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OPPOSITION SLAMS GOVT. AS REPORT SAYS INDIA BOUGHT NSO SPYWARE

Centre silent; Cong. calls purchase an ‘act of treason’, to raise issue in Parliament

- A fresh political storm has erupted over a report in the New York Times that said the Indian government had purchased the Pegasus spyware from the NSO group of Israel in July 2017 to carry out targeted surveillance on citizens. The investigative report said the high-level visits by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Benjamin Netanyahu, his Israeli counterpart at the time, and even a UN vote on a Palestinian organisation were part of a larger back-room deal.
- The revelations just two days before the Budget session of Parliament have provided fresh ammunition to Opposition parties to corner the government on the spying issue.

‘PARLIAMENT MISLED’

- They attacked the government on Saturday, accusing it of “misleading” Parliament and the Supreme Court. The Congress said the alleged use of spyware

on Opposition leaders, Supreme Court judges, journalists and activists was an “act of treason”, and said the party would raise the issue in the Budget session.

- In the report published on Friday, the NYT said ties between Mr. Modi and Mr. Netanyahu had “warmed” because of their agreement for the sale of “a package of sophisticated weapons and intelligence gear worth roughly \$2 billion — with Pegasus and a missile system as the centrepieces”.

LINKS IT TO UN VOTE

- The NYT did not divulge sources for the claim that India had bought the Pegasus system, and did not respond to an e-mail from The Hindu asking for any details used to verify the report. In their detailed investigation, the paper’s reporters named several countries such as India, the UAE, Hungary, Poland and Mexico on the list of those which had purchased the spying software, and said these countries had not just strengthened ties with the Netanyahu government, but also shifted positions on support to Palestine and muted opposition to Israel at the UN.
- “In June 2019, India voted in support of Israel at the UN’s Economic and Social Council to deny observer status to a Palestinian human rights organisation, a first for the nation,” the report said.
- Syed Akbaruddin, India’s Ambassador to the UN at the time, however, denied the last claim.
- “The vote was a decision taken by me locally (as UN Permanent Representative in New York). No one talked to me about it before or after,” Mr. Akbaruddin, now retired, said in response to a query from The Hindu, adding that “The NYT seems to have wrongly made an insinuation.”

‘NO TRANSACTION’

- The government, including the Ministries of Home Affairs and External Affairs, did not respond to the NYT report.
- In August 2021, after the original revelations of the extent of Pegasus spyware found on thousands of telephones worldwide were published by the online news publication The Wire and international news agencies, the Ministry of Defence had said in Parliament that the “Ministry of Defence has not had any transaction with NSO group technologies”.

INDIA-ISRAEL TIES IMPORTANT AMID GLOBAL CHANGE: PM

- The importance of India-Israel ties has further increased in a world facing several major transformations, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said on Saturday. The speech by the Prime Minister marked three decades since New Delhi established formal diplomatic ties with Tel Aviv on January 29, 1992, when P.V. Narasimha Rao was the Prime Minister.
- Thirty years ago, on this day, full diplomatic relation was established between India and Israel, starting a new chapter between two sides. Though the chapter

was new, the history of our countries is very old. For hundreds of years, our people maintained close relation. Since time immemorial, the Jewish community has lived in India without any discrimination and flourished here while contributing greatly to our economic growth,” Mr. Modi said.

- India launched a logo earlier this week featuring the Star of David and the Ashoka Chakra that will be used in events to celebrate the landmark year in bilateral ties.

BSF, PAK. RANGERS RESUME DIALOGUE

Indian side raised drone incursions

- After three years, the border guarding forces of India and Pakistan have revived sector commander-level talks. The Border Security Force (BSF) and the Pakistan Rangers held two meetings in the past six months. The latest was on January 5.
- After the January 5 meeting, held at the Octroi outpost in Jammu, the BSF said in a statement that “both sides agreed to conduct such meetings at regular intervals for better understanding and to maintain peace and tranquillity on border ... BSF also strictly objected to the drone operations carried out by Pakistan regularly violating the IB [International Boundary]”.
- Last year, the BSF spotted more than 70 drones and two of them were shot down. Dropping of arms and ammunition from unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) is one of the biggest challenges faced by the BSF. At the meeting, the BSF delegation emphasised the infiltration attempts from the Pakistani side and regular recovery of arms, ammunition and narcotics on the IB.

J&K GOVT. TO DELINEATE SMALLER WATERBODIES, CANALS

It will allow owners to carry out economic, non-economic activities; end pending litigations in courts

- In a first, the Jammu and Kashmir government on Saturday decided to delineate and demarcate smaller water streams and canals termed as “gair mumkin khads, daryas, nallahs” etc. recorded in revenue records, which do not form a part of water channels but have been recorded in revenue records.
- The decision was taken during a meeting of the Administrative Council chaired by Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha held in Jammu. The Council approved 3-tier committees mandated to conduct khasra-wise surveys of all lands recorded as such.
- The decision will give a major relief to the people who are put to hardship because of erroneous and misleading entries of such water bodies in their revenue records.

REMEDIAL ACTION

- “This will put an end to litigations pending in various courts, besides allowing owners of such lands to transact and carry out various economic, non-economic

activities allowed as per land use under the Master Plans of development of local areas,” the government spokesperson said.

- Officials have been directed to use a global positioning system for generation of digital maps, conducting actual spot verification to establish the desirable width of water course and channels especially in the proprietary lands and removal of illegal encroachments on identified water courses through remedial action.

INDIA, OMAN TO HOLD 10TH MILITARY COOPERATION MEETING

Defence Secretary General to visit New Delhi

- After a gap of three years, India and Oman are set to hold a meeting of the Joint Military Cooperation Committee (JMCC) during the visit of Mohammed Nasser Al Zaabi, Secretary General, Ministry of Defence of Oman, here from Sunday to Tuesday.
- This will initiate a series of high-level defence engagements between the two countries next month, officials said. Mr. Zaabi would be co-chairing the JMCC with Defence Secretary Ajay Kumar, an official source said.
- The JMCC is the highest forum of engagement between India and Oman in the field of defence that evaluates and provides guidance to the overall framework of defence exchanges between the two sides.
- The JMCC was to hold discussions annually, but a meeting could not be organised since 2018, when the meeting of the 9th JMCC was held in Oman, it has been learnt.
- Given the three-year gap, the 10th edition is expected to “comprehensively evaluate” the ongoing exchanges and “provide a road map for further strengthening the defence ties in the coming years”.
- Mr. Zaabi is expected to call on Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, and in line with India’s emphasis on boosting exports, will get insights into the Indian defence manufacturing capabilities to explore possible opportunities for procurement and joint production.

MORE TALKS TO FOLLOW

- His visit will be followed by a series of high-profile engagements in February that includes visits by Navy and Air Force chiefs of Oman encompassing staff talks between the Indian Navy and the visiting Navy chief as well as a bilateral Air Force exercise in Jodhpur. The annual bilateral Air Force exercise this year will see the participation of over 150 personnel from Oman.
- Visits of the naval and Air Force chiefs of Oman are taking place after five years and would enable a high-level re-engagement between the forces of two sides, officials noted.
- While India’s defence engagement with the Gulf region has significantly expanded in the last few years, Oman remains India’s closest defence partner in the region. It is the only country in the region with which all the three services of India conduct regular bilateral exercises and staff talks.
- Defence exchanges between the two countries are guided by a framework MoU (Memorandum of Understanding), which was renewed in 2021.
- As part of its anti-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden, the Indian Navy has deployed its P-8I long-range maritime surveillance aircraft for anti-piracy patrol sorties from Salalah in Oman on few occasions, extending the reach and operational turnaround. Oman also actively participates in the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS).

THE PEOPLES WITHOUT A STATE

The Arunachal government's aborted plan to hold a special census targeting Chakmas and Hajongs triggered concerns of their racial profiling

- The often-violent Assam agitation from 1979 to 1985 had a domino effect on some of the other north-eastern States. The agitation, spearheaded by students, was aimed at expelling the “illegal immigrants” — by which they referred to “Bangladeshis” — who they claimed were outnumbering the indigenous communities.
- The present-day hill States were fairly untouched by the riots in undivided Assam of the 1960s and early 1970s that targeted Bengalis through the politically-charged ‘Bongal kheda’ (chase out the Bengalis) campaign. In 1979, weeks after the Assam agitation started, the Bengalis of Shillong, Meghalaya, became the victims of the first major riot. Sporadic communal violence that continued till the 1990s did not spare the other non-tribal communities such as Biharis, Marwaris, Nepalis, Punjabis and Sindhis, viewed as “dkhars” (outsiders). The situation was the worst in 1987, which was marked by curfews throughout the year.
- The Assam agitation also impacted Arunachal Pradesh and the politics of xenophobia was primarily directed at four communities — Chakmas, Hajongs, Tibetans and Yobins — who had settled there before Arunachal Pradesh was upgraded from the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA) in 1972. These four communities were largely settled in the present-day Changlang district when NEFA was under the Ministry of External Affairs up to 1965 and then under the Ministry of Home Affairs until 1972.
- The Yobins, formerly called Lisus, came from northern Myanmar. The migration of the Tibetans started in 1959 with the flight of the 14th Dalai Lama from Lhasa and peaked during the 1962 war with China. The main concentrations of the Tibetans today are in West Kameng and Tawang districts of Arunachal Pradesh.
- The Buddhist Chakmas and the Hindu Hajongs came from present-day Bangladesh. Communal violence in 1964 and the construction of the Kaptai dam on the Karnaphuli River displaced about 100,000 Chakmas from the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh. Around the same time, religious persecution made about 1,000 Hajongs cross over from Mymensingh district of Bangladesh. Some Chakmas were settled in areas of Mizoram and Tripura contiguous to the CHT.
- The flow of Chakmas to Arunachal Pradesh continued till 1969. Those who came later were mostly from Bihar's Gaya, where former Union Relief and Rehabilitation Minister Mahavir Tyagi had tried to settle them in. Over time, the Chakma-Hajongs became more of a political issue than a humanitarian problem in the State with indigenous groups mobilising on a plank of pushing back refugees.
- Amid growing opposition to the continued settlement of Chakmas in the State, the Arunachal government had planned a special census from December 11 to 31, 2021, leading to criticism that Chakmas and Hajongs were being subjected to “racial profiling. The census was put on hold after the Chakma Development Foundation of India (CDFI) approached the Prime Minister's Office. But it remains a sensitive political issue in the State.

‘REFUGEES GO BACK’

- Documents with the Committee for Citizenship Rights of the Chakmas and Hajongs of Arunachal Pradesh (CCRCHAP) show that New Delhi had granted migration certificates to about 36,000 Chakmas and Hajongs settled in the erstwhile NEFA. These certificates indicated legal entry into India and the willingness of the Centre to accept the migrants as future citizens. But indigenous groups led by the All Arunachal Pradesh Students' Union (AAPSU) said the papers were inconsequential since neither the local people nor their representatives were consulted before settling the refugees in their backyard. They also pointed out that the prolonged stay of the refugees violated the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation (BEFR) of 1873 that requires outsiders to visit the State with a temporary travel document called Inner the Line Permit, also applicable in Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland.

- The Chakma-Hajongs were at the core of the first bandh that Arunachal Pradesh experienced in April 1980. The AAPSU had imposed the shutdown to highlight a few demands, including resolution of the Assam-Arunachal boundary problem, detection and deportation of foreign nationals from the State and withdrawal of land allotment permit and trade licence from the non-Arunachalees. Inspired by the Assam agitation, the AAPSU organised a series of district-level bandhs in August 1982, primarily demanding the ouster of “outsiders”. In 1985, the government-backed students’ body adopted a resolution for asking the Centre to immediately remove the refugees settled permanently in the State and take steps against a possible influx of people displaced internally by the anti-foreigners agitation in adjoining Assam.
- The ‘refugees go back’ slogans returned after a lull in 1994 when the AAPSU organised a march to Delhi, demanding action against “illegal foreign nationals”, who, they claimed, were threatening to change the demography of the region. Pointing out that the Indian government violated the legal provisions prohibiting people from outside entering Arunachal Pradesh, the AAPSU organised a ‘people’s referendum rally’ in September 1995 against making the State a “dumping ground” for “foreigners”. December 31 that year was set as the deadline for the then Congress government to eject the refugees, compelling the Centre to form a high-level committee to look into the issue.
- According to Chakma organisations, the State government had by then systematically denied the refugees access to social, economic and political rights they were entitled to under Indian and international laws. The employment of Chakmas and Hajongs was banned in 1980 and all trade licences issued to them in the 1960s were seized in 1994. There were reports of blockades and attacks on the refugee camps and Vijoypur, a village in the Changlang district, was reportedly destroyed thrice between 1989 and 1995. In September 1994, the State government allegedly began a campaign to close down schools in the refugee areas and to relocate the Chakma-Hajongs.

DEPORTATION BID

- The AAPSU flagged the increasing population of the Chakma-Hajongs to justify the perceived threat to the identity and culture of the indigenous people. It said the population of the refugees had by the new millennium swollen to 65,000 from the 57 families originally settled in the State after a temporary stay in Assam’s Ledo in 1964. “Their population is more than 1 lakh today,” AAPSU’s general secretary Tobom Dai said. However, Santosh Chakma, general secretary of the CCRCHAP, said the figure was exaggerated. “A special census of the Chakma-Hajongs conducted in 2010-11 revealed the population was under 50,000. According to our estimate, it is about 60,000 now with 95% of them born in India to merit citizenship under Section 3 of the Citizenship Act,” he said.
- The State government’s aborted move to hold the special census followed Chief Minister Pema Khandu’s Independence Day speech in which he said “all illegal immigrant Chakmas will be moved and settled in some other places” as the Constitution does not allow them to live in a tribal State. Following the controversies, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) has asked the Ministry of Home Affairs and the State government to submit a report on the alleged racial profiling of the Chakmas and Hajongs.
- The Chakma Development Foundation says there is no provision in the Constitution as a tribal State that stops the Chakmas from staying in Arunachal Pradesh. It also said the government has not processed their citizenship applications despite the Supreme Court’s orders in 1996 and 2015 to do so. The solution, Chakma organisations said, lies in the State respecting the rule of law and the judgments of the Supreme Court and the politicians stopping using the Chakma-Hajong issue for political benefits.

AWARDS & CONSENT

Who finalises the list for the Padma awards, the second highest civilian honour after the Bharat Ratna?

- **The story so far: The Padma awards were announced on January 25, and former West Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee refused the award. His refusal brought to the fore the question under what circumstances a recipient can decline the award. The awards are always announced a day before the Republic Day celebrations. The awards are given away by the President at ceremonial functions held at Rashtrapati Bhavan usually in the months of March-April every year. The functions for the 2020 and 2021 awardees were held together last November because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This year the President approved the conferment of 128 Padma Awards.**

WHAT ARE THE PADMA AWARDS?

- After Bharat Ratna, Padma awards are the second highest civilian awards in the country and are given in three categories. It recognises achievements in public service in the field of art, social work, public affairs, science and engineering, trade and industry, medicine, literature and education, sport and civil services, among others. The awards, initially known as Padma Vibhushan and then categorised as Pahela Varg, Dusra Varg and Tisra Varg, were first constituted in 1954. They were later renamed as Padma Vibhushan, Padma Bhushan and Padma Shri in 1955. The Padma Vibhushan is given for exceptional and distinguished service, while the Padma Bhushan and the Padma Shri are for distinguished service of a high order and distinguished service respectively.

WHO DECIDES THE AWARDS?

- The awards are conferred on the recommendations made by the Padma Awards Committee constituted by the Prime Minister every year. It is headed by the Cabinet Secretary and includes the Union Home Secretary, the Secretary to the President and four to six eminent persons as members. However, the names of the eminent members of the committee are not revealed. Even the names nominated and shortlisted by the committee are revealed after the awards have been announced. Even self-nomination can be made to the committee. The recommendations of the committee are submitted to the Prime Minister and the final list is signed by the President before it is notified in the Gazette of India.

CAN A RECIPIENT DECLINE THE AWARD?

- The rules are silent on this. The convention is that the Home Secretary calls up each awardee and informs them of the civilian honour on January 25. The individual has the option of declining the award then, following which the name is removed from the list before it is sent to the President for approval.
- For example, eminent artistes, percussionist Pandit Anindya Chatterjee and vocalist Sandhya Mukhopadhyay turned down the awards when they received the call this year and their names were not inserted in the final list. In the case of Mr. Bhattacharjee, the call was received by his wife as he is ailing. A Home Ministry official said she was informed of the conferment of the Padma Bhushan on the former West Bengal Chief Minister. "If he had to decline the award, they could have called back and said so, the name would have been removed," said the official. The official said there is no such rule to refuse the award once it has been announced. "I know nothing about this award. No one has told me anything about it. If they have decided to offer the Padma Bhushan to me, I refuse to accept it," said a statement issued by Mr. Bhattacharjee on January 25 after the awards were announced in the evening.

IS THERE A PRECEDENT?

- In 1992, former general secretary of the CPI(M) E.M.S. Namboodiripad had declined the award. The party said in a statement last week, "The CPI(M) policy has been consistent in declining such awards from the state. Our work is for the people, not for awards." P.N. Haksar,

principal secretary to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, was offered the Padma Vibhushan days after he retired in January 1973. He wrote to the then Home Secretary Govind Narain, “I have a difficulty in accepting the award. All these years, I have often said to myself that one should work so that one can live with oneself without regret.” Swami Ranganathananda of the Ramakrishna Mission refused the award in 2000 as it was given to him as an individual and not to the Ramakrishna Mission. Historian Romila Thapar has declined the award twice.

WHAT DOES THE AWARD ENTAIL?

- At the ceremonial function held at the President’s House in Delhi, the recipients are presented a ‘Sanad’ (certificate) signed by the President and a medallion. A small replica of the medallion is also given to them which can be worn during any ceremonial or State function. The award does not amount to a title and cannot be used as a suffix or prefix to the awardees’ name.

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