

WORLD PRESS FREEDOM INDEX, 2021

The World Press Freedom Index, 2021, produced by Reporters Without Borders (RSF), a French non-governmental organisation, has again ranked India at 142nd out of 180 countries.

About:

- This is despite the fact that for a year, on directions from Cabinet Secretary Rajiv Gauba, an index monitoring cell worked to improve the rankings, even holding a meeting between the Indian Ambassador to France and the RSF officials to lobby for a change in the ranking.
- In 2016, India's rank was 133, which has steadily climbed down to 142 in 2020.
- The RSF report says India is one of the world's most dangerous countries for journalists trying to do their job properly. They are exposed to every kind of attack, even police violence against reporters, ambushes by political activists, and reprisals instigated by criminal groups or corrupt local officials.
- The latest index released ranks 180 countries, topped, yet again, by Norway followed by Finland and Denmark, while Eritrea is at the bottom. China is ranked 177, and is only above North Korea at 179 and Turkmenistan at 178.

AD-HOC JUDGES IN HIGH COURTS

The Supreme Court on Tuesday cleared the way for appointment of retired judges as ad-hoc judges in High Courts under Article 224A of the Constitution to deal with mounting backlog of cases.

About:

- Terming pendency of around 57 lakh cases in High Courts as "docket explosion", the Supreme Court activated a "dormant" constitutional provision to pave way for appointment of retired High Court judges as ad-hoc ones for a period of two to three years to clear backlog.
- Article 224A, used rarely, of the Constitution deals with appointment of ad-hoc judges in High Courts.
- It says "the Chief Justice of a High Court for any State may at any time, with the previous consent of the President, request any person who has held the office of a Judge of that Court or of any other High Court to sit and act as a Judge of the High Court for that State".
- A bench of Chief Justice S.A. Bobde and Justices S.K. Kaul and Surya Kant issued a slew of guidelines pertaining to issues such as tenure, salary, perks, etc, and their role in adjudicating cases.

INDIA SHOULD BE A 'COUNTRY OF PARTICULAR CONCERN': U.S. PANEL

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), an independent bi-partisan commission, has recommended for the second year in a row that the State Department put India on a list ('Countries of Particular Concern' or CPCs) for the worst violations of religious freedoms in 2020.

About:

- One of the 10 USCIRF commissioners presented a dissenting view.
- The USCIRF recommended that the administration impose targeted sanctions on Indian individuals and entities for "severe violations of religious freedom".
- A second recommendation was for the administration to promote inter-faith dialogue and the rights of all communities at bilateral and multilateral forums "such as the ministerial of the Quadrilateral [the Quad]".
- Another recommendation — to the U.S. Congress — was to raise issues in the U.S.-India bilateral space, such as by hosting hearings, writing letters and constituting Congressional delegations.
- The USCIRF recommendations are non-binding and the Trump administration had rejected the USCIRF recommendation to designate India a CPC last year, when it released its own determinations in December.

- The key concerns of the 2021 report include the Citizenship (Amendment) Act.

TYRANNOSAURUS REX

According to a study published in the journal Royal Society Open Science by palaeontologists from the Netherlands, the Tyrannosaurus had a preferred walking speed of just 5 kmph– about the same as the average walking speed of humans.

About:

- The Tyrannosaurus rex, the most storied of all dinosaurs, is considered the most fearsome eating machine to have evolved on Earth. It lived toward the end of the Cretaceous period, around 66 million to 68 million years ago.
- It is believed that an adult member of the species stood 12 feet tall and 40 feet long, and weighed between 5,000 to 7,000 kg.
- The dinosaur inhabited what is today's western United States. It was not found in India; the fiercest of all Indian dinosaurs was probably the Rajasaurus narmadensis, followed by another specimen of the Abelisauridae family, the Indosuchus raptorius.
- Previous studies placed the T. rex's walking speed between 7.2-10.8 kmph– the maximum speed that its bone structure researchers believed could have permitted. The new research reduces the previous estimates by more than half.

Important Info :

- Another study, which came out in Science last week, posits that over the course of two or three millennia, some 2.5 billion T. rex lived and died on Earth.

INTERNATIONAL SPACE STATION (ISS) PROGRAMME

Russia's space agency said it hoped to launch its own orbital station in 2025 as Moscow considers withdrawing from the International Space Station programme to go it alone.

About:

- Roscosmos chief Dmitry Rogozin said work had begun on the first module of a new station, after officials warned that Russia was considering pulling out of the ISS, one of the few successful examples of cooperation with the West.
- The announcement came with tensions soaring with the West.
- Launched in 1998 and involving Russia, the United States, Canada, Japan, and the European Space Agency, the ISS is one of the most ambitious international collaborations in human history.
- Russia's Deputy Prime Minister Yury Borisov said in recent days that Moscow was considering whether to leave the ISS programme from 2025 because of the station's age. Roscosmos said that a decision on quitting the ISS had not yet been made.
- Russia lost its monopoly for manned flights to the ISS last year after the first successful mission of U.S. company Space X.
- Despite its much-lauded history — Russia this month marked the 60th anniversary of Yuri Gagarin becoming the first person in orbit — the country's space programme has struggled in recent years as president Putin is more interested in military technology than space exploration.

IDRISS DEBY ITNO

Chad's President Idriss Deby Itno died from wounds sustained in battle after three decades in power, the Army said, opening a period of uncertainty in a country that is a key strategic ally of the West.

About:

- Idriss Déby Itno (1952 – 2021) was a Chadian politician and military officer who was the president of Chad from 1990 until his death by militant forces when commanding troops on the front in 2021.
- He was killed in April 2021 while commanding forces fighting on the front against rebels from the Front for Change and Concord in Chad (FACT).
- The Transitional Military Council, led by interim president Mahamat Idriss Déby, son of the late president, has assumed control of government.

Important Info :

Chad

- Chad is a landlocked country in north-central Africa. It is bordered by Libya to the north, Sudan to the east, the Central African Republic to the south, Cameroon to the southwest, Nigeria to the southwest (at Lake Chad), and Niger to the west.
- Lake Chad, after which the country is named, is the second-largest wetland in Africa.
- The capital N'Djamena is the largest city.

BOAO FORUM FOR ASIA

While speaking at the annual Boao Forum, China's President Xi Jinping said that global rules cannot be imposed "by one or a few countries".

About:

- Headquartered in China, the Boao Forum for Asia (BFA) is an international organization jointly initiated by 29 member states.
- BFA holds its annual conference in Boao, Hainan on a regular basis.
- The founding purpose of BFA was to promote economic integration in Asia. Its mission now is to pool positive energy for the development of Asia and the world.
- The first conference of BFA was held on Feb. 26-27, 2001 in Boao, Hainan Province, China.
- The forum, sometimes known as the "Asian Davos" is modelled on the World Economic Forum held annually in Davos, Switzerland.
- Its fixed address is in Bo'ao, Hainan province, China, although the Secretariat is based in Beijing.

RESPOND PROGRAMME

Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi said that the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) has announced that it will support eight joint research projects mooted by the Space Technology Cell (STC), IIT-Delhi.

About:

- The ISRO will support the projects under its RESPOND programme with varying duration of 1-3 years, it added.

- The institute said that the Space Technology Cell was set up at IIT, Delhi under an MoU signed between the ISRO and IIT-D in November 2019 with an aim to strengthen the research collaboration between the two organisations and to carry out focused research projects in the space technology domain with specific deliverables.
- Since then, eight collaborative research projects have been announced.
- Some of the projects include developing a system for drought and flood forecasting and understanding land-atmosphere interactions.

SUDARSHAN SEN COMMITTEE

The RBI set up a committee to undertake a comprehensive review of the working of asset reconstruction companies (ARCs) in the financial sector ecosystem and recommend suitable measures for enabling them to meet the growing requirements.

About:

- The six-member committee will be headed by Sudarshan Sen, former executive director, Reserve Bank of India (RBI).
- The panel will review the existing legal and regulatory framework applicable to ARCs and recommend measures to improve efficacy of ARCs.
- It will also review the role of ARCs in the resolution of stressed assets, including under the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC), and give suggestions for improving liquidity in and trading of security receipts.
- Besides, it has also been asked to review the business models of ARCs.
- The committee will submit its report within three months from the date of its first meeting.