections touched ₹14.7 lakh crore by January 10, a growth of 19.4% over the corresponding period of 2022-23; provisional direct tax collections continue to register a 'steady growth'

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

India's net direct tax collections touched ₹14.7 lakh crore by January 10, meeting over four-fifths of this year's target and reflecting a growth of 19.4% over the corresponding period of 2022-23.

The Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT) on Thursday said provisional direct tax collections continue to register 'steady growth' with gross collections rising 16.77% to ₹17.18 lakh crore, led by a 26.11% rise in Personal Income Tax (PIT) inflows. Corporate Income Tax or CIT collections grew at a relatively muted pace of 8.32%.

"After adjustment of refunds, the net growth in CIT collections is 12.37% and that in PIT collections is 27.26% [PIT only]," the

Tax mop-up

Direct tax collections are at 80.61% of the Budget estimates for FY24 as of January 10

- Gross direct tax collections amount to ₹17.18 lakh crore, showing a year-on-year growth of 16.77%

- Net direct tax collection, after refunds, stands at ₹14.70 lakh crore, reflecting a year-on-year growth of 19.41%

- The net corporate income tax has grown by 12.37%, and the net personal income tax has grown by 27.26% year-on-year

- Refunds amounting to ₹2.48 lakh crore have been issued between April 1, 2023, and January 10, 2024



Board said in a statement. Net of refunds, PIT and Securities Transaction Tax receipts were up 27.22%.

The net direct tax collection has grown by ₹1 lakh crore since December 17, when it had surpassed ₹13.7 lakh crore.

"Direct Tax collection, net of refunds, stands at ₹14.70 lakh crore, which is 19.41% higher than the net collections for the corresponding period of last year. This collection is 80.61% of the total budget estimates of direct taxes

for FY. 2023-24," the CBDT said.

Refunds amounting to ₹2.48 lakh crore had been issued to taxpayers by Wednesday, about ₹23,000 crore more than the refunds that had been sent by December 17.

Rating agency ICRA said it expects the full year's direct tax collections to exceed the budget estimates by ₹1 lakh crore.

"Direct tax revenues are projected to grow by 12% in 2024-25, based on expectations that benign levels of commodity prices would augur favourably on the profitability of corporates," ICRA economists said. "Hence such tax collections and the continued efforts by the government to improve compliance are likely to support personal income tax inflows amid widening of the tax base."

Minorities' right to establish, administer institutions was not to make them insular: SC

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Thursday observed that the right given to religious and linguistic minorities to establish and administer their own educational institutions under Article 30(1) of the Constitution was not intended to "ghettoise" them.

The minority character of an educational institution is not lost if its founders, who belong to a particular minority community, chose administrators from other communities, including the majority group, to run the institution, Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud observed.

The Chief Justice was heading a seven-judge Bench hearing a reference related to the minority status of Aligarh Muslim Un-



The Centre has contended that the AMU cannot be considered a minority institution given its "national character". FILE PHOTO

iversity (AMU). "Article 30 does not mandate that the administration of a minority educational institution should be only by members of that community. The provision confers on the minority the discretion to choose the administrators of the institution," Chief Justice Chandrachud said.

Senior advocate Kapil Sibal, who represents the AMU Old Boys' Associa-

tion, said whether or not an educational institution has minority character should be learnt from its genesis. "The inspiration to found the institution, the essential paraphernalia of funding it, persuading the government to accept the institution and give it a minority tag – all of this should be by the minority community members. The genesis of the institution is the test of determining its minority character," Mr. Sibal submitted.

A five-judge Bench in *S. Azeez Basha versus Union of India* case in 1967 had held that the AMU was a central university and cannot be considered a minority institution.

In its written submissions, the Centre has contended that AMU cannot be considered a minority institution given its "national character".

Agnipath scheme was brought after consultations: Army chief

General Manoj Pande says there is zero tolerance for human rights violations in J&K, says the Army is taking steps to improve human and technical intelligence in the UT; he adds that situation along border with China is 'stable but sensitive'

Dinakar Peri
NEW DELHI

Acknowledging concerns about the situation in the Rajouri-Poonch sector of Jammu and Kashmir over the past five to six months, as well as the high attrition rate for Army personnel, the Chief of Army Staff General Manoj Pande said on Thursday that local support was crucial. The Army was engaging with the local community there, he said, emphasising that there will be "zero tolerance" for human rights violations in Jammu and Kashmir.

On the Agnipath scheme, he reiterated that its final framework came about "after an iterative process, after consultations, and it took into account whatever issues we had to put across".

The Army chief outlined the problem in the Rajouri-Poonch sector, in response to a question from *The Hindu* at the annual press conference ahead of Army Day. "If we look at the entire Jammu and Kashmir, in terms of the number of terrorists neutralised in the entire State in 2023, it is 71, of which 51 are in the



Annual gathering: The Chief of the Army Staff, General Manoj Pande, addressing a press conference in Delhi. SHIV KUMAR PUSHRAKAR

[Kashmir] valley and 21 in the Rajouri-Poonch region. Our own casualties in Kashmir have been seven; in Rajouri-Poonch, it has been 20. The figures, especially in Rajouri-Poonch, is something we have taken note of," Gen. Pande said.

Human rights

"My guidance to soldiers and commanders there is unambiguous, in terms of respect for human rights and zero tolerance for any actions on that account," he said. The Army chief's statement comes in the wake of allegations of recent civilian deaths in Army custody.

"We have clearly laid down guidelines which spell out what you must

do, and what you must not do in those areas and for soldiers to be able to act in a professional manner and whatever they're doing. This is something which I have emphasised and re-emphasised. But let me assure you that our counter-terrorism operations in those areas will continue in a relentless fashion so that we get back to normalcy at the earliest," he added.

Gen. Pande highlighted several measures being taken to improve the situation, of which the first is the strengthening of the Army's human intelligence network, as well as those of other agencies, and also outreach to the local population. "We have increased or enhanced our deploy-

ment in those areas as also reorientated some of the units which were earlier operating in the last five to six months," he said.

Strengthening the Army's ability to get technical intelligence in terms of communications and better synergy with other agencies, and the local and Central police forces is also key, the Army Chief said.

Agnipath scheme

Gen. Pande declined to comment on his predecessor's remarks that the armed forces had been "taken by surprise" regarding the Agnipath scheme. Launched in June 2022, the scheme is aimed at short-term recruitment of soldiers, sailors and airmen for a four-year period.

Agnipath had taken the Army "by surprise" while it was a "bolt out of the blue" for the Navy and Air Force, former Army Chief Gen. Manoj Mukund Naravane has written in his upcoming memoir, *Four Stars of Destiny*.

"It would be unfair for me to say anything on that," Gen. Pande said, when asked about Gen. Naravane's observations, adding, "From here on, we

need to move forward."

He elaborated on the current status of the scheme. "As I said, the acceptability, the positivity and integration of the Agniveers in the units is happening well. There are few challenges in terms of training, most of which are at the tactical level which entail tweaking of our policies, limited training period, harmonising firing standards between Agniveers and regular soldiers," Gen. Pande said.

The Army Chief characterised the situation on the northern border with China as "stable but sensitive". "We continue to talk to find a solution to address the balance issues between the two sides. Operational preparedness is very high, and deployment is both robust, and balanced," he added.

On the situation in Myanmar and the impact on the border, Gen. Pande said that it has been of concern. The activities of the Myanmar Army and ethnic groups have resulted in 416 Myanmar Army personnel crossing over to India, as well as some civilians crossing into Mizoram and Manipur, he said.

SC questions Centre on GM mustard

The Hindu Bureau

NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Thursday questioned the government on whether the Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee (GEAC) had considered the reports of the court-appointed Technical Experts Committee (TEC) on the biosafety of transgenic mustard hybrid DMH-11 before approving it for envi-

ronmental release.

Appearing before a Bench of Justices B.V. Nagarathna and Sanjay Karol, Attorney-General R. Venkataramani, for the Centre, said the GEAC was a statutory body and the committee had examined relevant scientific data before giving the go-ahead for the environmental release.

"The reason why we are asking this is because the GEAC was not working in a

vacuum... These are reports included a dissenting note by [agricultural scientist] R.S. Paroda submitted to the court on the issue. Will these reports be con-signed to the record room?" Justice Nagarathna asked.

Transparent framework

Mr. Venkataramani submitted that a detailed analysis of the TEC's recommendations and steps taken by

the Centre reveal that the regulatory regime had been further strengthened since 2012 to ensure that a transparent and science-based framework was in place for environmental risk assessment of GM crops. He said the conditional approval granted for environmental release of GM mustard was an example of effective implementation of the strengthened regulatory framework.

Tamils living in 58 countries take part in World Tamil Diaspora Day fete

The Hindu Bureau

CHENNAI

Tamils from about 58 countries participated in the two-day World Tamil Diaspora Day celebrations, inaugurated by Minister for Youth Welfare and Sports Development Udhayanidhi Stalin here on Thursday.

State Ministers, people's representatives, industrialists and writers, among others, took part in the

Minister Udhayanidhi thanked Tamils living in other countries for their warm reception during T.N. Chief Minister M.K. Stalin's visits

two-day event.

During the inauguration ceremony, held at Chennai Trade Centre, Mr. Udhayanidhi underlined the

strong link that Tamils living abroad have with the State and the functions of the Commissionerate of Rehabilitation and Welfare of Non-Resident Tamils.

More efforts

It took about eight months to one year to bring (to the State) the mortal remains of Tamils who die in accidents abroad, but due to the efforts of the Commissionerate, the remains

were now being brought to the State between eight and 10 days, the DMK leader said.

Mr. Udhayanidhi thanked Tamils living in other countries for their warm reception during Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin's visits and the encouragement they extended to the State's sportspersons when they took part in international sports events.

Surat, Indore cleanest cities; Maharashtra tops State list

Visakhapatnam, Bhopal, Vijayawada, Delhi, Tirupati, Hyderabad figure among top 10 clean cities; President calls for elimination of manholes 'to establish our true identity as a sensitive society'

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Surat in Gujarat and Indore in Madhya Pradesh were on Thursday jointly declared the cleanest cities of India at the annual clean city awards for 2023 of the Union Urban Affairs Ministry. The next best is Navi Mumbai.

The Swachh Survekshan awards were given away by President Droupadi Murmu here.

Indore has been adjudged the cleanest city for the seventh time in a row.

The list of top 10 cleanest cities with a population of more than one lakh includes Greater Visakhapatnam, Bhopal, Vijayawada, New Delhi, Tirupati, Greater Hyderabad and Pune.

In the State rankings, Maharashtra came first, followed by Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. Odisha is ranked fourth, followed by Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Punjab, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Sikkim, Karnataka, Goa, Haryana and Bihar.

In the category of cities with a population of less than one lakh, Sasvad and Lonavala in Maharashtra

Ranking cleanliness

The tables list the cleanest cities with more than 1 lakh population and the best-performing States, according to the Swachh Survekshan Awards. Indore bagged the tag of India's cleanest city for the seventh consecutive time

Cleanest cities with >1 lakh population		States ranking	
Rank	City	Rank	State
1	Indore	1	Maharashtra
1	Surat	2	M.P.
3	Navi Mumbai	3	Chhattisgarh
4	Greater Visakhapatnam	4	Odisha
5	Bhopal	5	Telangana



and Patan in Chhattisgarh secured the top three spots. The Mhow Cantonment Board in Madhya Pradesh was adjudged the cleanest cantonment Board.

Varanasi and Prayagraj in Uttar Pradesh won the top two awards for the cleanest Ganga towns. Chandigarh won the award for the safest city for sanitation workers. Twenty zonal awards were given to medium and small cities.

Madhyamgram, Kalyani and Haora, all cities in West Bengal, have the dubious distinction of being placed at the bottom of the list, while the States at the

end of the list were Rajasthan, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh.

The theme of the cleanliness survey 2023 was "Waste to wealth", while for 2024, it is "Reduce, reuse and recycle".

"Only by eliminating manholes through mechanised cleaning and achieving the goal of sanitation through machine-holes, we will be able to establish our true identity as a sensitive society," Ms. Murmu said in her address. She noted that the circular economy's methods of recycling and reusing more and more goods were proving helpful for sustainable

development. She expressed confidence that such a system will prove to be very useful in the field of waste management also.

Ms. Murmu also launched the 'Swachh Survekshan' 2023 dashboard at the function.

'People's movement'

Union Urban Affairs Minister Hardeep Singh Puri said: "Today, every city in India is ODF (open defecation free). This became possible because the Swachh Bharat Mission went from being a government programme to becoming a Jan Andolan (people's movement)."

Mr. Puri said that in 2014, there was only 15-16% scientific processing of waste, while today the number is almost 76%; in the next two to three years, 100% will be achieved. "By the end of this mission, we would have fully transitioned from manhole to machine hole," he said.

The Swachh Survekshan, which began with a modest evaluation of 73 major cities in 2016, now covers 4,477 cities. The evaluation this year was done by over 3,000 assessors. Nearly 12 crore citizen responses were received.

Show of fairness

Tableau rotational plan for States and Union Territories is an equitable one

The Defence Ministry has finalised a rotational plan which will ensure that all States and Union Territories get a chance to display their tableaux at the Republic Day parade within a three-year cycle. This is a welcome step that will potentially avoid controversy over the selection of tableaux that has become an unfortunate and frequent accompaniment of the parade. This year, tableaux of 16 States/Union Territories (UT) were selected for the January 26 parade following an established process but the Opposition-ruled Delhi, Punjab, Karnataka and West Bengal that were not qualified cried foul. Karnataka's Congress Chief Minister Siddaramaiah has said that seven proposals sent by the State were rejected by the Centre. A political motive behind selection and exclusion has often been suggested, under the current BJP regime and the previous UPA regime. Only around 15 or 16 tableaux from States/UTs are selected each year, and, obviously, all cannot be accommodated. Those States that have not been selected for the parade this year were invited to showcase their tableaux at the Bharat Parv from January 23 to 31 at the Red Fort. The new plan, that has been agreed to by 28 States, is aimed at giving everyone an equitable chance at participation.

The Defence Ministry already has an elaborate screening mechanism for participants in the parade. A committee of distinguished persons drawn from various fields including Padma awardees was set up this year too that screened proposals from States and organisations. The Ministry of Culture had empanelled 30 agencies for design and fabrication of tableaux through an open selection process and States/UTs were advised to engage these agencies following appropriate procedure. The allegations by States of discrimination with respect to their proposals may or may not be unfounded, but the selection process has to be apolitical and conducted in a transparent manner while maintaining standards to avoid questions in the first place. While the marching contingents and military platforms at the parade showcase the nation's military might, the tableaux and the performances hold a lens to the country's cultural splendour and diversity. In the backdrop of controversies year after year, the new proposal of a rotational opportunity for each State/UT offers a fairer, more transparent mechanism. The assertion by officials that the Government, Minister or Secretary do not have any role in the selection process, is reassuring. It will go a long way in keeping the festivities free from bickering.

The Speaker's court

The power to disqualify should be in independent hands

The Maharashtra Assembly Speaker Rahul Narwekar's ruling on the disqualification petitions filed by rival factions of the Shiv Sena demonstrates why the adjudicatory function under the anti-defection law should not be in the hands of Presiding Officers in the legislature. In a matter that many thought would decide the survival of the Eknath Shinde regime, the Speaker has ruled that there was no case to disqualify members of the Eknath Shinde faction, or 14 members in the Uddhav B. Thackeray (UBT) group. The ruling is based mainly on the finding that loyalists of Eknath Shinde, the Chief Minister now, constituted the 'real political party' when rival Shiv Sena factions emerged on June 21, 2022. Mr. Narwekar's verdict conveniently draws upon some aspects of the Supreme Court's final verdict of May 11, 2023, in which a Constitution Bench ruled that the Governor was wrong in asking the then Chief Minister, Uddhav Thackeray, to undergo a floor test and that the Speaker was wrong in recognising the Shinde faction's appointee as the party's whip. In contrast to the Court ruling, the Speaker has declared that Sunil Prabhu, an appointee of the UBT faction, 'ceased to be the duly authorised whip' from June 21, 2022, and that Bharat Gogawale of the Shinde group was "validly appointed" as the whip. As a result, Mr. Narwekar found no reason to sustain the charge that the Shinde loyalists violated any whip. He also ruled that there was no proof that the UBT group violated the other side's whip as no such whip was served on them.

The Uddhav Thackeray group may approach the Supreme Court again, possibly on the ground that the Speaker's ruling contradicts key conclusions of the Bench. While acknowledging the split in the Shiv Sena Legislature Party, the Court had said: "... no faction or group can argue that they constitute the original political party as a defence against disqualification on the ground of defection". The Speaker has also referred to the Shinde faction's "overwhelming majority" (37 out of 55 MLAs of the original party). On the other hand, the Court had observed that the percentage of members in each faction is irrelevant to the determination whether a defence to disqualification is made out. However, the Court had conceded that the Speaker may have to decide on which faction is the real party when adjudicating a question of defection. It favoured reliance on a version of the party constitution and leadership structure submitted to the Election Commission before rival groups emerged. It is these observations that the Speaker has utilised to determine which group is the real party. As long as defection disputes are in the hands of Speakers, and not any independent authority, political considerations will undoubtedly cast a shadow on such rulings.

Are antibiotics over-prescribed in India?

PARLEY

The National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) recently found that over half of the nearly 10,000 hospital patients surveyed for a study were given antibiotics to prevent, rather than treat, infection. The survey mapped patients treated on one to five days each at 20 tertiary care institutes across 15 States and two Union Territories between November 2021 and April 2022. It found that 55% of the patients surveyed were prescribed antibiotics as prophylaxis, or as a preventive; only 45% were prescribed antibiotics to actually treat infections; and of them, only 6% were prescribed the drugs after identifying the specific bacteria. This is worrying as India carries one of the largest burdens of drug-resistant pathogens worldwide. Are antibiotics being over-prescribed in India? Sumit Ray and Abdul Ghafur discuss the question in a conversation moderated by Bindu Shajan Perappadan. Edited excerpts:

What is antimicrobial resistance (AMR) and how did India reach this stage?

Sumit Ray: AMR is defined as resistance of micro-organisms to an antimicrobial agent to which they were first sensitive. The present serious concern about AMR is that multiple types of bacteria, particularly in the Indian context – *E. coli*, *Klebsiella*, *Acinetobacter*, *Staphylococcus aureus*, *enterococcus* – have even become resistant to some of the latest generation antibiotics. Patients who get infections with these resistant strains of bacteria have a higher possibility of poorer health outcomes due to the resistance.

We reached this stage due to a combination of factors. First, the inappropriate use of antibiotics in non-bacterial infections, both because of prescribing practices and the use of over-the-counter antibiotics. Second, inadequate laboratory facilities to inform clinicians rapidly about what would be an appropriate antibiotic even in bacterial infections, based on cultures. So, most clinicians are shooting in the dark. Third, the lack of adequate training in antibiotic selection, escalation, and de-escalation. Fourth, inadequate monitoring of AMR and control of antibiotic prescription and dispensing practices by health systems in spite of repeated warnings. And fifth, the incentivisation of prescribing practices by the pharmaceutical industry.

Abdul Ghafur: Inappropriate use of antibiotics and other molecules used to treat or prevent infections in the human, animal and agricultural sectors generates bugs that are resistant to these drugs. Inadequate sanitation in the community



GETTY IMAGES/STOCKPHOTO

and improper infection prevention in healthcare institutions helps spread these superbugs. AMR is a complex socio-economic and political challenge and not just a scientific issue to be solved by doctors and researchers alone.

In the light of the recent NCDC report, should there be standardisation for ensuring uniformity in prescribing antibiotics?

SR: There are already NCDC guidelines and multiple other guidelines to initiate antibiotics in different types and sites of infection. Doctors prescribing antibiotics need to be trained in appropriate use. But the problem is in diagnosing whether the patient has a bacterial infection or not. The criteria for differentiating bacterial from non-bacterial infections or a non-infective cause is still strongly based on clinical judgment. Laboratory and radiological investigations only aid us in this. So, the initial diagnosis of a bacterial infection will remain clinical till more accurate and rapidly available methods are developed.

AG: The NCDC survey results are relevant, but not at all unexpected. It is a known fact that more than half the antibiotics prescriptions in most countries are unnecessary. But why do doctors make these unnecessary prescriptions? Are they doing this purposely to harm the patient? Are they doing this to increase the AMR rate? Of course not. Both the NCDC and the Indian Council for Medical Research (ICMR) have guidelines for the use of antibiotics. There is no scarcity of guidelines, but implementation is a different story.

We should look into the root causes of this over-prescription. First, look at any government or private hospital outpatient unit and you will see that they are overcrowded. Taking the patient's health history, examining the patient, getting speedy investigations done... these don't happen as much as they should. What is lacking is access to rapid diagnostics and a large, good



The rate of AMR is directly proportional to steady and strong governance, infrastructure, sanitation, poverty, access to clean drinking water, etc.

ABDUL GHAFUR

network of laboratories. A course of antibiotics is cheaper than any blood culture and investigation. So, for a doctor who doesn't have the time to examine patients, the time to examine their health history, and for patients who can't afford investigations in a country where most parts do not have enough laboratories, antibiotics are the cheaper and less time-consuming option. Unless we correct these factors, nothing is going to change.

Following COVID-19 and now with the knowledge that humankind is vulnerable to the ever-present threat of an outbreak due to climate change, zoonotic spillovers, resistance creeping in from agriculture products and poultry, how important is the judicious use of antibiotics in the world and what is the immediate danger that we face?

SR: The immediate threat is clear. I am an intensivist and I see people dying because of AMR. The study that we are quoting has also shown that nearly 75% of the surveyed patients who had an *E. coli* or a *Klebsiella* infection in hospital were resistant to what we simply called a third- or fourth-generation antibiotic. What is more worrying is that resistance to the next generation of antibiotics (carbapenem resistance) is also high. The trickle-down effects from poultry and agriculture are also high, particularly in industrialised agriculture, which is more common in the U.S. and China. But more importantly, our prescription practices are proving to be a hurdle. What is essential is the linking of labs to all levels of clinical setups and the fast transmission of infection-related data between the lab and the clinician.

AG: I treat infections in cancer patients, who are the most immuno-compromised patients you can come across. Patients are losing their lives because of AMR. But to tackle this challenge, we should think far beyond the prescription or consumption of antibiotics.

AMR is not a stand-alone entity. The rate of AMR is directly proportional to steady and strong governance, infrastructure, sanitation, poverty, access to clean drinking water, etc. So, in a country with high AMR, reducing consumption of medicines alone will not make any significant change in the rate of resistance.

While rationalising antibiotics is indeed important not just from the AMR perspective but also as a patient safety measure, other factors such as sanitation in hospitals, basic access to personal hygiene and infection control, are vital. COVID-19 taught us the importance of small steps, such as washing our hands and wearing a mask when in public, to counter a huge threat. Fighting AMR needs us to start with these basic steps.

What measures have been put in place by the Central government most recently to control AMR in India? And are they enough?

AG: I have been a technical advisory committee member for the national policy on antibiotics for years, so I can give a detailed picture. In 2011, we brought out the first National Policy for Containment of Antimicrobial Resistance. We also banned over-the-counter use of antibiotics (H rule), though this was not implemented. In 2013, inspired by the Chennai Declaration, a new H rule banning only second- and third-line antibiotics was brought out. Even this modified rule has not been implemented. While health is State subject, to control AMR we need strong Centre-State coordination. AMR cannot be tackled in isolation. The pandemic has taught us that everything is interconnected. So, we must work with all the stakeholders, including patients. While India has taken some strong and long-term measures to tackle AMR, there is scope to do more, including better enforcement of laws. The 2019 ban by the Indian government on the use of colistin as a growth promotional agent in poultry farming is a significant step in regulating antibiotic use. May I remind you that colistin is the most powerful antibiotic that is available to treat infections in humans?

SR: There is a need to restrict access to reserve antibiotics, so that chances of resistance are reduced. What is interesting is that the highest per capita in antibiotic usage is seen in countries with the highest privatised healthcare. This trend clearly indicates that improving public health systems and public health delivery, including sanitation, is key to curbing any rise in AMR. Even within the country, States with good public health systems have lower AMR. This is the way forward. Planned expenditure, structured delivery of services, and robust accountability of the public health system are all important factors that will help.



To listen to the full interview
Scan the code or go to the link
www.thehindu.com

Strained ties in India-Maldives relations

How did disparaging remarks on social media lead to the suspension of Maldivian Ministers? What concerns did India express through diplomatic channels in response to the escalating row? Why did President Muizzu insist on the withdrawal of Indian soldiers after coming to power, and how did India respond?

EXPLAINER

Summary

The story so far:

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's tourism push for Lakshadweep triggered a social media spat, escalating into a diplomatic clash between India and the Maldives, worsening the already strained relationship between the Indian Ocean neighbours. Disparaging remarks led to the suspension of three Maldivian Ministers. India expressed concerns, impacting travel bookings, and 'boycott Maldives' trended on social media. India-Maldives relations have hit a rough patch since Mohamed Muizzu was elected President last year on the back of an 'India Out' campaign.

What led to the 'India out' campaign during Solih's administration?

The Maldives is a key maritime neighbour of India in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The country's location holds significant strategic importance to India, especially amid China's growing engagements in the region.

Although Maldives-India ties have been mostly cordial over the years, there was a noticeable tilt towards China during the presidency of Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) leader Abdulla Yameen from 2013 to 2018. It was under Mr. Yameen that China included the Maldives as a part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Bilateral ties improved when Ibrahim Mohamed Solih of the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) took over the reins from Mr. Yameen in 2018.

Aiming to reset ties with "one of its closest bilateral partners," Mr. Solih adopted an 'India first' foreign policy to establish a closer relationship with India in the areas of defence, security and economics. The Maldives "makes no apology" for close ties with India, he told *The Hindu* in a 2021 interview.

However, the growing proximity between New Delhi and Male and high-level military exchanges sparked



Disputed diplomacy: Narendra Modi in a meeting with Mohamed Muizzu. FILE PHOTO

concern in certain quarters, leading to an 'India out' campaign spearheaded by the Opposition. The critics of the Solih administration alleged that the government was compromising the sovereignty of the island nation and "allowing Indian boots on the ground." The Opposition sharpened its attack after the government signed the Uthuru Thila Falhu (UTF) deal with India in 2021 to jointly develop the National Defence Force Coast Guard Harbour.

The anti-India campaign emerged as the main poll plank in the 2023 presidential race under the leadership of former pro-China Maldivian President Yameen.

With a few months to go, PPM's Mohamed Muizzu emerged as the joint Opposition candidate following a series of dramatic events which prevented former President Yameen from contesting the presidential election. A protégé of the PPM chief, Mr. Muizzu was then serving as the Mayor of Male. Mr. Yameen returned to prison and Mr. Muizzu entered the poll fray.

Mr. Muizzu built on the 'India out' campaign to persuade voters. He promised to remove Indian troops from the Maldives shores and balance trade relations, which he claimed were heavily tilted in India's favour.

He refused to be labelled pro-China and maintained that he was "pro-Maldives", saying his government

wouldn't allow Indian, Chinese, or any other country's military presence in the archipelago. He, however, signalled his intentions to build strong ties with Beijing, highlighting the benefits of Chinese assistance to the Maldives.

In September 2023, Mr. Muizzu won the contest with 54% of the votes, and in November, took oath as the eighth President of the island nation.

The first signs of a shift in foreign policy emerged when the new Maldivian President skipped India and instead travelled to Türkiye in November on his first official visit. The Ankara trip marked a departure from a long tradition of Maldivian heads visiting New Delhi first.

Mr. Muizzu has since travelled to the UAE and is currently on a five-day visit to China at the invitation of Chinese President Xi Jinping. The Maldivian President has termed China as its "valued ally and integral collaborator".

Why did President Muizzu insist on the withdrawal of Indian soldiers?

In his first address to the nation after taking the oath, Mr. Muizzu insisted on the withdrawal of Indian soldiers from the Maldives as he pledged to safeguard the sovereignty and independence of the Maldives. The President's remarks that the country "will not have any foreign military personnel" grabbed headlines in India, viewed as an attempt to officially turn the compass from his predecessor's

'India first' policy to an 'India out' policy.

A disappointed New Delhi urged the Maldives to look at the presence of its military personnel in the "proper perspective."

The new President made another formal announcement on this matter following his meeting with PM Modi on the sidelines of the UN's COP-28 climate summit in the UAE in December, claiming that Mr. Modi had agreed to his demand. While statements issued by the two governments didn't mention any such agreement, sources in the Indian government countered the claim, saying the discussions on the issue were still "ongoing".

Male's hesitance to maintain defence ties with New Delhi was again evident from the absence of a Maldivian government representative in the latest round of the Colombo Security Conclave held in Mauritius last month.

Why did the decision to revoke the survey pact with India cause a stir in political circles?

The Muizzu government caused a stir in political and strategic circles with its decision to revoke a key 2019 agreement with India for conducting surveys in Maldivian waters. The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for hydrographic surveying, signed during PM Modi's state visit to the islands when President Ibrahim Solih was in power, backed the commitment of the two countries to maintain close cooperation in defence and maritime security. Critics of the Solih government, however, had claimed that it harmed national security.

In December, Mr. Muizzu announced that the pact would not be renewed.

Abhijit Singh, Head of the Maritime Policy Initiative at the Observer Research Foundation, says that the Muizzu administration's refusal to renew the pact seems less to do with the President's sensitivities about sovereignty than with his special relationship with Beijing. "Getting Indian hydrographic ships out of Maldivian waters appears intended to aid China's marine surveys of the surrounding seas," Mr. Singh notes in his analysis.

THE GIST

Prime Minister Modi's tourism promotion for Lakshadweep sparked a social media and diplomatic clash with the Maldives, worsening relations.

Disparaging remarks led to the suspension of three Maldivian Ministers, and India expressed concerns, impacting travel bookings.

Ties improved under President Solih in 2018, adopting an 'India first' policy, but concerns arose, leading to an 'India out' campaign.

PPM's Mohamed Muizzu emerged as the Opposition candidate, winning the 2023 presidential election with a shift in foreign policy.

Mohamed Muizzu's presidency was marked by distancing from India, prioritising ties with China, the UAE, and Turkey.

Maldives, China commit to greater strategic cooperation, sign 20 MoUs

During President Muizzu's visit, the two countries agreed to draw up an 'action plan' for building a 'China-Maldives Strategic Partnership' from 2024 to 2028; Beijing said it 'firmly opposes' any external interference in Male's internal affairs

Meera Srinivasan

COLOMBO

Noting that the "strategic significance" of China-Maldives relations has become more prominent, the two countries committed to greater strategic cooperation this week, while China said it "firmly opposes" external interference in the internal affairs of the Maldives, according to a joint press communiqué.

"The two sides agree to elevate China-Maldives relations to a comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership, better leverage the political guidance of high-level engagement, expand practical cooperation between the two countries in various fields, strengthen collaboration on in-



Timely ties: Mohamed Muizzu and Xi Jinping with their wives during a welcome ceremony in Beijing. AFP

ternational and multilateral affairs, enhance the well-being of the two peoples, and work toward a China-Maldives community with a shared future," said the communiqué, issued on January 11, on the penultimate day of Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu's five-day state visit to China.

The move is among many initiatives the two countries announced, including Maldives's participation in the Global Security Initiative (GSI), following Sri

Lanka's affirmation in October 2023. The two governments agreed to draw up an "action plan" for building a "China-Maldives Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership from 2024 to 2028.

The decisions assume greater significance, a month after the Muizzu government decided to skip the India-led Colombo Security Conclave's NSA-level meet, held in Mauritius in December.

Mr. Muizzu's visit coincides with a diplomatic row between the Maldives and India, after three junior Ministers in the Maldives posted controversial remarks against Prime Minister Narendra Modi, referring to his recent trip to Lakshadweep. While Mr. Muizzu has not comment-

ed on the tensions, the deputy Ministers in his government have since been suspended.

In his meeting with President Xi, the newly elected Maldivian leader hailed the BRI, and said his country looks forward to expanding new channels of cooperation and promote high-quality partnership in the construction of the Belt and Road.

Two governments agreed to cooperate – the two leaders presided over the signing of 20 MoUs – in several areas including blue economy, digital economy, disaster and risk mitigation, and news cooperation, through an MoU between the Public Service Media of the Maldives and the Xinhua news agency of China.