

1. Centre pulls the plug on three NGOs

Close on the heels of the publication of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's assertion in an interview in the latest issue of 'Science' that some United States-based NGOs are behind the agitation against the Kudankulam nuclear power plant, the Centre announced the revocation of the licences of three NGOs. Simultaneously, India told Russia, which is collaborating with India in the 2,000-MW plant, that the government was engaged in consultations with all stakeholders and appreciated Moscow's patience. At 'Comprehensive Foreign Office Consultations,' Foreign Secretary Ranjan Mathai told Russia's First Deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Denisov that India was consulting various domestic constituencies and working on the opening of the first 1,000-MW unit, a process that would pave the way for operationalising the second unit six months later. The Centre has offered half of the electricity to be produced to Tamil Nadu, where four more units have been planned. Talking to journalists, Minister of State in the Prime Minister's Office V. Narayanasamy insisted that Dr. Singh's statement was based on a probe by the Home Ministry. He said the licences of the three NGOs were cancelled after an inquiry by the Ministry found that they were diverting foreign funds for anti-nuclear plant campaign in Kudankulam.

2. Upset scientist quits the Space Commission

Eminent aerospace scientist Roddam Narasimha has resigned as a member of the Space Commission in protest against the blacklisting of scientists involved in the controversial spectrum deal between the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) and Bangalore-based Devas Multimedia Private Limited. Professor Narasimha objected to the treatment of four scientists, including the former ISRO chief, Madhavan Nair, who were barred last month from holding government office for their role in multi-million dollar deal between the ISRO's commercial wing Antrix Corporation and Devas. Professor Narasimha was part of the two-member High Powered Review Committee (the second member being Planning Commission member B.K. Chaturvedi) appointed by the Union government in February 2011 to probe flaws in the agreement. While the committee's report said that "concerns [over] cheap selling of spectrum have no basis," it enumerated several lapses in the agreement. For instance, it pointed out that the Space Commission and the Cabinet were not informed that the Antrix-Devas agreement was signed in January 2005 and that proposals for building satellites GSAT-6 and GSAT-6A for Devas were neither discussed with the INSAT Coordination Committee nor authorised by it.

3. DGCA issues new guidelines for airlines

Even as Jet Airways ordered an inquiry into allegations of harassment of a differently-abled woman passenger by the airline staff, the Directorate-General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) issued new guidelines for Carriage by Air of Persons with Disability or Reduced Mobility under which no airline should refuse to carry persons with disability or reduced mobility. The airlines would also have to incorporate appropriate provisions in the online form for booking tickets so that required facilities are made available to such passengers. While the DGCA is also probing the incident, a Jet Airways spokesperson said the incident on board the Delhi-Raipur flight has been reported at the Mumbai headquarters of the airline.

4. NIT-K is the lead institute for virtual labs

The National Institute of Technology - Karnataka, Surathkal, is the lead institute in the Government of India's ambitious project to set up virtual laboratories. NIT-K Director Sandeep Sancheti told presspersons that the virtual laboratories project was launched in New Delhi by Union Human Resource Minister Kapil Sibal. The project is a collection of several virtual laboratories containing hundreds of experiments in nine disciplines of science and engineering, according to a government release. Aimed at providing high quality education in India, the virtual laboratories enable graduate and undergraduate students to perform required laboratory experiments using the World Wide Web, a computer, and an internet connection. It allows sharing of expensive equipment for the benefit of students even in rural areas. Nearly 85 virtual laboratories had been developed. Virtual labs site (vlab.co.in) has had 2,33,570 visits and 10.34 lakh page visits in six months from India, the United States, Malaysia, Philippines, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, Germany and Pakistan. NIT-K was collaborating with NPTEL – National Programme on Technology-enhanced Learning. NPTEL provides e-learning through online web and video courses in engineering, science, and humanities streams. The mission of NPTEL, according to its website, is to enhance the quality of engineering education in the country by providing free online courseware.

5. Unable to bail out foreign telecom firms, says Centre

The Centre has expressed its helplessness in bailing out foreign telecom firms after the Supreme Court cancelled over 120 licences in the wake of the 2G spectrum scam. This message from South Block will serve as the common government response to four countries seeking redress for their telecom companies hit by the Supreme Court order. This was conveyed by Foreign Secretary Ranjan Mathai to First Deputy Foreign Minister of Russia Andrei Denisov during Foreign Office talks. Japan, Norway, Russia and the United Arab Emirates have raised diplomatic dust here after the Supreme Court cancelled licences in which their companies NTT DoCoMo, Telenor, Sistema, and Etisalat respectively had substantial stake. The apex court cancelled most of the licences held by Indo-Russian joint venture Sistema Shyam TeleServices (SSTL), in which Sistema had made substantial stake. After Mr. Denisov said Sistema had become an unwitting loser even though it had followed all the norms, Mr. Mathai suggested mounting an appropriate legal response. Russia and Norway, in particular, have been vocal about their companies becoming victims of the judicial system even though their investments were vetted at each stage by the Central government. But Sistema has a special resonance in India-Russia ties. It is not only the first major Russian investment in the Indian consumer and services sector, but its chief Vladimir Yevtushenko, considered close to the Kremlin, co-chairs the India-Russia CEOs council and holds the key to Indian investment in the lucrative Trebs and Titov gas fields in north-eastern Russia. Russia and India also touched on the space sector, especially the use of Russian satellite chain Glonass which the Indian military wants to bank upon as an alternative to the U.S.-based GPS for satellite navigation and location. India began taking an interest in Glonass which is still evolving after it found that the United States had blocked or corrupted GPS signals to the Iraqi military during its invasion of the country in 2003, as a result of which Iraqi missiles went off the intended target.

6. Adarsh scam: commission to submit report by mid-March

The Adarsh Commission will soon submit an interim report to the Maharashtra government on the ownership and reservation of the land in question, as the commission accepted the State government's application seeking such a report. The final arguments in the matter are slated to begin on March 1. The two-member commission of P. Subramaniam and Justice J.A. Patil observed that the Ministry of Defence and the State government would mainly have to argue about both the points of reference. Till date, the commission has examined 36 witnesses. The Ministry of Defence has examined four witnesses, whereas the State government has examined 12. The commission has also examined 13 independent witnesses, which include Santosh Daundkar and other social activists. The Adarsh society has examined three witnesses.

7. Antony orders probe into Italian helicopter deal

Concerned over reports alleging kickbacks in the procurement of 12 VVIP helicopters, Defence Minister A.K. Antony has ordered an inquiry to find out whether corruption was involved in its procurement. Sources in the Ministry said Mr. Antony has asked Defence Secretary Shashi Kant Sharma to inquire into reports from Italy that prosecutors there were looking into allegations of corruption in the over Rs. 3,500 crore deal signed by India. Italian defence major Finmeccanica's subsidiary AgustaWestland is supplying 12 AW101 helicopters for VVIP travel. The contract was signed two years ago and delivery of the first batch is due this year with the entire fleet to be handed over by next year. The company had won the order against American Sikorsky S-92. The new helicopters would replace the ageing Russian-made Mi-8 helicopters that are nearing completion of their operational life.

8. Supreme Court frowns on Gujarat for order on probe panel

The Supreme Court disapproved the manner in which the Narendra Modi government issued the order appointing Justice K.R. Vyas to probe the 22 cases of fake encounter deaths in the State from 2003 to 2006. On January 25, a Bench of Justices Aftab Alam and Ranjana Desai asked retired Supreme Court judge M.B. Shah, who was heading the Monitoring Authority (MA), to probe the 22 fake encounters and submit an interim report in three months. The Bench had passed this order on two petitions filed by Javed Akhtar, B.G. Varghese and others for a direction to order a CBI probe into all the 22 fake encounters that took place in the State from 2003 to 2006. Senior counsel Ranjit Kumar and Additional Advocate General of Gujarat, Tushar Mehta, informed the Bench that Justice Vyas, retired Chief Justice of the Bombay High Court and former chairman of the Maharashtra State Human Rights Commission, had been appointed to probe the matter since Justice Shah had expressed his inability to take up the task.

9. CHAFB bags Raksha Mantri Award

Command Hospital Air Force Bangalore (CHAFB) has been adjudged the best hospital in Armed Forces for 2011 and has been awarded the Raksha Mantri Award. According to a release, the hospital had won the Raksha Mantri Award in 1991, 2004, and 2009. The award is in recognition of the high standards set by the hospital in all areas of patient care. The award comprises a purse of Rs. 10 lakh. Defence Minister A.K. Antony gave away the award to Air Vice-Marshal A.K. Behl, Commandant CHAFB, at a function in New Delhi

10. Delhi Metro launches international flight check-in facility

Celebrating its first anniversary, the high-speed Airport Metro Express has introduced check-in service for international flights for passengers at two of its stations. Three airlines Air India, Jet Airways and Kingfisher Airlines had introduced domestic baggage check-in facility in June 2011, all three opened their counters at the New Delhi and Shivaji Stadium stations of the Airport Express Line for international flight check-in. At present, Air India has opened the facility for five destinations in the Gulf and one in Nepal, Kingfisher Airlines for Hong Kong-bound flights, and Jet Airways for Nepal. Passengers will be allowed to check in at the stations up to two-and-a-half hours prior to their flight departure.

11. Ukraine to liberalise visa regime for service travellers

The Ukraine government has decided to liberalise visa regime for service travellers from India. Close on the heels of simplifying the visa process for diplomats, Ukraine embassy has initiated the process for simplifying the processes for service travellers, Ukraine ambassador to India Oleksandr Shevchenko said. Mr. Shevchenko told that bilateral trade between the two countries grew ten-fold in the last few years to reach US \$ 3 billion. Sectors like higher education, pharmaceuticals, IT, bio-technology and aeronautics were among the areas offering new opportunities for Indo-Ukraine trade engagement. Ukraine already attracted over 10,000 students from India, including 2,000 from the State, who were pursuing higher education there. The two countries were slated to hold an inter-government dialogue in April for further boosting bilateral trade and this would be followed by an India Show in September.

12. Sri Lanka readies for fight over civilian deaths in Geneva

Barely few days ahead of the United Nations Human Rights Council session in Geneva, Sri Lanka has begun a no-holds-barred attack on its "enemies", is making fervent appeals to countries it considers friends, and is galvanising support back home in a bid to cash in on the siege mentality it is trying to create. The issue at the Rights Council relates to Sri Lanka's unwillingness to admit to civilian deaths during the end stages of Eelam War IV (January-May 2009). While one pro-Sri Lanka academic, Rohan Gunaratne, put the number killed at around 1,500, a few in the Sri Lankan hierarchy have admitted to deaths being in the range of 2,800 to 3,000. The United Nations Secretary-General's Expert Panel on Accountability in Sri Lanka has said that upwards of 40,000 civilians were killed. The second issue relates to Sri Lanka delaying any kind of political solution to the Tamils of the Northern Province, where the Tamil Tigers held sway for over three decades. The UNHRC session will witness a resolution against Sri Lanka, which will cite the lack of progress on the promises it had made earlier on a political solution to the Tamils of the Northern Province, and also on make adverse comments on the complete absence of accountability and respect for human rights during the end stages of the war. The United States has made it clear that it will support a resolution of this nature. Canada, United Kingdom, and most of Europe, are likely to demand greater accountability for war crimes.

13. Communication with India can be helpful on Tibetan unrest, says China

A top Chinese government adviser has said "good communication" between China and India would be "helpful" in addressing ongoing unrest in Tibetan areas, an issue that the Chinese Parliament is set to grapple with as it begins its annual sitting here in a week's time.

While Indian and Chinese officials have, so far, not discussed the string of self-immolations and protests, with officials citing Beijing's sensitivities over its "internal affairs", Zhao Qizheng, Chairman of the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), a top political advisory body that China would "welcome" communicating with India over the role of overseas groups, which he blamed for orchestrating recent incidents. He was speaking ahead of next week's annual joint sitting of

the CPPCC and the National People's Congress, the country's Parliament, as they meet for a crucial session to formulate political and economic policies ahead of a once-in-a-decade leadership transition.

14. Russia, China boycott Syria conference

The Tunisian capital, Tunis, is hosting an international conference on Syria, minus Russia and China two key members of the United Nations Security Council amid suspicions that the meeting, backed by the West, will seek fresh avenues to remove Bashar al-Assad from the Syrian presidency. The meeting of the Friends of Syria is taking place outside the fold of the United Nations, where Russia and China have blocked moves to unseat Mr. Assad. Analysts say the meeting in Tunis resembled a similar effort earlier to form the Libya Contact Group, which played a considerable part in forcing the exit of Muammar Qadhafi, who was eventually executed. The conference is expected to designate the SNC as the "legitimate" representative of the opposition, just short of accepting it as a government-in-waiting. Later, the conference, is likely to ask Syria to announce a ceasefire and permit humanitarian assistance in the areas that are badly engulfed in violence.

15. KVB keen to go pan-India

Karur Vysya Bank (KVB) is keen on expanding its presence across the country and towards this moving into the north, west and eastern regions, Managing Director and CEO K. Venkataraman said. The bank wants to take the number of branches to 450 by this fiscal. In 2011-12, it would be opening 72 branches, including one in Patna, Bihar, shortly, and proposes to add 100 more next fiscal. The bank would initially be targeting the cream of its four million customers, including borrowers, for the KVB SBI co-branded Visa credit cards. The variants of the card Platinum and Gold would be both magnetic stripe as well as chip-based, providing a high level of security to the users. The bank was also coming up with mobile wallet to facilitate easy payments. Sanjeev Jain, CEO, GE Capital Business Process Management Services, said the focus was constantly on understanding the customers more and helping them save as they used the cards

16. New policy on urea gets GoM nod

A Group of Ministers (GoM), headed by Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee, approved a new investment policy for the urea sector in a bid to bridge the widening demand-supply gap and reduce dependence on imports of the key soil nutrient. The policy will now be placed before the Union Cabinet for a formal approval and then subsequent notification. In 2008, the New Investment Policy announced by UPA-I to boost urea production had failed to attract investments. Seeking to set right the situation, the government in 2010 decided to frame a new policy. In 2011, a Committee of Secretaries (CoS), headed by Planning Commission Member Soumitra Choudhary, was set up for this purpose. The CoS had in its recommendations suggested incentives for setting up of greenfield and brownfield projects as well as expansion of existing plants and facilities. At present, the country faces a shortfall of seven million tonnes, which is met through imports. Domestic urea production is estimated at 22 million tonnes, while the consumption is pegged at 29 million tonnes.

17. NeST ties up with Bangalore firm

NeST Software, a Kerala-based IT services company with worldwide operations, has entered into a pact with Mymo Wireless based in Bangalore, to develop integrated solutions for the telecom industry. NeST vice-chairman and managing director is N. Jehangir. "The alliance will result in a win-win situation for both the companies in upcoming wireless markets like 4G. It will help us both in creating innovative solutions for our customers," said Mymo Wireless CEO and founder-director Sondur Lakshmipathi

18. Vijayalakshmi picks up second gold

Kerala's 75-year-old Vijayalakshmi S. Nair claimed her second gold of the 33rd National Masters athletics championships with victory in the women's 75 plus long jump event in Bengaluru.

19. Jeev joins Noida team for LP Cup

Jeev Milkha Singh is set to provide the much-needed strength and appeal to the Shubhkamna Noida team in the upcoming Rs.1.24 crore Louis Philippe Cup golf championship scheduled from March 6 to 10 at the KGA course in Bangalore. Jeev, who has signed a three-year deal with the real estate developer as its Brand Ambassador, joins Raju Ali Mollah and Gaurav Pratap Singh in the 10-team competition, the richest domestic sports event.