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1. Senior Congress leader Sonia Gandhi took Oath as Rajya Sabha MP (April 4, 2024)

Prominent Congress leader Sonia Gandhi took oath as Rajya Sabha member on April 4, 2024.

An Overview of the News

- After the completion of the tenure of former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on April 3, Sonia Gandhi secured her seat from Rajasthan.
- This is Sonia Gandhi's first term in the upper house of Parliament.
- Along with Sonia Gandhi, 13 other members took oath as ministers.
- Notable individuals who took the oath included former Congress and current BJP member RPN Singh, Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnav, Congress leaders Ajay Maken and Syed Nasir Hussain from Karnataka and BJP member Samik Bhattacharya from West Bengal.
- Besides, YSRCP representatives Gola Babu Rao, Medha Raghunath Reddy and Yerum Venkata Subba Reddy also took oath.
- The oath ceremony was presided over by Rajya Sabha Chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar and was held at the new Parliament House.

About Sonia Gandhi

• Background:

- Sonia Gandhi, born on 9 December 1946, is an Indian politician and the longest-serving president of the Indian National Congress.
- He is from a small village near Vicenza, Italy and was raised in a Roman Catholic family.

• Political Career:

- Gandhi assumed the leadership of the Indian National Congress in 1998 after the assassination of her husband Rajiv Gandhi, the former Prime Minister of India.
- He held the position of party leader for 22 years until 2017, overseeing the Congress during a crucial period in Indian politics.
- After a short hiatus, Gandhi returned to the post of Congress president in 2019 and remained in the position for an additional three years.

2. President dedicates CAR-T cell therapy at IIT Bombay to the nation (April 4, 2024)

President Draupadi Murmu dedicated CAR-T cell therapy at IIT Bombay to the nation.

An Overview of the News

- CAR-T cell therapy, used in treating cancer patients, has been developed by IIT Bombay-incubated company ImmunoAdoptive Cell Therapy (ImmunoACT) in India.
- This therapy is the result of a collaborative effort between IIT Bombay and Tata Memorial Center (TMC).
- It has been designed and developed at IIT Bombay, with integrated process development and manufacturing conducted at ImmunoACT.
- Clinical investigations and translational studies were conducted by teams at TMH.
- It is expected that the CAR-T cell therapy product has the potential to save many lives at a much lower cost than similar products available outside India.

CAR T-cell therapy:

- It is a treatment method where a patient's T cells, a type of immune system cell, are modified in a laboratory setting to target cancer cells.
- T cells are extracted from the patient's blood, and in the lab, a gene for a specific receptor called a chimeric antigen receptor (CAR) is introduced into these T cells.
- The CAR enables the modified T cells to bind to a particular protein found on the patient's cancer cells.
- Following this modification, large quantities of CAR T cells are cultured in the laboratory and subsequently administered to the patient through infusion.
- This therapy is primarily employed in treating certain types of blood cancers, and ongoing research is exploring its potential for treating other forms of cancer.
- CAR T-cell therapy is also referred to as chimeric antigen receptor T-cell therapy.

3. Successful flight test of Agni-Prime missile (April 4, 2024)

Agni-Prime missile successfully flight tested in Odisha.

An Overview of the News

- The test was conducted jointly by the Strategic Force Command (SFC) and Defense Research and Development Organization (DRDO) from Dr APJ Abdul Kalam Island.
- The Defense Ministry said that the Agni-Prime missile met all the test objectives, demonstrating its reliable performance.

Introduction of Agni-P (Agni-Prime):

- Agni-P, also known as Agni-Prime, is a medium-range ballistic missile under development by India's Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO).
- It is the sixth missile in the Agni series and is designed to be a two-stage, surface-to-surface, canister-launched, and road-mobile system.

Purpose and Deployment:

- Agni-P is intended to be deployed within the Strategic Forces Command for operational use.
- Its development aims to enhance India's ballistic missile capabilities, particularly in the medium-range segment.

Key Features and Upgrades:

- The missile incorporates significant upgrades compared to its predecessors.
- These upgrades include advancements in the composite motor casing, navigation systems, and guidance systems.

Maneuverable Reentry Vehicle (MaRV):

- Agni-P is equipped with a maneuverable reentry vehicle (MaRV), enhancing its effectiveness in penetrating enemy defenses and accurately hitting targets.

Solid-Fueled Design:

- Agni-P utilizes solid fuel propulsion, ensuring reliability, mobility, and ease of deployment.

Canister Launch Capability:

- Its canister-launch system adds to its mobility and readiness, allowing for rapid deployment and launch from various platforms.

Strategic Significance:

- The development and deployment of Agni-P mark a significant advancement in India's strategic missile program.
- It strengthens India's deterrence capability and provides a credible response to evolving security challenges in the region.

4. Judith Suminwa Tuluka becomes the first female Prime Minister of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (April 4, 2024)

Judith Suminwa Tuluka has been appointed as Congo's first female Prime Minister under President Félix Tshisekedi on April 1, 2024, amid a political realignment following the resignation of Jean-Michel Sama Lukonde.

An Overview of the News:

- In January 2024, President Tshisekedi was sworn in for a second five-year term. After this Prime Minister Tuluka was appointed.

Constitutional Mobility:

- According to the Constitution of the DRC, the President cooperates with the Prime Minister, who is elected from the largest legislative party.

Challenges in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC):

- The DRC, which is endowed with abundant natural resources such as copper, uranium, cobalt and diamonds, is struggling with ongoing violence and instability, particularly in its eastern provinces.
- The situation is worsened by tensions with neighboring Rwanda, which is accused of providing support to militia groups such as the March 23 Movement, which has led to mass displacement of civilians.

About the Democratic Republic of Congo:

- Central Africa is the second largest country in Africa after Algeria. Known as the Republic of Zaire until 1971, it gained independence from Belgium in 1960.
- Kinshasa, the capital, is located next to the Congo River, the second longest river in Africa after the Nile River.
- Congo is the only river in the world that crosses the equator twice.
- Its currency is the Congolese franc.

5. NHAI Implements 'One Vehicle, One FASTag' Norm (April 3, 2024)

The National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) has initiated the 'One Vehicle, One FASTag' norm to address misuse of FASTags.

An Overview of the News

- This norm discourages the practice of using a single FASTag for multiple vehicles or linking multiple FASTags to a single vehicle.

Compliance Deadline Extension:

- NHAI extended the compliance deadline for the initiative until the end of March due to issues faced by Paytm FASTag users.

Effective Enforcement Date:

- Starting April 1st, 2024, multiple FASTags for a single vehicle will cease to function, and users with such setups won't be able to utilize them.

Objectives of the Initiative:

- NHAI aims to enhance the efficiency of electronic toll collection and ensure smooth traffic flow at toll plazas through the 'One Vehicle, One FASTag' initiative.

Overview of FASTag System:

- FASTag, operated by NHAI, is an electronic toll collection system widely adopted in India with over 8 crore users and a penetration rate of around 98%.
- It utilizes Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) technology for toll payments directly from linked prepaid or savings accounts or directly to the toll owner.

6. Romania and Bulgaria's Schengen Accession (April 1, 2024)

On March 31, Romania and Bulgaria formally joined, at least partially, Europe's visa-free Schengen travel area.

An Overview of the News**Statements from political leaders:**

- Bulgarian Prime Minister Nikolay Denkov called the event a "big victory" for Bulgaria, emphasizing its historical significance.
- Despite his resignation, Denkov remains in office, highlighting the achievement as Bulgaria's "greatest success" since joining the EU.
- Deputy Prime Minister Maria Gabriel echoed this sentiment, calling it a "historic moment" with benefits for various sectors.
- Romanian Prime Minister Marcel Ciolacu qualified the achievement with plans for full Schengen accession by the end of the year.

European Commission Perspective

- European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen praised the development as a "great success" for both countries and a historic moment for the Schengen area.
- They emphasized the shared goal of building a stronger, more united Europe.

Implications and Challenges

- Free movement for flights and boats is allowed, land routes are restricted due to Austrian objections.
- Both countries aim to open land borders by the end of 2024, awaiting the opportune political moment for full integration.
- The Schengen area, established in 1985, covers 29 European countries and allows more than 400 million people to travel freely without internal border controls.

Reactions and Concerns

- While welcome, ongoing border checks on the roads have caused frustration among truck drivers, leading to calls for urgent measures for full Schengen integration.

- Long wait times at the border have caused significant financial losses to Romanian carriers, leading to calls for faster progress.
- Bulgarian businesses also express disappointment at the slow progress, especially concerning land transport.

Romania:

- Southeastern European country.
- Known for the forests of Transylvania and the Carpathian Mountains.
- It includes well-preserved medieval cities such as Sighisoara.
- Famous for fortified churches and castles, including Bran Castle associated with Dracula.
- Capital: Bucharest, home of the communist-era Palatul Parlamentului government building.

Bulgaria:

- The Balkan nation with diverse geography.
- It includes the Black Sea coast, the mountainous interior and rivers such as the Danube.
- Cultural diversity with influences from Greek, Slavic, Ottoman and Persian civilizations.
- Capital city: Sofia, located at the base of Mount Vitosha, dates back to the 5th century BC.

7. Thailand Legalizes Same-Sex Marriage, Promotes Equality and Tourism (March 28, 2024)

Thailand's lower house of parliament approved a landmark bill legalizing gay marriage, making the country a leader in Southeast Asia in promoting equal rights.

An Overview of the News

- The bill, amending the Civil and Commercial Code, received overwhelming support in the House of Representatives.

Major Provisions of the Bill:

- The "Marriage Equality" bill has received overwhelming majority approval from the 500-member House of Representatives.
- 400 MPs voted in favour, while 10 opposed it, and after three hours of debate, five MPs abstained.
- The law allows same-sex partners aged 18 and over to register their marriages, giving them inheritance, tax benefits and child adoption rights.

- It modifies the legal definition of marriage from "one man and one woman" to "two persons" and changes the status from "husband and wife" to "married couple".

Impact and Importance:

- Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin's administration is leading the bill, which aims to strengthen Thailand's reputation as an LGBTQ-friendly destination.
- Thailand joins Taiwan and Nepal as one of the few Asian regions to recognize same-sex marriage, joining around 40 other countries globally.
- Despite previous obstacles, such as a 2021 Constitutional Court decision and failed attempts at civil partnership recognition, LGBTQ activists have persisted in their quest for equality.

Tourism Promotion and Economic Implications:

- Legalizing same-sex marriage is expected to have a positive impact on tourism, which contributes significantly to Thailand's economy.
- Before the pandemic, LGBTQ tourism in Thailand generated approximately \$6.5 billion, underscoring the potential economic benefits of this progressive legislation.

8. New Members take Oath in Lokpal of India (March 28, 2024)

Justice Ritu Raj Awasthi assumed charge as the newest judicial member of the Lokpal on March 27, 2024.

An Overview of the News

- Lokpal Chairperson Justice AM Khanwilkar administered the oath to Justice Ritu Raj Awasthi.
- Pankaj Kumar and Ajay Tirkey took oath as new members of the Lokpal at the Lokpal Office in New Delhi on March 27, 2024.
- On March 26, the tenure of two judicial members, Justice PK Mohanty and Justice Abhilasha Kumari, ended.
- Additionally, on the same day, the tenure of three other members – DK Jain, Archana Ramasundaram and Mahendra Singh – expired.

Introduction of New Members:

- Justice Ritu Raj Awasthi, former Chairman of the 22nd Law Commission of India and former Chief Justice of the Karnataka High Court, plays the role of judicial member.
- Pankaj Kumar, a 1986 batch IAS officer of Gujarat cadre, previously served as the Chief Secretary of Gujarat.
- Ajay Tirkey, a 1987 batch IAS officer of Madhya Pradesh cadre, was the former Secretary of the Department of Land Resources, Government of India.

Historical Background of Lokpal:

- The concept of an ombudsman originated in Sweden in 1809 and gained global prominence with its adoption by New Zealand and Norway in 1962.
- In India, the idea of a Constitutional Lokpal was first proposed in Parliament in the early 1960s by Law Minister Ashok Kumar Sen.
- The terms "Lokpal" and "Lokayukta" were introduced by jurist LM Singhvi, and the Lokpal and Lokayuktas Act, 2013 was ultimately passed after advocacy by the Anna Hazare-led India Against Corruption Movement.
- The purpose of this Act was to establish the Lokpal at the Center and Lokayuktas in the states to investigate allegations of corruption against public officials.

9. Bassirou Diomaye Faye wins in Senegal's Presidential Election (March 28, 2024)

Faye, known as an anti-establishment figure, won the initial round with 54.28% of the vote.

An Overview of the News

- At 44, Faye is poised to become Africa's youngest democratically elected head of state.
- His victory marked the first time an opposition candidate had won in the first round since Senegal gained independence from France in 1960.
- Recognition of Faye's victory awaits confirmation from Senegal's Constitutional Council in the coming days.

Defeat of the governing coalition candidate:

- Faye won a decisive victory over the ruling coalition's candidate, former Prime Minister Amadou Ba, who won 35.79% of the vote.
- Aliou Mamadou Dia is in third place among 19 contenders with just 2.8% of the votes.
- Voter turnout stood at 61.30%, surpassing the 2012 figure but lower than the previous 2019 election.

Departure from the status quo:

- Faye, who was released from prison just 10 days before the election, advocates a departure from the current political landscape.
- He promised to restore national "sovereignty" and launch a program focused on "leftist Pan-Africanism", potentially indicating a significant restructuring of Senegal's institutions.

About Senegal

- Capital - Dakar
- Currency - West African CFA Franc

Official language - French

10. Rumi Alqahtani, the first Saudi contestant to participate in the Miss Universe Pageant (March 28, 2024)

Rumi Alqahtani, a 27-year-old Saudi Arabian model, was the first to reveal her participation in the upcoming Miss Universe pageant via Instagram.

An Overview of the News

- Riyadh-born Alqahtani has held previous awards including Miss Saudi Arabia, Miss Arab World Peace 2021, and Miss Woman (Saudi Arabia).
- Her participation marks the inaugural representation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia at the Miss Universe pageant, marking a significant milestone for the country.

Miss Universe Pageant (2024):

- The upcoming Miss Universe pageant for the year 2024 is scheduled to be held in Mexico.
- The current Miss Universe titleholder is Shanice Palacios, representing Nicaragua.

Highlights of other Beauty Pageants

- Kristina Piskova of Czech Republic won the title of Miss World 2024 in Mumbai, India on March 9, 2024.

About Saudi Arabia

- Capital - Riyadh
- King - Salman of Saudi Arabia
- Currency - Saudi Riyal