

## DAILY CURRENT AFFAIRS (22 September 2024)

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## Sri Lanka votes to pick a new President (22 September)

- Sri Lankans held a peaceful Presidential election on Saturday.
- The election outcome is crucial for the country's economic recovery after a severe crisis two years ago.
- Voter turnout is expected to be around 75% to 80%, similar to the last election's turnout of 83.72%.
- This is the first election since the 2022 uprising that led to former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa fleeing the country.
- The election featured three candidates: incumbent President Ranil Wickremesinghe, Sajith Premadasa, and Anura Kumara.
- Voters are emphasizing the need for an "honest President" to combat corruption, a key issue during the election.
- Citizens are frustrated with ongoing economic struggles and demand effective leadership.
- The Election Commission began counting postal votes on Saturday evening.
- A candidate must secure over 50% of the votes to win outright; otherwise, a second round of counting will determine the winner among the top two candidates.
- Voters can indicate their preference for three candidates on the ballot in Sri Lanka's preferential voting system.

## Air Marshal Amar Preet Singh to be next Air Force chief (22 September)

- Air Marshal Amar Preet Singh will become the next Chief of the Air Staff on September 30, 2024.
- He is currently the Vice Chief of the Indian Air Force (IAF).
- Air Chief Marshal V.R. Chaudhari will retire on that date.
- The Defence Ministry announced his appointment in a statement.
- Air Marshal Singh is a graduate of the National Defence Academy and other prestigious military institutions.
- He joined the IAF's fighter stream on December 21, 1984.
- He has over 5,000 flying hours and is a qualified flying instructor and test pilot.
- He has commanded a fighter squadron and an air base.
- He led the MiG-29 upgrade project in Moscow, Russia.
- He was the project director for flight testing the Tejas aircraft.
- Before becoming Vice Chief, he served as the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief at the Central Air Command.
- He has received the Param Vishisht Seva Medal and the Ati Vishisht Seva Medal for his service.

## Eight High Courts get new Chief Justices (22 September)

- The Centre announced the appointment of Chief Justices for eight High Courts on Saturday.
- The affected High Courts include those in Delhi, Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, Madras, and Jharkhand.
- These appointments followed amendments to the Supreme Court Collegium's earlier recommendations from July 11.
- The new Chief Justices are:
  - Justice K.R. Shriram for Madras High Court
  - Justice Nitin Madhukar Jamdar for Kerala High Court
  - Justice Manmohan for Delhi High Court
  - Justice Rajiv Shakdher for Himachal Pradesh High Court
  - Justice Suresh Kumar Kait for Madhya Pradesh High Court
  - Justice Tashi Rabstan for Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh

- Justice M.S. Ramachandra Rao for Jharkhand High Court
- Justice Indra Prasanna Mukerji for Meghalaya High Court

## ICGA Foundation launches country's first comprehensive cancer genomics repository (22 September)

- The Indian Cancer Genome Atlas (ICGA) Foundation launched a new portal to enhance understanding of genetic variations in cancer among the Indian population.
- This portal is the first in India to provide data on DNA, RNA, and protein profiles specifically for breast cancer patients, along with their clinical outcomes.
- Historically, cancer treatments in India relied on Western data, which may not accurately reflect the molecular differences in Indian patients.
- The initiative aims to empower researchers, clinicians, and innovators by sharing data openly, promoting collaboration in cancer treatment.
- Currently, the portal includes data from 50 breast cancer patients, with plans to expand to over 500 in the next year.
- The data will be freely accessible to the global research community, fostering ethical sharing and collaboration.
- The ICGA expects independent researchers to publish analyses using this data, providing insights into breast cancer in India.
- The initiative is inspired by the U.S.-based Cancer Genome Atlas (TCGA), which has characterized over 20,000 primary cancers since its launch in 2006.
- For the ICGA to succeed, it needs to create incentives for institutions to share data and establish a supportive ecosystem involving diagnostic and drug companies.
- Breast cancer became the leading cause of global cancer incidence in 2020, surpassing lung cancer.

## Why was Hezbollah attacked through pagers? (22 September)

**How do these low-tech gadgets work? Why was Hezbollah using them? What is the scare for future conflicts? Why is it believed that Israel is responsible? How is the low-tech gadget blitz redrawing the contours of the Israel-Iran conflict?**

- On September 17, at least nine people were killed, and thousands were injured in Lebanon when pagers used by Hezbollah detonated.
- The attacks happened across Lebanon, and even Iran's envoy to Beirut was injured.
- A day later, walkie-talkies used by Hezbollah also exploded, killing nearly two dozen people and injuring over 450.
- The Lebanese Information Minister blamed Israel for the attacks, calling it "Israeli aggression."
- These attacks come at a time when tensions between Israel and Hezbollah have been rising, with both exchanging fire since the start of the Gaza war in October.
- The blasts surprised Hezbollah, especially as two of its fighters and an 8-year-old girl were among those killed.
- Most explosions happened in southern Lebanon, a Hezbollah stronghold, and Hezbollah has vowed to retaliate against Israel.
- The attackers used pagers, which are outdated communication devices that work using radio signals, making the blasts surprising due to their simplicity.
- Pagers can receive messages through radio waves, and although they are old technology, they are still reliable in places with weak cell coverage.
- Pagers are used in covert operations because they are harder to track than smartphones, lack GPS or internet connectivity, and can be modified to trigger signals for explosives.
- Hezbollah likely used pagers because they believed their modern communication devices, like cell phones, were compromised by Israeli surveillance.
- Israelis took advantage of Hezbollah's trust in pagers and manipulated them for destructive purposes, instead of just eavesdropping.
- According to expert Bruce Schneier, it wasn't the vintage tech that mattered; the manipulation could have been done with any technology.
- Pagers are ideal for sending short, encrypted messages that are hard for intelligence agencies to detect, making them useful in conflicts.
- Israel has not commented on the pager and walkie-talkie blasts, but it's suspected they were behind the operation.
- The pagers in the explosion had the branding of Gold Apollo, a Taiwan-based company. However, the company denied involvement, stating that the pagers were made by a European firm licensed to use their brand.
- Hezbollah ordered thousands of pagers, thinking they could evade Israeli tracking systems.
- Experts are still investigating how the attack was executed, but it's unclear if the devices were tampered with during manufacturing or later in the supply chain.

- Schneier suggested that Israel might have set up a fake company to sell pagers to Hezbollah, which were modified to include explosives like PETN.
- The attack could have been carried out by Israeli engineers who modified the pagers before delivering them to Hezbollah.
- Walkie-talkies used by Hezbollah were also likely intercepted and altered by Israel for remote detonation.
- This entire operation involved sophisticated manipulation of the supply chain, with Israel controlling the sale and distribution of the devices to Hezbollah.

## What is the Nipah protocol in Kerala? (22 September)

**How did the State respond after a fresh scare in Malappuram? How does the deadly zoonotic virus spread? What are the restrictions that need to be followed once a patient is diagnosed? Who are at risk of contracting the virus? Why is the September death a cause for concern?**

- On September 9, a 24-year-old man died of Nipah virus at MES Medical College Hospital, Perinthalmanna, Malappuram district, Kerala.
- The final confirmation of the virus came from the National Institute of Virology (NIV), Pune, although the state virology lab in Kozhikode had already flagged it.
- After the positive test, the health department activated the Nipah protocol, forming 16 committees to identify close contacts of the victim.
- On September 15, Kerala Health Minister Veena George confirmed that the man had died from Nipah, a zoonotic virus that causes severe respiratory issues and encephalitis.
- Social movement restrictions were imposed in Malappuram, and face masks became mandatory in public places.
- This was the second Nipah death in Malappuram in less than two months; a 14-year-old boy had died of Nipah on July 21.
- The July and September Nipah cases occurred within 10 km of each other in a densely populated area.
- It's unclear how the student contracted the virus, while the boy who died earlier was thought to have gotten it from eating a hog plum.
- Kerala has had six Nipah virus outbreaks since 2018, with 22 people dying from the virus so far. The first outbreak in 2018 caused 17 deaths in Kozhikode and Malappuram.
- The recent Nipah incidents in 2023, within two months, have raised concerns that the virus could become a recurring problem in the state.

### Why was there a delay to identify the virus?

- The 24-year-old man returned from Bengaluru in late August. He developed a fever and had trouble walking by September 5.
- He visited several clinics and was admitted to MES Medical College on September 8 with symptoms of meningitis or encephalitis. He died on the morning of September 9.
- A doctor at the hospital suspected Nipah and contacted the District Medical Officer, sending a body fluid sample for testing.
- The government quickly declared five civic wards in Tiruvali and Mampad as containment zones. Schools, madrasas, tuition centres, and cinemas were closed, and shops were only allowed to open between 10 a.m. and 7 p.m.
- Social gatherings were banned, and masks were made mandatory, especially for students and teachers.
- The health department created a route map of the victim's movements, traced 267 people who had contact with him, and put them in quarantine. Several, including his parents and healthcare workers, were closely monitored, and their tests were negative.
- The government opened a Nipah control room in Malappuram and senior health officials camped there to monitor the situation.
- Health workers, in 66 teams, conducted a field survey, reaching 7,953 houses within four days. They reported 175 cases of fever, which were put under surveillance.
- Nearly 300 people received psychological support from the health department.
- Bats are believed to carry the Nipah virus, with transmission to humans possible through contaminated fruits or direct human-to-human contact.
- It is unclear how the 24-year-old contracted the virus, and experts are divided on whether bats are the sole carriers. Attempts to destroy bat colonies since 2018 have been unsuccessful.

## Is the spike in India's trade deficit a worry? (22 September)

**What are the sectors in which exports have dropped? Is there any significant risk at this point?**

- Goods exports started strong in the first quarter of 2024-25 but declined by 1.5% in July and 9.3% in August, reaching an eight-month low.
- Imports hit a record \$64.4 billion in August, leading to a merchandise trade deficit of \$29.7 billion, the second-highest ever.
- The trade deficit widened because imports increased by 7.5% in July and 3.3% in August, while exports shrank.
- In July, the trade deficit reached \$23.5 billion, and it widened by \$6.2 billion in August.
- While some export segments grew, major sectors like petroleum and gems & jewellery saw significant declines: oil exports fell by 22.2% in July and 37.6% in August, and jewellery exports dropped over 20%.
- Growth in drugs, pharmaceuticals, and electronic goods also slowed in August. Exports of materials like stone, cement, and iron ore dropped due to the slowdown in China's economy.
- Oil import costs fell by almost a third to \$11 billion in August, as oil prices dropped by about \$6 per barrel, lowering the petroleum deficit to a three-year low.
- The main reason for the wider trade deficit was the sharp fall in gems and jewellery exports and increased imports of gold and other items.
- Gold imports more than doubled to \$10.1 billion in August, influenced by the reduced gold import duty (from 15% to 6%), rising gold prices, and domestic stocking for the festive season.
- Economists believe the duty cuts on gold and other items will further impact the import bill in the coming months.

### Could wider trade deficits pose a risk?

- Commerce Secretary Sunil Barthwal stated there is no major risk to the economy despite the trade deficit. He emphasized that India is growing faster than the global economy, so its demand for imports will naturally exceed global demand for its exports.
- He mentioned that the trade deficit is not a concern for a developing, fast-growing economy like India, as long as there are no foreign exchange problems.
- India's foreign capital inflows remain positive, and foreign exchange reserves hit a record high of \$675 billion as of August 2, which is enough to cover 11.6 months of imports.
- Although the import cover might reduce if imports stay above \$60 billion in the coming months, India's services exports, which grew over 10% between April and August, provide some relief.
- Global trade is expected to grow faster in 2024 than in 2023, but demand is still weak in most developed markets.
- Geopolitical tensions, including U.S. tariff hikes on Chinese goods and China's struggling domestic economy, are challenges for India. While China's demand for imports is falling, it could flood non-U.S. markets with cheap products.
- Low oil prices are expected to continue, which could hurt India's oil export potential. Global demand concerns are rising.
- India aims to scale up its services and goods exports to \$1 trillion each by 2030, but the road ahead is difficult due to the global economic slowdown and increasing trade barriers like tariffs and new regulations from the European Union (e.g., the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism).
- Chief Economic Adviser V. Anantha Nageswaran warned that despite some opportunities in the next year or two, boosting exports will be challenging due to these global factors.

