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'We find ourselves in a slow growth, high inflation scenario'

Inflation largely due to food prices, which have a rather high weight in the CPI, says MPC's external member Nagesh Kumar. Though elevated, inflation trajectory remains on the expected lines, food inflation likely to soften in Q4, said Ram Singh

The Hindu Bureau
MUMBAI

Two external members of the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) Nagesh Kumar and Ram Singh, who had voted for a 25 basis point rate cut in the last rate fixing panel meeting held between December 4 and 6, and batted for revival of growth, were hopeful that inflation would reduce in the last quarter of FY25, the minutes of the MPC meeting released by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on Friday showed.

"We find ourselves in a slow growth, high inflation scenario. However, inflation is largely on account of food prices, which have a rather high weight in the CPI," Dr. Kumar said in his statement.



Staying focused: Former RBI Governor Das emphasised that policy priority had to be restoring the inflation-growth balance. ANI

"Keeping in mind the easing of vegetables and edible oil in November, food inflation should be easing further in the coming months. Core inflation persistence has declined over time, suggesting an improving anchoring of inflationary expectations," he emphasised while advocating for a rate cut to provide impetus to growth.

"The policy responses to address the challenges of high inflation and growth slowdown should look into their determinants. Monetary policy, being a demand management tool, has limitations in addressing inflation largely driven by a supply-side shock driving up vegetable prices. The high vegetable prices represent an essen-

tially seasonal supply-demand mismatch that has started to correct itself in November 2024," he stated. "Though elevated, the inflation trajectory remains along the projected/expected lines. As we advance, food inflation is likely to soften in Q4:2024-25, and energy prices are also expected to be stable in the near future," Prof. Singh said in his statement.

"A growth-supportive monetary policy is also consistent with the international scenario," he added. However, RBI Deputy Michael Patra was of the view that durable reduction in inflationary pressures could rekindle the impulses of growth in a sustained manner.

"The expected winter easing of food prices may provide the turning point.

With the prospects for private consumption expected to improve over the rest of the year, the key is to get investment going, since exports are hostage to a difficult external environment," Dr. Patra stated.

Stressing that private investment would like to see a robust revival of domestic demand to draw in the slack that it is now experiencing, he said that "the monetary policy stance is open to support growth, but it must await the ebbing of inflation on a durable basis or else the uneven progress made so far in disinflation will get dissipated."

Former RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das had emphasised that policy priority at this critical juncture had to be on restoring the inflation-growth balance.

IAS Academy



Frosty and bitter

Parliament needs to be more productive, not sidetracked by barbs

The first winter session of 18th Lok Sabha ended on December 20 as one of the least productive and most acrimonious in history. The conflict between the government and the Opposition degenerated into a scuffle on the penultimate day, followed by absurd allegations and police reports. The Opposition sent a notice for a motion of no confidence in Rajya Sabha Chairman and Vice-President of India Jagdeep Dhankhar, which was rejected by the Deputy Chairman. The acrimony peaked with the Opposition turning a reference by Home Minister Amit Shah to Dr. B.R. Ambedkar into a stick to beat the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) with. Mr. Shah's mis-spoken remarks were taken out of context by the Opposition which feels that it is par for the course. After all, the BJP had made ridiculous allegations about the Congress party's supposed link with anti-India forces abroad to stall Parliament proceedings for several days earlier. Productivity in the Rajya Sabha was 40%, as it met for 43 hours and 27 minutes of the schedule. The Lok Sabha functioned for 54.5% of its scheduled time. Both the Houses witnessed protests from the treasury and Opposition sides over issues such as the alleged interference of U.S. billionaire George Soros in Indian politics, and the U.S. government's actions against the Adani Group.

The session was scheduled to take up 16 Bills in the legislative business and the first batch of supplementary grants under the financial business. Of the 16 Bills, only one Bill, the Bharatiya Vayuyan Vidheyak, 2024, significant for the civil aviation sector, was passed in both Houses. The Rajya Sabha passed the Boilers Bill and the Oil-fields (Regulation and Development) Amendment Bill, bringing major changes in the industrial laws governing large furnaces and boilers and the petroleum sector. Other than the Appropriation Bills as part of the supplementary demands for grants, the Lok Sabha discussed and passed the Banking Laws (Amendment) Bill, the Railways (Amendment) Bill and the Disaster Management (Amendment) Bill. The debates saw Opposition members asking the government to protect the public sector banking system, ensure the safety of rail passengers and employees and bring in transparency in the allocation of funds to States hit by natural calamities. The Constitution (One Hundred and Twenty-Ninth Amendment) Bill and the Union Territories Laws (Amendment) Bill, that aim to achieve simultaneous elections in the country, were introduced and referred to a Joint Committee of Parliament. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar made statements in both Houses on India-China relations. The winter session demonstrated the need for an urgent restoration of parliamentary norms and basic decency in exchanges between political opponents.



New undersea cables to boost India's digital connectivity

Two new submarine cable systems will provide additional Internet links to Asia and Europe even as India takes a more active role in discussions on undersea cable resilience and security

Aroon Deep
NEW DELHI

With data use increasing year on year, India's undersea cable network is growing. Two new cable systems are set to be launched in the coming three months: the India Asia Xpress (IAX) and the India Europe Xpress (IEX), both connecting India with additional Internet links to the two continents. This comes even as India takes a more active role in discussions around submarine cable security and resilience.

Both cable systems, cumulatively over 15,000 kilometres in length, are owned by Reliance Jio, with a strategic investment from China Mobile. The IAX connects Chennai and Mumbai with Singapore, Thailand, and Malaysia in Asia, and the IEX connects them with France, Greece, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Djibouti. This adds to the dozens of cables landing in India, mainly in Mumbai and Chennai.

The cable expansions not only reflect growing traffic, but also increased geopolitical ambition, Ja-



Experts say India is emerging as a strong maritime cable network player in the region. B. VELANKANNI RAJ

gannath Panda, head of the Sweden-based Stockholm Center for South Asian and Indo-Pacific Affairs (SCSA-IPA) wrote recently. The new cable systems bolster India's "defense strategy in terms of the resilience of the cables against physical damages or digital disruptions from cyberattacks by state or non-state actors", Mr. Panda wrote in a paper for the *Marine Policy* journal.

"India is emerging as a strong maritime cable network player in the region," Mr. Panda said in an interview. "There will be focus in the Bay of Bengal and

the South China Sea region, and India's proactive role will be closely watched, and India won't shy away from taking a leading role there," he said.

In March, three submarine cables connecting India to West Asia and Europe were disrupted, impacting traffic to India. While that incident had an impact on India's international bandwidth, traffic still flowed through alternate routes, with data centres within India itself also buffering against disruptions for key Internet services. The alarm over disruptions to connectivity

has been felt worldwide, and India is no exception. Telecom Secretary Neeraj Mittal is part of the International Advisory Body for Submarine Cable Resilience established by the International Telecommunication Union. IT Secretary S. Krishnan asked at an event earlier this month, "Are we stable within the country that all services within this country can be offered even in the event of a disruption?"

Bangladesh connection

The Bangladeshi government recently put on hold plans by Internet service providers in that country to sell bandwidth to North-east India, according to reports from local media. This setback, however, has limited impact for India, said Suvesh Chattopadhyaya, an undersea cable industry veteran. North-east States are already served by fibre laid on top of the Power Grid Corporation of India's transmission lines, and this fibre accounts for "hundreds of gigabits" per second of connectivity, Mr. Chattopadhyaya said, sufficient for current connectivity needs.

PM's visit to Kuwait aims to boost partnership, says MEA

The visit is also expected to strengthen ties between New Delhi and the Gulf Cooperation Council; the total volume of India's trade with GCC countries was \$184.46 billion in financial year 2022-23

Press Trust of India
NEW DELHI

India and Kuwait are expected to focus on shoring up ties in a range of key areas including defence and trade during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's two-day visit to the country beginning Saturday.

Mr. Modi will hold talks with the top Kuwaiti leadership, visit an Indian labour camp, address the Indian community and attend the opening ceremony of the Gulf Cup football tournament. It will be the first trip to the Gulf nation by an Indian Prime Minister in 43 years.

A day ahead of the Prime Minister's trip, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said discussions are underway with Kuwait on a bilateral investment treaty and a defence cooperation pact.

At a media briefing, Arun Kumar Chatterjee, Secretary (Overseas Indian



Sustaining the bond: Narendra Modi with Kuwait's Foreign Minister Abdullah Ali Al-Yahya in New Delhi on December 5. ANI

Affairs) in the MEA, said a few bilateral documents are expected to be firmed up during the visit.

"The historic visit by the Prime Minister is expected to open a new chapter in India-Kuwait bilateral relations," he said.

"It will not only consolidate the partnership in existing spheres but also unveil new avenues for future cooperation, reinforce our shared values and build a

more stronger and dynamic partnership for the future," he added.

Mr. Chatterjee said the visit is also expected to boost the ties between India and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

The GCC is an influential grouping comprising the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar and Kuwait. The total volume of India's trade with GCC countries stood

at \$184.46 billion in the financial year 2022-23.

Kuwait is the current Chair of the GCC.

Mr. Chatterjee said India is holding negotiations with the GCC for a free trade pact.

On Mr. Modi's planned visit to a labour camp in Kuwait, Mr. Chatterjee said the Government of India attaches considerable importance to the welfare of all the Indian workers abroad. "The idea of the visit of the Prime Minister to the labour camp is to express the amount of importance the government of India attaches to our workers. That is the prime purpose," he said.

Over 45 Indians were killed in a devastating fire in a building housing foreign workers in southern Kuwait's Mangaf locality in June.

The Prime Minister is visiting Kuwait at the invitation of Kuwaiti Emir Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah.

Assam bird sanctuary records 72% decline in bird species count

Rahul Karmakar
GUWAHATI

The number of avian species at a major wetland in north-eastern Assam declined by almost 72% in 27 years, a study has revealed.

The study on avian diversity at the Bordoibam-Bilmukh Bird Sanctuary (BBBS) straddling the Dhemaji and Lakhimpur districts was published in the *Journal of Threatened Taxa* recently.

The authors of the study are North Lakhimpur-based independent researchers Lakhijyoti Saikia and Siddhartha Suman Bora and Khitro Sankar Das of Barpeta's Bhawanipur Anchalik College.

The trio conducted the survey over 154 days between October 2022 and March 2024 at the 11.25 sq. km bird sanctuary parked



Bordoibam-Bilmukh Bird Sanctuary in north-eastern Assam. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

90-95 metres above the mean sea level.

"A total of 167 avian species were recorded in 1997. We observed 47 species under 16 orders and 29 families during our 18-month study in the sanctuary," Mr. Bora said.

The drop in the bird species count since 1997

works out to 71.85%.

The study indicates the decline in avian diversity has been drastic since 2018.

It cites a 2011 survey during which 133 species of birds belonging to 41 families were recorded, out of which 86 species were resident, 23 were migratory

and 24 were local migrants.

Out of all the species recorded, three - brown shrike, citrine wagtail, and white wagtail - were winter migratory while the lesser kestrel was a summer migratory and the remaining 43 were resident species.

Another survey carried

out between April 2017 and March 2018 recorded 120 species of birds apart from 133 species of macrophytes, 68 species of fish, and seven species of aquatic ferns.

The study listed a few anthropogenic activities as the causes of the decline in the bird species count at BBBS. These include over-fishing, harvesting aquatic plants in excess, poaching of wild birds, and collecting bird eggs.

Among the birds poached are the lesser whistling duck, fulvous whistling duck, white-breasted waterhen, Indian pond heron, eastern spotted dove, and yellow-footed green pigeon. The cultivation of crops with high-decibel machines close to the edge of the water body, and the use of the bird sanctuary as a pasture area have also forced the

resident and migratory birds to "change their foraging and/or breeding grounds to somewhere else", the study said.

Intense conservation

"The degradation of wetland habitat may cause the water table to drop, the food chain to get disrupted, the migratory bird populations to decline, and the nutrient cycle to slow down, all of which are detrimental to the environment, ecosystem, and human beings," the study said, advocating intense conservation efforts at the BBBS.

Assam is one of the most biodiversity-rich States in India and home to about 950 bird species, including 17 endemic species. The State has 55 Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas that act as the hotspots for various avian species.



'Bill on simultaneous polls will deepen the north-south fault lines'

The Hindu Bureau

NEW DELHI

Noting that the sharpest reaction to the 'one nation, one election' (ONOE) Bill had come in from the southern States, veteran journalist and author Neeraja Chowdhury on Friday questioned the need for going ahead with the legislation that will deepen the "north-south fault lines".

Speaking at the 15th Tarkunde Memorial Lecture, Ms. Chowdhury said: "In the consultation that the Law Commission held with political parties in 2017, the sharpest reaction to the proposed Bill had come from the southern States, and of course, we heard leaders like M.K. Stalin (Tamil Nadu Chief Minister) expressing himself very sharply against this proposed Bill".

She added that "as it is, the southern States are

concerned about the delimitation exercise that is due in 2026".

Two Bills seeking to implement simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and the State Assemblies were introduced in the Lok Sabha on Tuesday by Law Minister Arjun Ram Meghwal.

The Constitution (129th Amendment) Bill was introduced in the House by Mr. Meghwal after a 90-minute debate, followed by a division of votes as Opposition members insisted on it. He also introduced the Union Territories Amendment Bill, which seeks to align elections in the Union Territories of Puducherry, Delhi, and Jammu and Kashmir with the Lok Sabha election.

Ms. Chowdhury went on to say that "as the Bill is worded", simultaneous elections cannot be rolled out before 2034.



