

Call for fast-tracking WTO agricultural negotiations

In a recent WTO meeting, India urges prioritisation of issues, including a permanent solution for public stockholding and special safeguard mechanism. In a meeting of the Committee on Agriculture (CoA) of the World Trade Organization (WTO) held in Geneva on December 4, 2024, India insisted that negotiations on unresolved/previously mandated issues in agriculture, including a permanent solution to public stockholding, special safeguard mechanism (SSM) and elimination of trade-distorting cotton subsidies by rich countries etc, be 'prioritised' and 'fast-tracked' by treating them as standalone issues instead of clubbing them with other issues. The US, on the other hand, criticised the prioritisation of certain issues over others, stating that this was the primary cause of the longstanding stalemate in agriculture. India also rejected a new proposal presented by Guyana to advance agricultural negotiations ahead of the WTO's 14th Ministerial Conference (MC14 is tentatively scheduled to take place in Cameroon in 2026) by adopting a so-called 'non-traditional approach based on convergence'. India reiterated that any facilitator-led process should be 'consensus-based' and respect WTO's multilateral principles. It emphasised on Text-based negotiation (TBN). TBN refers to the process of working up the text of an agreement that all parties are willing to accept and sign. Negotiating parties may begin with a draft text prepared by the Chair of the particular committee dealing with the subject. The draft is based on discussions amongst the member countries and is fine-

tuned till all the nations are in agreement with it. This is in sharp contrast to a convergence-based approach that involves super-imposition of non-multilateral trade regimes on the multilateral trading system (MTS). The theorists dealing with international trade in particular, WTO-related issues describe it as a process of 'gradually aligning different trade regimes, in particular preferential trade agreements (PTAs) and the MTS'. Others define convergence as requiring 'greater coherence between trade rules and policies, norms and standards in other areas of international cooperation'. Shorn of jargon, this is a well-orchestrated attempt by the developed countries - the US, the European Union (EU), the UK, Australia, etc (they exercise disproportionately greater influence during actual confabulations at the WTO, set the agenda of meetings, float proposals more often through small countries such as Guyana and get away with what they want) to scuttle the standard practice of taking decisions by consensus where every member country has an equal voice. Therefore, India has rejected this approach, rightly so. But, what happens to India's demand for 'prioritising' and 'fast-tracking' negotiations? In a meeting of the CoA held on October 2, 2023, in Geneva, the EU agreed to consider India's demand for a permanent solution to the public stockholding (PSH) program for food security. Accordingly, India had urged WTO members to start TBN on the issue as soon as possible and get this deliberated at the WTO MC-13 slated to be held in Abu Dhabi from February 26-29, 2024.

But, that was not to be. The Ministerial Conference ended in a deadlock. On the issue of finding a permanent solution to the (PSH) for food security, India's stance was vehemently opposed by the USA/EU. Earlier attempts by India also met with the same fate. At the Trade Policy Review (TPR) meeting held at WTO in January 2021, India insisted that the three issues should be taken up on a priority basis at the MC-12. But, in that Ministerial Conference held in Geneva on June 12-17, 2022, the issues were not even put on the table. The deadlock has existed for more than two decades despite India taking up these issues at WTO under what has come to be known as the Doha Development Agenda (DDA). Developed countries had junked DDA at MC-10 held in Nairobi (2015). On the most contentious issue of a permanent solution for PSH, a ray of hope emerged when in the WTO-General Council (GC) meeting in Geneva (July 31, 2014), India insisted on a time-bound action plan on the subject matter to be executed before the end of 2014 co-terminus with approval of Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA) - an area of great interest to developed countries. This was a good strategic move but it was abandoned midstream. In December 2014, even as the developed countries got away with the TFA, the developing countries got an "extension of the peace clause till a permanent solution was found." Put simply, India had literally surrendered its right to secure a permanent solution; that it was "Ok" with "the benefit of peace clause." What is the peace clause?

To understand this, let us look at the Agreement on Agriculture (AoA) of the WTO. Under it, a developing country cannot give aggregate measurement support (AMS) - an acronym for subsidies - over 10 per cent of the value of its farm production. The AMS includes "product-specific" subsidies and "non-product specific" subsidies on agricultural inputs such as fertilisers, seed, irrigation and power. The "product-specific" subsidy is the excess of the Minimum Support Price (MSP) paid to farmers over the External Reference Price (ERP) multiplied by the quantum of agri-produce. Whereas the MSP is taken for the relevant year, say, 2023-24, the ERP is the average of the global price prevailing during 1986-88 fixed in rupee terms. If the subsidy given by a developing country exceeds 10 per cent, it will be treated as a violation of its WTO commitment. This has been a major worry as India could face action in a situation of AMS exceeding the 10 per cent threshold. In this backdrop, the MC-9 in Bali (2013) had agreed to a "peace clause" under which "if a developing country gives AMS in excess of 10 percent, no member will challenge this until 2017, when the WTO would look for a permanent solution to address their food security concerns." It came with several riders such as submission of data on food procurement, stockholding, distribution and subsidies. These also include establishing that subsidies are not "trade distorting." Besides, programs implemented after 2013 are not covered under the ambit of the 'peace clause'. In December 2014, the WTO-GC modified the above decision to

South Asia: Two decades of turmoil

December marks two pivotal anniversaries — Soviet intervention in Afghanistan and Kandhar Hijacking — that changed South Asia's geopolitics. December marks two pivotal anniversaries that significantly influenced South Asia's geopolitical landscape: 45 years since the Soviet Union's intervention in Afghanistan and 25 years since the hijacking of Indian Airlines Flight IC-814 from Kathmandu to Kandahar. Despite occurring two decades apart, these events underscore the fragility of South Asia and the profound influence of external powers and non-state actors in shaping the region's trajectory. On December 24, 1979, Soviet troops entered Afghanistan to support the struggling communist regime in Kabul, led by Babrak Karmal. This intervention, ostensibly aimed at stabilising Afghanistan, set off a decade-long occupation and transformed the country into one of the Cold War's fiercest battlegrounds. The repercussions extended far beyond Afghanistan, triggering global, regional and internal upheavals that persist to this day. The Soviet invasion catalysed a chain of events that hastened the disintegration of the Soviet Union and radicalised South Asia. The mujahideen-fighters armed and financed by the United States, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and other allies-became a formidable force against the Soviets. This external patronage laid the groundwork for militant extremism, which would later engulf the region. The Soviet intervention underscored Afghanistan's strategic importance as the fulcrum of great power

politics. Pakistan emerged as a critical player, acting as a frontline state in the anti-Soviet effort. Two decades later, on December 24, 1999, South Asia faced another defining moment when Indian Airlines Flight IC-814 was hijacked en route from Kathmandu to Delhi. Five armed men commandeered the aircraft, eventually forcing it to land in Kandahar, then under Taliban control. What ensued was a week-long standoff that exposed the vulnerabilities of regional counter-terrorism strategies and marked a turning point in how nations approached security and terrorism. The Kandahar hijacking exposed the evolving nexus between terrorism and geopolitics in South Asia. The Taliban's willingness to shelter the hijackers highlighted its transition into a state sponsor of terrorism. For India, this incident was a stark reminder of the threats posed by cross-border terrorism, often enabled by Pakistan's support for extremist proxies in Afghanistan and Kashmir. The release of Masood Azhar not only emboldened groups like JeM but also underscored the growing influence of non-state actors in undermining regional stability. Although the Soviet intervention and the Kandahar hijacking may seem unrelated, they are deeply interconnected in shaping South Asia's trajectory. The destabilisation of Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation created fertile ground for militancy, enabling the rise of networks that facilitated events like the Kandahar hijacking. Pakistan's role as a key US ally during the Soviet-Afghan war empowered



its military-intelligence complex, which later exploited jihadist networks to further strategic objectives in Kashmir and Afghanistan. These same networks became instrumental in orchestrating attacks against India, exemplified by the IC-814 hijacking. Both events marked the ascendancy of non-state actors in South Asia's security dynamics. The mujahideen's success against the Soviets emboldened militant groups across the region, while the Kandahar hijacking demonstrated their ability to exploit state vulnerabilities for political gains. The Kandahar episode underscored the inadequacy of India's counter-terrorism infrastructure at the time. It led to significant reforms, including the establishment of specialised counter-terrorism units like the National Security Guard (NSG) and the strengthening of aviation security protocols. Pakistan's dual role in these episodes—as a US ally during the Soviet-Afghan war and as a sanctuary for groups like JeM—has perpetuated instability in the region. Its support for extremist proxies has strained

relations with India and exacerbated internal security challenges. Addressing South Asia's fractured security landscape requires collective action. Countries in the region must transcend historical animosities to combat terrorism and address shared challenges like extremism and socio-economic disparities. Both the Soviet intervention and the Kandahar hijacking highlight the need for strong democratic institutions and accountable governance. Weak states are particularly susceptible to external manipulation and internal subversion, further destabilising the region. The lessons from these pivotal episodes remain crucial as South Asia navigates the 21st century. The radicalisation fueling terrorism often stems from socio-economic deprivation. Investments in education, healthcare, and employment can help counter extremist ideologies. Strengthened regional cooperation and robust international partnerships are essential to addressing the complex interplay of geopolitics and terrorism. Much like the Grand Trunk Road connecting distant regions and histories, these events remind us of the intersecting paths of interventionism and terrorism in shaping modern South Asia. They were not mere crises but turning points that redefined the region's political, social, and economic trajectories. As South Asia confronts new challenges, the enduring lessons of these anniversaries emphasize the importance of resilience, cooperation, and proactive governance in securing a stable future.

Israel Closer Than Ever To Hostage Deal With Hamas, Says Defence Minister



Israel's Defence Minister, Israel Katz, has announced that Israeli negotiators are closer than ever to reaching a deal for the release of hostages held in Gaza. Speaking to the Israeli parliament's foreign affairs committee, Katz emphasized that the current negotiations represent the nearest Israel has been to an agreement since the November 2023 truce between Israel and Hamas, which resulted in the release of 105 hostages. The breakthrough comes at a time when Israeli negotiators have arrived in Doha, Qatar, to discuss both a ceasefire and a prisoner exchange deal. Sources close to the talks suggest that Israeli and Qatari working-level teams are involved in these discussions, marking a significant step forward in resolving the hostage crisis. While Katz's statements have raised hopes for a deal, a Hamas official also weighed in, indicating that the militant group is open to a ceasefire agreement, provided that it leads to a permanent cessation of hostilities. However, the Hamas representative stressed that the terms of any agreement must include a full withdrawal from Gaza, the return of displaced Palestinians, and a comprehensive prisoner swap, with no compromise on their demands, as reported by Hindustan Times. This announcement follows years of diplomatic struggles, with previous mediation efforts having faltered. The

release of more than 100 hostages since the outbreak of the war has been a result of tense negotiations, but with over 100 hostages still believed to be held in Gaza, the stakes are higher than ever. The conflict between Israel and Hamas began on October 7, 2023, when Hamas militants launched an unprecedented attack on Israeli soil, killing over 1,200 people and abducting more than 250 hostages, including Israeli-American dual nationals. Since then, Israel's military response has led to the deaths of over 45,000 people in Gaza, mostly civilians, and the displacement of nearly the entire population of the enclave. In the aftermath of the November 2023 truce, which saw the release of 105 hostages, hopes of a lasting ceasefire have remained elusive. Diplomatic efforts were initially halted in September 2024, after Qatar suspended its mediation efforts, citing a lack of willingness from both parties to make concessions, as per media reports. However, the diplomatic momentum has recently been revived, especially following Donald Trump's election victory in the United States, with a renewed focus on bringing an end to the conflict and securing the safe release of the remaining hostages.

What's Next?

As negotiations continue, the world watches closely to see whether this renewed push for peace will result in a lasting ceasefire or whether it will mark another temporary pause in a prolonged and bloody conflict. The stakes are high not only for the hostages but also for the broader prospects of peace in the region. The outcome of these talks could have a profound impact on the future of Gaza and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a whole.

After Palestine Bag, Priyanka Gandhi Carries 'Stand With Bangladesh Minorities' Tote To Parliament



A day after Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, Congress MP, made headlines by carrying a pro-Palestine bag to Parliament, she and other Opposition MPs were seen on Tuesday with another symbolic tote bag. This time, the bag highlighted the plight of minorities in Bangladesh, bearing the message, "Stand with Bangladeshi Hindus and Christians." The move referenced recent attacks on minorities in Bangladesh, linked to political unrest following the removal of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. On Tuesday morning, the Opposition MPs came with bags and placards to register their protest against atrocities faced by Bangladeshi minorities. However, Speaking in Parliament on Monday, Priyanka Gandhi spoke about the need for India to address the safety and security of Hindu and Christian minorities in Bangladesh. "The government must raise the issue of atrocities against Bangladeshi minorities with their government and provide moral support to those suffering," she urged. Later, Priyanka, while speaking to media, mentioned her intent to discuss the role of India, under Indira Gandhi's leadership, during the Bangladesh Liberation War. However, she expressed disappointment at being unable to complete her statement on Vijay Diwas, commemorating India's role in Bangladesh's independence.

The Palestine Bag Controversy

On Monday, Priyanka Gandhi's choice of a bag with "Palestine" emblazoned on it, accompanied by emblems like a watermelon - a symbol of Palestinian solidarity - stirred political debate. The gesture drew praise from Pakistani politician Fawad Chaudhry, who applauded her for standing with Palestine. In a post on X (formerly Twitter), Chaudhry remarked, "Priyanka Gandhi has stood tall amidst pigmies... such courage is yet to be seen in Pakistani politics."

Bangladesh Set For Elections In 2025 Or 2026, Says Interim Leader Muhammad Yunus

In a significant update for Bangladesh's political landscape, interim leader Muhammad Yunus has confirmed that the country's general elections are set to take place by late 2025 or early 2026. Yunus, a Nobel Peace Prize laureate and microfinance pioneer, was appointed as the country's "chief adviser" following the overthrow of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's government in August 2024, as reported by Times Of India. This announcement comes amidst growing pressure on Yunus to set a firm election date and initiate critical reforms to restore Bangladesh's democratic institutions. The announcement of the election timeframe follows the August 2024 revolution, in which a student-led uprising toppled the Hasina administration. Protests across the country culminated in thousands of demonstrators storming Hasina's residence in Dhaka, leading to her dramatic escape by helicopter to neighbouring India. Hasina's 15-year tenure was marked by allegations of human rights abuses, including mass detentions, extrajudicial killings, and politicization of the judiciary and civil service, all of which critics argue dismantled democratic safeguards and checks on her power. Yunus, 84, was appointed to lead a caretaker government aimed at overseeing the political transition and restoring democratic norms. His administration faces a challenging task: rebuilding trust in democratic institutions and ensuring fair, free, and credible elections.

The Election Timeline: Late 2025 or Early 2026



In a televised broadcast, Yunus stated that the general elections would likely be held at the end of 2025 or the first half of 2026, depending on the pace of political reforms. Yunus emphasized the importance of establishing a robust democratic framework before the elections are held, including electoral reforms that would ensure the fairness and transparency of the electoral process. "There is a possibility that elections could be conducted by the end of 2025 if political parties agree on minimal reforms, such as ensuring a flawless voter list," Yunus said. However, he cautioned that a more comprehensive set of reforms, which would include changes to the electoral system and a review of voter registration, would delay the elections by several months, as per Hindustan Times. The interim leader's comments reflect the delicate balance he must strike between the political parties, which have varying demands regarding the level of reform needed before an election can be held. Yunus has

consistently advocated for reforms to be implemented before elections, stating that "reforms should take place first before the arrangements for an election."

The Reform Process and Its Challenges

Yunus has already launched several commissions to oversee reforms in Bangladesh's political system. These reforms are crucial in restoring the public's confidence in the electoral process and ensuring that future elections are free from manipulation, as critics have argued that previous elections under Hasina's rule were rigged and lopsided. The electoral reforms would focus on creating a reliable and updated voter list, ensuring that elections are conducted transparently, and making the process more inclusive and representative of Bangladesh's diverse population. One of the critical aspects of the reform process is the restoration of an independent and impartial electoral commission that can oversee the elections without political interference. Yunus has noted that his administration is working on these reforms while engaging political parties in discussions about the elections, as per media reports.

Hasina's Exit and the Political Fallout
Sheikh Hasina's dramatic exit from the country marked the collapse of her administration, which had been under increasing scrutiny for its handling of protests and dissent. The former prime minister's gov-

ernment was accused of using heavy-handed tactics to suppress opposition, including arresting political opponents and journalists critical of her rule. Her flight to India was seen as a direct consequence of the mounting protests and the broader dissatisfaction with her governance. This power vacuum left Yunus in charge of leading the country through a transitional period. His administration has faced significant challenges in managing the political crisis, especially as the country deals with the aftermath of Hasina's 15 years of centralized power.

The Road Ahead: What to Expect

As Bangladesh enters this uncertain period, Yunus' leadership will be tested in the coming months. The international community, along with local political actors, will be watching closely to see whether the country can successfully navigate the transition to a more democratic system. Yunus has expressed his commitment to restoring democracy and ensuring that Bangladesh's political institutions are resilient, transparent, and accountable. However, the political landscape remains highly volatile, with various parties vying for influence and struggling to agree on the terms of the election reforms, as per media reports. The exact date of the election will depend on how quickly the political parties can come to a consensus on the reforms needed and whether the caretaker government can effectively implement those changes. In the meantime, Bangladeshis will be hoping for a peaceful transition and a restoration of democratic governance after years of political turmoil under Hasina's rule.



