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Punjab Police form SIT to investigate Nicaragua 'human trafficking' case

Vikas Vasudeva
CHANDIGARH

The Punjab Police set up a special investigation team (SIT) on Saturday to probe a suspected human trafficking case related to Indian passengers on an aircraft run by Legend Airlines of Romania.

The plane was destined for Nicaragua but was grounded in France and the passengers were detained. Though the passengers have now returned to India, no one has yet come forward to register any case.

Police sources said that in cases of illegal or irregular migration, people usually do not register complaints as they have often willingly opted for the so-called "dunki" or donkey route to emigrate and are aware of the risks in the process. In fact, people often strike compromises with the agents accused of facilitating illegal migration and turn hostile or quash the first information report (FIR) in court. Agents based outside India are also difficult to trace, the police sources added.

An A340 Airbus char-

tered for a flight by a Romanian company named Legend Airlines took off from Fajairah in the United Arab Emirates on December 22. It was headed for Nicaragua in Central America. The flight had a technical stopover at France's Vary airport, but was grounded there after the local French administration received an anonymous tip-off about probable "human trafficking".

After four days at the Vary Airport, the flight with 276 passengers was sent to Mumbai on December 26. While 25 passengers chose



Risky route: Officials suspect that the passengers were trying to follow the donkey route. AP

to apply for asylum in France, two passengers were made assisted with

lysis of the passenger names, the police suspect that around half of those on the flight may belong to the Punjab-Haryana region. To investigate the matter of "human trafficking" in depth, the Director of the Bureau of Investigation, L.K. Yadav, has constituted a four-member SIT, which will submit its final report to the competent court.

A police officer with direct knowledge of the matter said the police were in touch with Central agencies, and those from other States as well. The passen-

gers' destination of Nicaragua had raised suspicions that they may have been trying to follow the donkey route to illegally enter Mexico, and then head further north to the U.S., or to Canada, the officer said.

Migratory springboard

The U.S. government has designated Nicaragua as one of several countries deemed as failing to meet minimum standards for eliminating human trafficking. Nicaragua has also been used as a migratory springboard because of relaxed or visa-free entry re-

quirements. However, the lawyer for Legend Airlines refuted this claim, with the argument that most passengers had valid visas to Nicaragua and return tickets.

As legal migration rises, illegal or irregular migration has also grown to a considerable magnitude, though there is little authentic data on this in the public domain. "Every year more than 20,000 youths from Punjab attempt irregular migration," the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime said in a report in 2008.

Wrestlers are struggling for justice, says Vinesh Phogat as she returns her awards

Press Trust of India

NEW DELHI

Multiple World Championship medallist Vinesh Phogat on Saturday returned her Khel Ratna and Arjuna Award, leaving the two awards in the middle of Kartavya Path here after the Delhi Police stopped her from reaching the Prime Minister's office.

On Tuesday, the Asian Games gold medallist grappler had decided to return her Khel Ratna and Arjuna Award to the government, saying such honours have become meaningless at a time when wrestlers are struggling to get justice.

Mark of protest

Ms. Phogat had announced her decision in a letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

On Saturday, she attempted to reach the Prime Minister's Office to return her awards but the police prevented her from reaching the PMO.

As a mark of protest, she left the awards on Kartavya Path and they were later picked up by the Delhi Pol-



Strong protest: Vinesh Phogat with her Arjuna Award and Khel Ratna before leaving them on Kartavya Path on Saturday. PTI

ice. Ms. Phogat, along with Olympic medallists Sakshi Malik and Bajrang Punia, had protested against the election of Sanjay Singh, a close aide of former Wrestling Federation of India president Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh, who had been accused of sexual harassment by the three grapplers.

Ms. Sakshi had also announced her retirement

from wrestling soon after Mr. Sanjay Singh's appointment as WFI chief.

However, the Sports Ministry later suspended the newly elected panel for not following the provisions of its own constitution while taking decisions and asking the Indian Olympic Association (IOA) to constitute an ad hoc panel to manage the affairs of the sports body.

Tamil Nadu Governor meets Stalin, holds discussions as suggested by SC

The Hindu Bureau

CHENNAI

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin, invited by Governor R.N. Ravi, met him at the Raj Bhavan on Saturday and urged him to give consent to the pending Bills and files related to the prosecution of the former AIADMK Ministers in due course and avoid any delay in future.

"The meeting was cordial. The Governor and the Chief Minister exchanged pleasantries and views on a range of issues concerning the State. The Governor reiterated his total commitment to the good of the people of Tamil Nadu and assured the government of continuing support within the bounds of the Constitution," a Raj Bhavan release said.

The Governor also underscored the need for and advantage of periodic meetings with the Chief Minister in the larger interests of the State.

SC's advice

According to the government, Mr. Ravi invited the Chief Minister following the advice of the Supreme



Exchanging views: Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin with Governor R.N. Ravi during a meeting, in Chennai on Saturday. PTI

Court to end the impasse with the Chief Minister.

Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud, while hearing a case filed by the Tamil Nadu government accusing the Governor of delaying consent to the Bills, had said, "So many things need to be resolved between the Chief Minister and the Governor. Please ask the Governor to engage with the Chief Minister. Let them sit down and discuss."

Mr. Stalin, accompanied by Water Resources Minister Duraimurugan, Finance Minister Thangam Thennarasu, Law Minister

S. Regupathy, and Backward Classes and Higher Education Minister S. R. Rajakannappan and Chief Secretary Shiv Das Meena, urged the Governor to give consent to the files pending for months.

'Give consent to Bills'

"He also told the Governor to get back the 10 Bills he has unnecessarily sent to the President and give his consent to them. Besides, the Governor was asked to speed up the process to give consent to the files prepared by the Directorate of Vigilance and Anti-Corruption (DVAC) to pro-

secute former AIADMK Ministers K.C. Veeramani and M.R. Vijayabaskar," the government said in a release.

It was pointed out that the files had been pending with the Governor for more than 15 months. Another issue that came up at the meeting was the pending of files related to sanction for the appointment of members of the Tamil Nadu Public Services Commission (TNPSC).

The Chief Minister said the Governor's action would benefit the people of the State and the administration only if he functioned in accordance with the provisions of the Constitution. "Since Ministers and officials of various departments have met the Governor and furnished him with details of the cases and the Bills, he should keep in mind the advice of the Supreme Court and give his consent," Mr Stalin said during his meeting with the Governor.

Reiterating his faith in and respect for various constitutional bodies, Mr. Stalin, in a letter, urged the Governor to give his consent to the Bills and the files.

PM visits 10th crore beneficiary of Ujjwala LPG scheme in Ayodhya

Mayank Kumar
LUCKNOW

Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a surprise visit on Saturday to the Ayodhya home of Meera Manjhi, the 10th-crore beneficiary of the PM Ujjwala Yojana, and had tea at her residence during his one-day tour of the temple town.

The Prime Minister was in the town to unveil an airport, a revamped train station and multiple projects.

As Mr. Modi arrived for his cup of tea and 10-minute chat with Ms. Manjhi's family, the entire area resonated with enthusiastic chants of 'Modi-Modi'.

The Prime Minister later posted about the visit on social media, noting his satisfaction that the scheme had eased the family's life. "I had a 'Chai pe Charcha' at the house of Meeraji, the 10th crore beneficiary of Ujjwala Yojana, and her family members in Ayodhya. I felt very satisfied to know how government schemes have made the life of the entire family easier," he wrote on X, posting a video of the conversation.

"Do you know why I came here today?" the video shows him asking as he arrived at Ms. Manjhi's



Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the house of a Ujjwala Yojana beneficiary in Ayodhya on Saturday. ANI

home. "We have given gas cylinders to 10 crore families. I wanted to visit the family that takes the number to 10 crore. And it was in Ayodhya only," he added.

Launched in May 2016 to provide subsidised liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) connections to poor households, the Ujjwala scheme aims to empower women, protecting their health and reducing the number of deaths due to unclean cooking fuel.

"The tea is good but it is a little too sweet," the Prime Minister told Ms. Manjhi who was elated to host the surprise guest at her house near Lata Mangeshkar Chowk in

Ayodhya.

Ms. Manjhi told the Prime Minister that she has got free LPG cylinders and accommodation. "Earlier, I had a *kutcha* house, but now it has become pucca," she said and expressed her happiness for being able to host Mr. Modi at her house.

Later, while addressing a rally in the temple town, Mr. Modi said, "Today, I got the opportunity to have tea at the house of the 10th-crore beneficiary of Ujjwala gas connection." Recalling its launch from Ballia in Uttar Pradesh, the Prime Minister said that even though it was ridiculed at that time, Ujjwala Yojana has changed the lives of

crores of women.

A statement by the Uttar Pradesh government said the programme was not scheduled in advance.

Hours after the Prime Minister visited Ms. Manjhi's home, Ayodhya Divisional Commissioner Gaurav Dayal and District Magistrate Nitish Kumar reached her residence with Ayushman Bharat health card under the Mukhyamantri Jan Arogya Yojana. Mr. Dayal said that instructions were issued from the Chief Minister's Office (CMO) to the Principal Secretary, Health to provide the Ujjwala beneficiary with the health card. (With PTI inputs)

Guided missile destroyer

INS Imphal

The ship is commissioned at a time when the Navy is looking to expand its fleet of capital warships in line with its growing commitments and engagements in the Indian Ocean Region

Dinakar Peri

In December 27, the third of four P-15B 'Visakhapatnam' class stealth guided missile destroyer was commissioned into the Indian Navy as *INS Imphal* at the Naval Dockyard, Mumbai. *Imphal* has the unique distinction of being the first warship to be named after a city in the Northeast. In addition, the time taken to build *Imphal* and for her trials is the shortest for any indigenous destroyer, according to the Navy.

Describing the ship as a shining example of 'Aatmanirbharta' in defence, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh said at the induction ceremony: "*INS Imphal* is a symbol of India's growing maritime power and it will strengthen it further. It will bolster our principle of 'Jalmev Yasya, Balmev Tasya' (One who controls the sea is all powerful) in the Indo-Pacific region."

Imphal's keel was laid on May 19, 2017 and the ship was launched into water on April 20, 2019. *Imphal* sailed out for her maiden sea trials on April 28, 2023 and has completed a comprehensive schedule of trials, both in the harbour and at sea, and was delivered to the Navy on October 20, within a record time frame of six months – the "fastest for a ship of its size". The ship



PHOTO CREDIT: ANI

successfully completed the first-ever test-firing of the extended range BrahMos supersonic cruise missile prior to its commissioning, making it 'weapon-ready'.

Expansion of warships

The speeding up of the construction process is especially important as the Navy looks to expand its fleet of capital warships in line with its growing commitments and engagements in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and the larger Indo-Pacific as also against the backdrop of a sharp increase in Chinese naval presence in the IOR. "We are on track to be a 170-180 [ship] Navy by 2028. 66 out of 68 ships presently under construction are also being built at Indian Shipyards. Further, 24 ships under contract conclusion, will similarly be indigenous – our aim is for the Navy to be fully Aatmanirbhar by 2047," Navy chief Admiral R. Hari Kumar told *The Hindu* recently.

Mr. Singh also defined

INS Imphal as a "conglomeration" of different strengths of the nation. BrahMos cruise missiles have been installed on the ship by Brahmos Aerospace; torpedo tube launchers by Larsen & Toubro (L&T), rapid gun mount by BHEL, and medium-range missiles by Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL). In addition, many start-ups and Micro, Small, Medium Enterprises are involved in its construction. The ship boasts a high level of indigenisation, about 75%, which includes indigenous equipment/systems, combat management systems, rocket launchers, torpedo launchers and integrated platform management systems.

The contract for construction of four ships under Project-15B was signed in January 2011 at a cost of about ₹29,643.74 crore. The ships have been designed in-house by the Directorate of Naval Design and constructed by Mazagon Dock Shipbuilders,

Mumbai. The P-15B class are a follow-on to the P-15A Kolkata class destroyers and named after major cities from all four corners of the country – Visakhapatnam, Mormugao, Imphal and Surat. The first two ships, *INS Visakhapatnam* and *INS Mormugao*, were commissioned in 2021 and 2022, respectively. The last of the class, *Surat*, is expected to be commissioned in 2024.

The design of Project 15B has largely maintained the hull form, propulsion machinery, many platform equipment, major weapons and sensors as the Kolkata class to benefit from series production. However, these ships have enhanced stealth features over the earlier class resulting in a reduced radar cross section through shaping of hull, plated masts and use of radar transparent deck fittings, which make these ships difficult to detect.

INS Imphal measures 163 m in length and 17 m in breadth and has a displacement of 7,400 tonnes. The ship is propelled by four gas turbines, in a combined gas and gas configuration, and is capable of speeds in excess of 30 knots. The ship has a total complement of 315 personnel, and is commanded by Captain K.K. Choudhury, a gunnery and missiles specialist.

Levy 20-30% health tax on food high in sugar, salt, fat: study

The recommendation is an outcome of a study commissioned by Niti Aayog, which is studying the impact of imposing health taxes and warning labels on food products to encourage healthy eating practices

Maitri Porecha

A health tax of between 20% to 30% in addition to GST can be considered to be imposed on sugar, sugar sweetened beverages (SSBs) like colas and juices as well as foods high in sugar, salt and fat (HFSS), public health researchers have recommended in a study published in *Journal of Health Policy and Planning*.

The recommendation is an outcome of a UNICEF-funded project, and the authors hope that this study along with others will influence policies aimed to reduce consumption of sugar and related products. Niti Aayog is interested in understanding the impact of imposing health taxes and warning labels on food products for encouraging healthy eating practices in Indian consumers.

Dr Beena Varghese, health economist and consultant, WHO and a co-author of the study tells *The Hindu* that the study does not recommend taxing households on purchase of their regular ration of sugar. "The study insists that bulk consumers of sugar such as confectionery and sweet manufacturers may be taxed which may reduce their demand for sugar. When the higher costs are transferred to consumers, demand for such products is expected to reduce," Dr Varghese says.

According to Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution da-

Improving health outcomes using sin tax

Currently, sugar sweetened beverages (SSB) attract 28% GST plus a 12% cess, while high fat, salt and sugar (HFSS) products only attract 12% GST

- While the global average consumption of sugar is 22 kg per person per year, it is 25 kg per year per person in India
- Free sugar consumption in India is five times the WHO recommended threshold
- For SSBs, a health tax of 10-30% could result in 7-30% decline in demand
- For HFSS, 10-30% health tax could result in 5-24% decline in demand
- If sugar costs ₹100 base price, with current GST at 18% it costs ₹118. With a proposed additional tax increase of 10-30%, estimated price to consumers will be ₹128-148



Precedents: Up to 70 countries have imposed a health tax on SSBs and HFSS products.

- For SSBs with a ₹100 base price, current GST at 18% plus 12% additional cess, the price to consumers is ₹140. This will increase to ₹150-170 with a proposed additional tax of 10-30%
- For HFSS products with a ₹100 base price and GST at 12%, the price to consumers is ₹112. This will increase to ₹122-142 with additional tax of 10-30%

ta, confectionery manufacturers purchase up to 55% of annual sugar produced in India.

Price Elasticity

Currently, sugar is taxed at 18% GST, if an additional 20-30% tax is imposed, this will take the tax to 38-48%. Researchers have applied the metric of 'Price Elasticity' to determine if there will be any reduction in demand if the prices of the product go up. "Sugar is a widely used product, so on studying price and demand for sugar over years from datasets available between 1984-85 to 2011-2012 of Private Final Consumption Expenditure and Consumer Price Index, we estimate that if the price of sugar is increased by 10%, demand for sugar will be reduced by 2% with

all other factors driving the demand remaining constant.

"However, for manufacturers of sweets and confectionaries, who buy sugar in bulk we are estimating a higher price elasticity, so by imposing an additional 30% tax to 18% GST, we estimate that there could be a 13-18% decrease in demand for sugar," Dr Varghese says.

For sugar sweetened beverages, a health tax of 10-30% could result in a 7-30% decline in demand, while a 10-30% health tax for HFSS products would result in a 5-24% decline in demand.

Researchers also noted that additional taxes would increase tax revenues for the government by 12-200% across different scenarios. Different products

are currently taxed differently. While sugar currently attracts 18% GST, sugar sweetened beverages attract 28% GST and a 12% additional cess, while high fat, salt and sugar products only attract 12% GST.

"Taxing unhealthy foods more is likely to reduce demand while increasing government revenues for reinvestment back into public health programmes and policies that may reduce obesity and the incidence of non-communicable diseases in India," says Dr. Varghese.

India is the largest consumer of sugar in the world, the paper notes.

"Global average consumption of sugar is 22 kg per person per year, an average Indian consumes 25 kg per year which includes regular sugar, free sugar

from sugar sweetened beverages, traditional sources like jaggery, which is five times the WHO recommended threshold for free sugar intake," the paper says. India is facing a sugar epidemic with a rise in sales of aerated drinks by 22.5% and a rise in all soft drinks by 24.8% from 2016 to 2019. Also, HFSS food products account for 10-30% of the average total caloric intake in rural and urban households respectively, the paper notes.

Imposing a health tax on sugar and related products can help control obesity, tooth decay, risk of type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease and certain cancers. Researchers say that if people continue to consume sugar sweetened beverages year-on-year the overweight and obesity prevalence is expected to rise from 39% to 49% from 2014 to 2023 and type 2 diabetes incidence is expected to rise from 319 to 336 per 1,00,000 in the same period.

Tax rate is tied to the volume of sugars and manufacturers are encouraged to reformulate and reduce the amount of sugar in drinks.

Up to 70 countries have imposed a health tax on sugar, SSBs and HFSS including Mexico, Chile, Saudi Arabia, Argentina and South Africa. In Mexico, taxation on SSBs decreased consumption of taxed beverages (and increased purchase of bottled water) in the first year of implementation and reduced mean BMI in younger age groups.

Missing TB cases in the private sector

R. Prasad

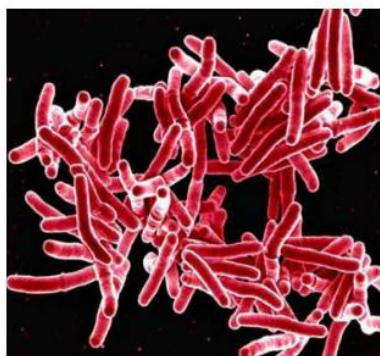
India made notification of TB patients mandatory in 2012 to address the problem of delayed diagnosis, suboptimal quality of care, incorrect diagnostic and treatment protocols being used, and a high drop-out rate in the private sector. A year later, only 2% of all notified patients were from the private sector. Thanks to several initiatives adopted by the National TB Elimination Programme (NTEP), the proportion of notified cases has increased substantially – 21% in 2017, 25% in 2018, 28% in 2019, 31% in 2020, 32% in 2021, and 30% in 2022.

Despite the significant increase in the private sector TB notifications over the years, they fall far short of the targets set by the National Strategic Plan 2020-2025. The TB notification target set by NSP for the private sector in 2020 was

35%, 45% in 2021, and 56% in 2022. If the gap between what was achieved vis-a-vis what was targeted in 2020 was small, the shortfall increased by 13% in 2021 and a staggering 26% in 2022.

According to the target set by NSP, in 2022, there should have been 1.93 million TB notifications by the private sector. Yet, there were only 0.73 million notifications. A staggering 1.2 million TB cases in the private sector were missed in 2022. Even the NTEP's target for expected notification in 2022 by the private sector was 0.95 million. What was achieved was only 0.73 million (77%). In contrast, the notification achieved by the public sector was 92.4% (1.68 million) of the expected notifications.

Based on the 2016 TB incidence of 2.8 million cases in India, of which only 0.3 million from the private sector and 1.6 million from



Far too low: TB notifications by the private sector in 2022 was only 30% NIAO

the public sector were notified, WHO noted: "A staggering one million TB cases are missing from notification, most of them being diagnosed and treated in the private sector. That's what makes the engagement with the private sector

so very vital." The National Strategic Plan also makes the same point about the missing cases in the private sector: "Hundreds of thousands of people with TB disease remain missing to TB surveillance/notification and services,

and are likely in private health delivery systems or the community." It had recommended that private provider engagement be rapidly scaled-up to "find and successfully treat two million patients in 2020-2021".

While the National TB Prevalence Survey India (2019-2021) found 50% of TB patients sought care in the private sector, the National Strategic Plan says about 70% of TB patients seek care in the private sector. While the TB prevalence survey found that 63.6% did not seek care for their symptoms, many of those who sought care in the private sector were not notified. According to the National Strategic Plan, "close to 0.54 million TB patients remain uncaptured by TB surveillance/notification and services, and are likely in private health delivery systems or the community".

Based on the analysis of anti-TB drug sales by pharmacists in India, the private sector was estimated to have treated 2.2 million TB patients in 2014 alone. However, the notifications by the private sector in 2014 were just 0.1 million. "While it is unknown how many of the patients studied were over-diagnosed, there are concerns that the true incidence may be much higher than has been estimated," says the National Strategic Plan.

The TB prevalence survey provided the much-needed information about the TB burden. It found that TB prevalence across all age groups was 312 per 100,000 population for the year 2021. In contrast, the case notification rate in 2021 (public and private sectors together) was only 153 per 100,000, as per the India TB report 2022; it was 172.1 per 100,000 in 2022.