CATMOCK DAILY CAPSULE

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AFGHANISTAN SAYS PAKISTANI ATTACK IN KABUL KILLED 400 ***- The Hindu***

Rescuers recovered more bodies from the rubble of a drug rehabilitation hospital in Kabul on Tuesday after officials said an overnight airstrike by Pakistan killed more than 400 people. Islamabad has rejected Afghanistan's accusation that it had targeted the hospital, insisting that its strikes, also conducted in eastern Afghanistan on Monday, were aimed at military facilities.

Pakistan also dismissed Afghanistan's claims of hundreds of casualties as propaganda. While crowds gathered to search for their loved ones among the injured and the dead, it was not possible to independently confirm the toll.

"While the world's attention has been focussed on the war in West Asia this month, another conflict has been brewing in India's own backyard, and is now in its third week. This dramatic escalation of the cross-border clashes between Pakistan and Afghanistan has now caused significant civilian casualties, so it is the top story on our front page," says Suresh Nambath, Editor, The Hindu. "India has also reacted sharply, 'unequivocally' condemning Pakistan's bombing of the Omid Drug Addiction Treatment Hospital, terming it 'barbaric' and 'unconscionable'."

The conflict between Afghanistan and Pakistan has seen repeated cross-border clashes as well as airstrikes inside Afghanistan. International calls for a ceasefire have gone unheeded.

Pakistan accuses Afghanistan of providing safe haven for militants who carry out attacks inside Pakistan, especially for the Pakistani Taliban. The group is separate but closely allied with the Afghan Taliban who took over Afghanistan in 2021 in the wake of the chaotic withdrawal of U.S.-led troops. Kabul denies the charge.

In a late-night post on X, Afghanistan's deputy government spokesperson Hamdullah Fitrat said the airstrike hit the Omid Addiction Treatment Hospital, a 2,000-bed facility in Kabul, at about 9 p.m. local time and that large sections of the facility had been destroyed.

Interior Ministry spokesperson Abdul Mateen Qani said Tuesday that 408 people had been killed and 265 injured. Night-time local television footage showed security forces using flash lights as they carried casualties from the site while firefighters struggled to extinguish the flames.

The Omid hospital was renamed and expanded in size roughly a year ago from the Ibn Sina Drug Addiction Treatment Hospital as part of government plans to stamp out drug addiction in the country. The site, near Kabul's international airport, is located beside a former NATO military base, Camp Phoenix, where U.S. forces used to train the Afghan National Army. After the Taliban seized power, the base was taken over by Afghanistan's new authorities. It is not clear what is now housed on the site of the former base.

Pakistan's Information Ministry said in an X post that the Pakistani military had "precisely targeted" Camp Phoenix, which it said was now a "military terrorist ammunition and equipment storage site." However, it said that the hospital was "multiple kilometres" away from the former camp and accused Afghan officials of lying. Google Maps shows another location, east of Kabul city, also labelled as Camp Phoenix.

BANANAS COULD GO EXTINCT. WAIT... WHAT? ***- Finshot***

You and I consume roughly 70–80 bananas a year. When we say “you and I”, we mean the average Indian. This makes bananas the most commonly produced and consumed fruit in India, and the world.

India is the world’s largest banana producer, producing about 35 million tonnes of the fruit every year. But nearly 90% of it is consumed within the country. That’s largely because India has smaller landholdings compared to countries like Ecuador and the Philippines, which dominate the global export market.

And smaller landholdings bring their own challenges. It’s harder to use advanced technology to spray pesticides across plantations. Post-harvest logistics aren’t always efficient, so fruits can spoil before they’re export-ready. And maintaining uniform quality — something global markets demand, is difficult. All of this means that despite producing nearly a quarter of the world’s bananas, India’s share in global exports is just about 1%.

But soon, even this market may be disrupted because the banana, as we know it, could actually go extinct.

Yup, you read that right. Okay, that may be a bit of an exaggeration. But hear us out.

There are more than 1,000 banana varieties in the world, with India alone having over 300 native varieties. But there’s just one we know to be a commercial favourite. It’s called the Cavendish, the G9 variety or also the supermarket banana. In India, you commonly know it by names like Grand Naine, Robusta, Bhusaval, Basrai, and Shrimanth.

These bananas trace their origins to Southeast Asia (possibly China) and were eventually shipped to different parts of the world by the 18th century. When they reached Mauritius, British horticulturalist and physician Charles Telfair got hold of them, planted some in his garden, and also sent a sample back to England, where it was grown as an exotic fruit by wealthy plant collectors. The banana eventually reached the garden of the sixth Duke of Devonshire, William Cavendish, whose gardener Joseph Paxton named the variety after his employer.

Now, cavendish bananas were known to be of uniform size and to have a long shelf life. But they weren’t always the preferred variety for global trade, simply because there was an even more commercially favoured banana back then — the Gros Michel (also known as Big Mike). The Cavendish was considered too delicate compared to the Gros Michel because bananas had to be loaded onto ships in bunches for global trade. And since the Cavendish bruised easily and had to be boxed, they couldn’t be shipped as conveniently as the Gros Michel. Some also felt that the Cavendish wasn’t as sweet. So for the next century or so, the Gros Michel was the dominant export variety.

But then a fungal disease called Panama disease, which started in Central America, quickly spread to most of the world’s commercial banana plantations and devastated the Gros Michel. This disease is caused by a soil-borne fungus called Fusarium. Once it infects the soil, it affects the plant’s vascular system, prevents it from absorbing water, and eventually leads to yellowing, wilting, and death of the plant. It can spread through contaminated soil, water, equipment, and even by wind. And since there’s no effective cure, infected plantations often have to be abandoned or shifted to other crops.

So eventually, as the disease spread across the world, it effectively wiped out Gros Michel as a viable export variety by 1965. And producers then switched to the Cavendish, which, while not perfect, was uniform, suitable for exports, and at the time resistant to Panama disease.

But now, nearly sixty years later, the Cavendish too seems to be affected by another strain of this very disease that killed the Gros Michel. This strain, called Tropical Race 4 (TR4), has begun to impact banana plantations across the world, including in India, particularly affecting the Cavendish variety. And if left unchecked, it could lead to significant yield losses and threaten the world's most widely consumed commercial banana.

Now you might wonder, "Okay, we do have so many other banana varieties. So what's the big deal?"

The thing is, there's no other variety that comes close to the Cavendish in terms of uniformity or the fact that it doesn't ripen and bruise as easily as many other existing banana varieties. That's exactly why it's preferred for global shipments where transportation times are long.
Besides, Cavendish bananas, and most other commercial banana varieties, are essentially clones of a seedless banana plant, which makes them all susceptible to this disease. Meaning, long ago, bananas available in markets weren't seedless. They had hard seeds, which were unpleasant to eat and difficult to bite into. So when farmers found a naturally seedless variety, they began propagating it by cutting a part of the plant (like a sucker) and planting it elsewhere so it would grow into a new plant. And that's how we got the seedless bananas we commercially consume today.
So since all of these are clones, and the Cavendish banana variety has created a kind of monoculture that the world depends on, a disease that affects one plant can affect all of them, and potentially wipe out the entire variety, just like what happened with the Gros Michel.
So how do we save the world's most commonly consumed fruit from this disease, you ask?
Well, scientists at the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) have been working on a solution in the form of a biopesticide that can help manage the disease. This biopesticide has been developed using a beneficial strain of fungi called Trichoderma. A few years ago, ICAR scientists had already developed a formulation that was effective against Fusarium wilt in crops like tomatoes and chillies. Building on that, they modified it to tackle Panama disease in bananas. It's called 'ICAR FUSICONT'. And this formulation helps control the Fusarium fungus from multiplying and affecting the roots, while also improving the plant's resistance, if applied at regular intervals during the banana crop cycle, which lasts about 14–16 months.
But that does not mean this Indian formulation can save the world's Cavendish bananas. That's because ICAR's formulation has been tested in specific Indian conditions — on particular G9 cultivars and soil-climate settings. And that doesn't automatically translate to effectiveness or economic viability in other banana producing regions such as Latin America, Africa, or Southeast Asia. Besides, each country has its own regulatory approvals, which can slow or even prevent the rapid adoption of any new biopesticide.

So there are only two other ways to tackle this problem.

One option is a genetically modified banana. Basically, you take a gene from a wild banana variety that is resistant to TR4 and transfer it to the Cavendish variety. But the problem here is that genetically modified crops are highly regulated across the world. They have to go through

strict food safety checks, as they could potentially introduce allergens or other issues. So even consumers could be wary of them.
And the second solution, which might sound simple, is to shift to another export banana variety. But that's not as easy as it sounds. Consumers have grown used to the Cavendish and aren't easily willing to accept a different kind of banana. So changing that preference isn't likely to happen any time soon.
Which could mean one thing. The most widely grown and consumed commercial banana might slowly disappear from global trade. And you may only have a few left in your backyard.
So yeah, the Cavendish banana, at least as a dominant global variety, could fade away over the next few decades. And we may soon have to sing the 1923 hit song by Frank Silver and Irving Cohn, "Yes! We Have No Bananas."
Unless the world comes up with a way to save it.

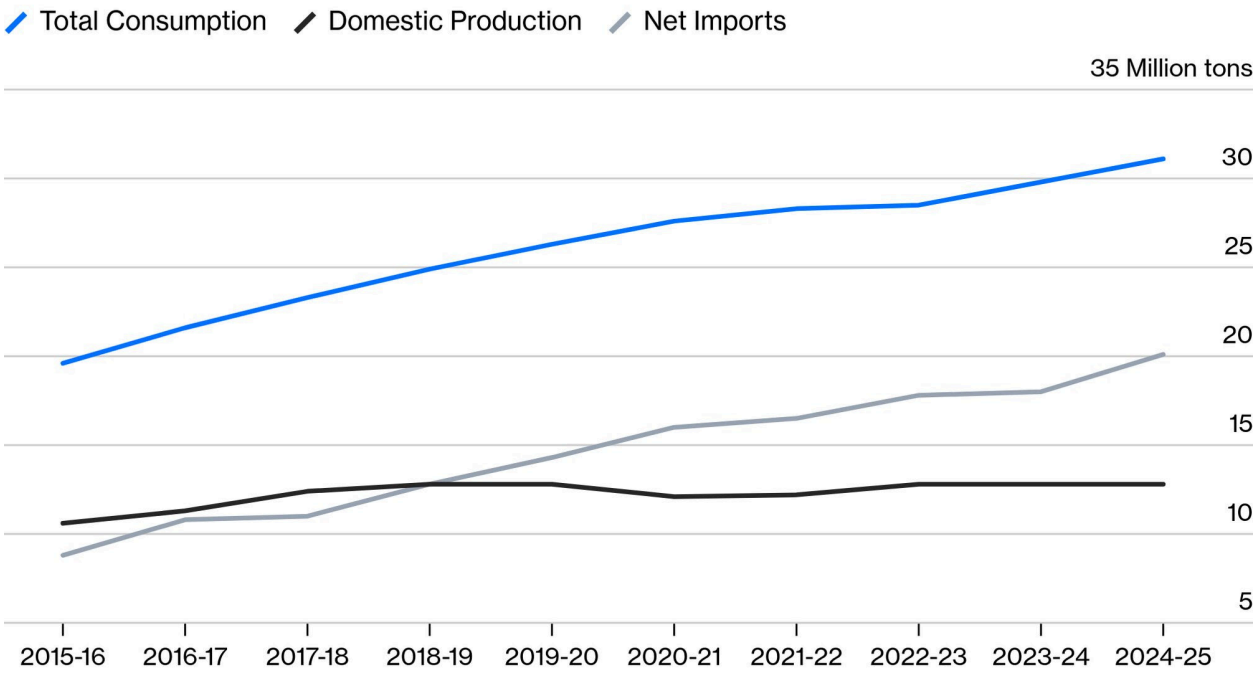
HOW TO WIN FRIENDS AND *NOT* INFLUENCE PEOPLE **- Bloomberg**

Have you ever had a friend who's somehow at every party but never on the group chat? Everyone's heard of them. They get invited to the neighborhood cookout. They're pleasant at dinner. But when you get fired and need someone to ugly cry with at 2 a.m., you don't FaceTime them. Not because they wouldn't pick up, but because it would just be … weird? You genuinely enjoy their company! You'd just never ask them for a favor.

India is that friend.

"New Delhi has booked a place at every high table — the Quad with Washington, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization with Beijing, BRICS with Moscow, and the I2U2 Group with Tel Aviv and Abu Dhabi. The national interest, we were told, required us to be close to everyone, but not too close to anyone," writes Mihir Sharma. Turns out, it's not exactly a great strategy in the middle of a war.

As Andy Mukherjee wrote last week, "almost 65% of India's cooking fuel today is directly imported in large vessels, and 90% of that traverses the Strait of Hormuz."



Prime Minister Narendra Modi, looking to cash in on the goodwill he's built, reached out to the Iranian president about "the need for unhindered transit of goods and energy." The result of said conversation? Two tankers — out of two dozen — were permitted through the Strait of Hormuz. To free more Indian-flagged vessels, Mihir says Modi "will have to burn some bridges with Washington" after spending the past three years cozying up to Israel. From Tehran's perspective, Mihir says, "India is either a bad friend or a naïve one."

With the strait at a standstill, India's "restaurants are already shutting their doors or truncating their menus; and households are being told that they will have to wait longer to replace natural-gas cylinders," Mihir writes. "When I tried to buy my mother in Kolkata an induction stove this week, the best-reviewed ones on Amazon had already sold out."

The on-the-ground panic makes Mihir wonder: "What is the point of an elevated global profile if not to have an edge in moments like this? The danger is that its confused presence with influence; being at the table does not mean you shape what happens at it."