

Maldives suspends three Deputy Ministers for remarks against Modi

India 'strongly raises' issue of 'disrespectful' comments about PM with the Foreign Office; the three leaders had commented about PM's visit to Lakshadweep; Muizzu govt. distances itself from remarks; senior Maldivian leaders condemn comments

Kallol Bhattacharjee
NEW DELHI

The Indian High Commission in the Maldives on Sunday "strongly raised" the issue of disrespectful remarks about Prime Minister Narendra Modi made by a few members of the government of President Mohamed Muizzu.

The Maldivian government suspended three Deputy Ministers who are at the centre of the controversy which erupted just a day before Mr. Muizzu is scheduled to depart for his first trip to China.

"Our High Commission in the Maldives had strongly raised and expressed concerns about the comments made in regard to PM by certain Ministers in the Maldives Government with the Foreign Office today," said a source.

The issue started after three Deputy Ministers in the Ministry of Youth Af-



Maintaining ties: Prime Minister Narendra Modi with President Mohamed Muizzu during the climate summit in UAE. FILE PHOTO

fairs - Maryam Shiuna, Malsha Shareef and Mahzooz Majid - made disparaging remarks about India and Mr. Modi after the Prime Minister's recent visit to Lakshadweep.

In a post on social media platform X, Ms. Shiuna referred to India's ties with Israel and made disparaging comments about Mr. Modi. Her colleagues joined in and said that the visit by the Indian Prime Minister to Lakshadweep

was aimed at challenging Maldivian tourism which prides itself on its famous beachside facilities.

These comments amplified by their supporters soon triggered a war of words on social media that escalated with Indian tourists cancelling hotel bookings in the Maldives.

In damage-control mode, the Muizzu government distanced itself from the remarks, with the Maldivian Foreign Ministry

saying that "it believes in freedom of expression but that has to be exercised in a responsible manner". "These opinions are personal and do not represent the views of the Government of Maldives. Moreover, the relevant authorities of the Government will not hesitate to take action against those who make such derogatory remarks," the Foreign Ministry said. The three Deputy Ministers were suspended later.

Prominent Maldivians, including former Foreign Minister and former President of the UN General Assembly Abdulla Shahid, condemned the comments, describing them as "reprehensible and odious". "I call on the Government to reprimand these officials. Public figures must maintain decorum," Mr. Shahid said.

Former President Mohamed Nasheed came down strongly on the three leaders and said, "Muizzu

government must distance itself from these comments and give clear assurance to India they do not reflect gov policy." Former President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih termed the remarks as "hateful".

The war of words that came ahead of the China visit has added to the tension as Mr. Muizzu hit the headlines soon after his November swearing-in by asking India to withdraw its military presence from the archipelago. India has been maintaining that the military presence there is mainly aimed at providing medical support to the distant islands of the Indian Ocean nation.

Mr. Muizzu subsequently met Mr. Modi during the climate summit in Dubai on December 1. He, however, chose Türkiye as the destination for his first foreign visit. This was followed by the decision to visit China from January 8 to 12.

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T.N. GIM kicks off with vision report for \$1-trn economy

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The Tamil Nadu Global Investors Meet (GIM) 2024 hosted by the DMK government got off to a blistering start at the Chennai Trade Centre on Sunday with Chief Minister M.K. Stalin unveiling a blueprint for making the State a \$1 trillion economy by 2030.

The government also released its Semiconductor and Advanced Electronics Policy, 2024, on a day when a slew of memoranda of understandings (MOUs) entailing mega investments were signed.

The vision report provides a comprehensive "growth framework" for achieving Mr. Stalin's ambitious target.

"To achieve the target, we are pursuing a two-pronged approach of attracting both capital and employment-intensive investments," he said inaugurating the event.

The GIM, he said, will

act as a catalyst to economic and industrial growth. "The event has witnessed encouraging response and is expected to bring pride and investment to Tamil Nadu. Multiple policies have been announced by the State. Our focus is to ensure development for all," he said.

Union Minister for Commerce and Industry Piyush Goyal, the chief guest, said India's growth is backed by the success of its States and Tamil Nadu stands as a pivotal cog in the wheel. "Tamil Nadu is one of the most ambitious States with the vision of \$1 trillion economy by 2030 and the Government of India is working closely with the State government towards taking the State's inclusive and sustainable growth forward," he said.

MoUs signed

A slew of MoUs were exchanged through the day. The key among them was a pact signed by the State government with Vietnamese



Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin with Union Minister Piyush Goyal and State Industries Minister T.R.B. Rajaa at the inauguration of the Tamil Nadu Global Investors Meet on Sunday. M. VEDHAN

electric vehicle (EV) maker VinFast for setting up its plant in Thoothukudi with a proposed investment of ₹16,000 crore.

Tata Electronics signed an MoU expressing an interest to invest ₹12,082 crore for an enclosure manufacturing and mobile phone assembly unit in Krishnagiri district and the project will generate over 40,500 jobs.

Mr. Stalin inaugurated First Solar's fully integrated solar manufacturing

plant in Sriperumbudur. The company also signed a pact to invest a further ₹2,500 crore, which would provide over 350 jobs.

Hyundai Motor India has committed additional investments of ₹6,180 crore for setting up a unit to manufacture internal combustion engine (ICE) and EV passenger cars, and EV batteries in Kancheepuram district and collaborate with IIT-Madras on "Hydrogen Valley Innovation".

Qualcomm announced a significant expansion in Chennai with a new facility for their Design Centre, representing a proposed investment of ₹177.27 crore. The new Design Centre is expected to generate employment for up to 1,600 skilled professionals.

Chengalpattu project

Apple supplier Pegatron inked a pact for investing ₹1,000 crore on a computing, communications, and consumer electronics manufacturing unit in Chengalpattu. This project will generate over 8,000 jobs.

JSW Energy will invest around ₹10,000 crore for its expansion plans in Thoothukudi and Tirunelveli. The project would provide employment to over 6,600 people.

Godrej Consumer Products Ltd. is investing around ₹515 crore and TVS Group will be investing ₹5,000 crore and provide employment to around 500 persons. Mitsubishi will be investing ₹200

crore at Gummidipoondi, near Chennai.

AP Moller Maersk has signed an MoU for transport and logistics solutions and Global Capability Centres across Tamil Nadu.

In a video message, Mukesh Ambani, chairman and managing director, Reliance Industries Limited said the company is committed to making new investments in Tamil Nadu in renewable energy and green hydrogen sectors.

Jio has invested over ₹35,000 crore in Tamil Nadu, bringing the fruits of digital revolution to 35 million subscribers in every town and village in the State. In December, Jio completed the fastest roll out of 5G, anywhere in the world, he said.

"As per our data the contribution of our members to Tamil Nadu GDP is around 25% and we expect this to continue to increase," said R. Dinesh, president, Confederation of Indian Industry (CII).

In a first, IAF C-130 with Garud commandos makes night landing at Kargil

The Hindu Bureau

NEW DELHI

In a first, a C-130 Super Hercules tactical transport aircraft of the Indian Air Force made a night landing at the Advanced Landing Ground (ALG) in Kargil close to the Line of Control (LoC) with Pakistan along with a team of Garud special forces.

"In a first, an IAF C-130J aircraft recently carried out a night landing at the Kargil airstrip. Employing terrain masking *en route*, the exercise also dovetailed a training mission of the Garuds," the IAF said in a social media post.

Earlier, transport aircraft landed here during daytime, one official said. Explaining the significance, the official said the ALG was located at an alti-



In the icy heights: A view of the IAF C-130 transport aircraft landing at night at the Kargil Advanced Landing Ground in Ladakh. IAF

tude of around 10,000 feet and was a restricted airstrip with a unidirectional approach surrounded by rough terrain. It does not have night-landing facilities. This demonstrates the capability to carry out specialised missions round the clock in this area, the official said.

The Kargil ALG is also significant because this is the only airstrip in this area critical for any exigen-

cy. In Jammu and Kashmir, the IAF has full-fledged airfields at Srinagar, Awantipora, Udhampur and Jammu. In Ladakh, the IAF has airfields at Leh and Thoise and ALGs at Nyoma, Fukche and Daulat Beg Oldi (DBO).

In the past decade, the Defence Ministry has reactivated a series of ALGs close to the border, especially along the Line of Actual Control with China.

A new high

ISRO should help everyone enjoy the fruits of its new science missions

In January 6 evening, a stream of commands transmitted by scientists and engineers of the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) were translated by a computer onboard the Aditya-L1 spacecraft into manoeuvres that guided it into orbit around an imaginary point in space. Thus, Aditya-L1 reached its destination, around the L1 Lagrange point, from where it will have an unfettered view of the sun for its expected lifetime of five years. Aditya-L1 is an observatory-class solar mission that will study the sun with seven instruments: VELC, a coronagraph to study the uppermost layer of the sun's atmosphere; SUIT, an ultraviolet imaging telescope; SoLEXS and HELIOS, to study solar flares and coronal mass ejections; ASPEX and PAPA, to study the solar wind and plasma; and a set of digital magnetometers to measure properties of the magnetic field around the spacecraft. ISRO picked the L1 Lagrange point – 1.5 million km from the earth in the earth-sun direction and one of five Lagrange points in the earth-sun system – because the gravitational influences of the two bodies interact such that a smaller body here will not experience a net tug towards either. So, Aditya-L1 can stay at L1 while expending little fuel. Its scientific mission will begin in a month or so, once its thrusters' emissions drift away.

As such, Aditya-L1 supplements India's storied history of observing the sun – dating back to the Kodaikanal Solar Observatory, which commenced operations in 1901 – by lofting it into space. It also follows the XPOSat mission, launched on January 1 to become only the world's second X-ray polarimetry satellite, and eight years after AstroSat, which reached several highs of its own. An important issue with such achievements is public perception. For example, while Aditya-L1 and AstroSat are big strides from India's point of view, they pale in comparison to the imaging abilities of the James Webb Space Telescope, which is operated by three space agencies. Yet, many continue to expect the Indian spacecraft to capture hi-res photographs of the cosmos and are disillusioned when it does not. This is not fair (setting aside the fact that not all instruments are imagers). ISRO can do more, too, by expanding its own and its collaborating institutes' public outreach efforts, such as by hosting open days focused on specific missions and commissioning science communication on new results at regular intervals. Everyone should be able to celebrate a new high, but especially the people at large, so ISRO should also consider including components on missions that feed public interest. All these efforts will require funds, but considering the love ISRO has been getting from the government of late, it may just be a matter of asking.

Turmoil in Jharkhand

CM Soren's troubles are legal and political in almost equal measure

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) is keeping Jharkhand Chief Minister Hemant Soren on his toes as it pursues allegations against him and his close associates. The charges are related to tribal land transfers and illegal mining. Seven summons past, Mr. Soren has not appeared before the ED. He apparently fears his arrest ahead of the Lok Sabha elections and is preparing the ground for turning these corruption allegations into a political battle. The Chief Minister has been touring the State and mobilising people around his government's welfare measures with the slogan, 'Aapki Yojana Aapki Sarkar Aapke Dwar, i.e., Your scheme, your government, at your doorstep'. His attempts at getting some judicial reprieve have had very limited success. After the ED's first summons in August, Mr. Soren had approached the Supreme Court of India questioning its legality. The Court directed him to the Jharkhand High Court which rejected his petition on October 13, allowing the ED to continue with its investigations. This case is related to the purchase and sale of tribal land between 2020 and 2022, allegedly in violation of laws that restrict such transactions. In a mining lease allotment case, he appeared before the ED office in Ranchi in November 2022. He was facing allegations of allocating mining leases for himself, his wife and sister-in-law while holding the Mines Department portfolio. The High Court recently rejected a PIL that sought a Central Bureau of Investigation inquiry into this case.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is counting on the possible arrest of Mr. Soren and keeping up the political heat. ED investigations frequently turn out to be very convenient for the BJP. The party has launched a campaign to preempt the possibility of Mr. Soren's wife, Kalpana Soren, replacing him as Chief Minister in the event of his arrest. Ms. Soren belongs to a tribal community in Odisha, and she may not be eligible to contest a seat reserved for Scheduled Tribes in Jharkhand. The abrupt resignation of Sarfaraz Ahmad, Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) MLA from Gandey, a general seat, on January 1, 2024 has given some credence to the speculation that the Sorens may be preparing for a transition in the face of mounting legal troubles. The BJP has asked the Governor not to allow anyone who is not an MLA to take oath as Chief Minister. Meanwhile, a meeting of JMM, Congress and Rashtriya Janata Dal legislators on January 3 at Mr. Soren's official residence unanimously called for his continuation in office regardless of the way the case turns. Corruption is a serious challenge to democracy, but selective investigation against political opponents is no less so.

How voice cloning through artificial intelligence is being used for scams

Voice clone fraud has been on the rise in India. A report published in May last year revealed that 47% of surveyed Indians have either been a victim or knew someone who had fallen prey to an AI generated voice scam. The numbers are almost twice the global average

Poulomi Chatterjee

A few years ago, voice cloning through Artificial Intelligence (AI) was just a phenomenon of mild amusement. AI-generated songs by famous artists like Drake and Ariana Grande were floating around online. However, fears around the AI software were realised when AI voice cloning-related scams burgeoned. In April last year, a family living in Arizona, U.S., was threatened to pay ransom for a fake kidnapping pulled off by an AI cloned voice. And scams weren't the end of it. Easy access to AI voice clones also spawned disinformation.

Earlier in January, 4chan users started flocking to free AI voice cloning tools to generate celebrity hate speech, wherein Harry Potter actress Emma Watson read out a portion of the *Mein Kampf* and conservative political pundit Ben Shapiro made racist comments against Democrat politician Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez.

Why is India a major target for AI voice clone scams?

Similar incidents have made their way in India. A report titled 'The Artificial Imposter' published in May last year revealed that 47% of surveyed Indians have either been a victim or knew someone who had fallen prey to an AI generated voice scam. The numbers are almost twice the global average of 25%. In fact, India topped the list with the maximum number of victims to AI voice scams. Even as several cases went unreported, some came to light. In

December, a Lucknow resident fell prey to a cyberattack that used AI to impersonate the voice of the victim's relative, requesting the person to transfer a substantial amount through UPI. Another report in August stated that a man from Haryana was duped of ₹30,000 after a call was made from a scamster who used an AI app to sound like the victim's friend in dire need of money due to an accident.

Indians have been found to be particularly vulnerable to scams of this nature. According to McAfee, 66% of Indian participants admitted that they would respond to a voice call or a phone call that appeared to be from a friend or family member in urgent need of money, especially if the caller was supposedly a parent (46%), spouse (34%) or their child (12%). The report stated that messages that claimed the sender had been robbed (70%), involved in a car accident (69%), lost their phone or wallet (65%) or needed financial aid while travelling abroad (62%) were the most effective excuses.

While these tools aren't perfect, scammers have relied on creating a sense of urgency to glide over these flaws. The report also shared that 86% Indians were prone to sharing their voice data online or via voice notes at least once a week which has made these tools potent.

How are voice clones done?

Once a scammer finds an audio clip of an individual, all it takes is to upload their voice clip to the online program that is able to replicate the voice accurately barring some intonations. There's a host

of these applications online with popular ones like Murf, Resemble and Speechify. While most of these providers have a monthly subscription fee from under \$15 for basic plans to \$100 for premium options, they have a free trial period.

An especially lauded one has been a year-old AI startup called ElevenLabs that was founded by former Google and Palantir employees. The Andreessen Horowitz-backed firm has been releasing a steady stream of tools. In October last year, it released a product called AI Dubbing which can translate even long-form speech into 20 different languages.

In mid-December, former Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan's political party used an AI-generated speech from the now imprisoned leader in an attempt to rally for votes virtually. Mr. Khan had reportedly sent his party a shorthand script from jail which was later edited and then dubbed by ElevenLabs.

Prominent tech companies also have a hand in the AI voice game now. Recently, Meta launched SeamlessM4T, an open-source multilingual foundational model that can understand nearly 100 languages from speech or text and generate translations in real-time. Apple introduced a voice cloning feature in iOS 17 intended to help people who may be in danger of losing their voice say to a degenerative disease.

ChatGPT, the poster boy for AI chatbots also has a voice transcription feature that can be used for cloning. But OpenAI has been careful to partner with specific parties to prevent the illegal use

of these capabilities.

YouTube took a similar route and announced Dream Track which partners with just 100 creators in the U.S. that would allow them to create song clips featuring AI vocals with permission from pop stars like Demi Lovato, Sia and John Legend.

What can be done?

The speed and easy access of these tools have sent alarm bells ringing. In November last year, the U.S. Federal Trade Commission or FTC launched a Voice Cloning Challenge which asked the public to send in their ideas to detect, evaluate and monitor cloned devices. Just yesterday, the contest posted a prize of \$25,000 for the winner. The FTC is also considering the adoption of a recently-proposed Impersonation Rule that will help deter deceptive voice cloning.

But the pace at which generative AI releases are moving has regulators gasping for air. On January 2, researchers from Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and Tsinghua University in Beijing, China, and members of AI startup MyShell released OpenVoice, an open-source voice cloning tool that is almost instant and offers granular controls to modify one's voice that isn't found on other such platforms.

And the segment is only expected to grow exponentially. A report by Market US has revealed that the global market for these applications stands at \$1.2 billion in 2022 and is estimated to touch almost \$5 billion in 2032 with a CAGR above 15-40%.