

1. Over 1,000 killed in Syria in two days: Who is fighting whom, and why

Introduction

More than 1,000 people have been killed in Syria amid clashes between anti-government groups and security forces and a spate of “revenge killings”, in one of the deadliest episodes of violence in the country since its civil war erupted 14 years ago.

In December, Syria’s long-time leader Bashar al-Assad was unseated by rebel groups. The violence coming months after has cast a shadow on the hopes of a stable future for Syria. Who is fighting whom now, and why?



Distrust among Groups

Bashar al-Assad belongs to the Alawite community, a Shia sect of Islam. The Alawites, a minority, had dominated government posts under Assad, and are still loyal to him.

The group that has come to power after his fall, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), is an al-Qaeda offshoot. Alawites and other Syrian minorities, such as Christians and the Druze, fear they will face persecution under this hardline Sunni regime, although interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa has pledged to carry everyone along.

What has happened in the past three days?

On March 6, pro-Assad militias attacked government forces in the coastal area of Jableh, dominated by Alawites. The militias targeted security patrols and checkpoints, killing 13 personnel.

In the government crackdown that followed, scores of civilians were killed. The government forces were joined by armed Sunni fighters, who are reported to have targeted and killed Alawite people in revenge for atrocities under the Assad regime.

Why has Syria been in the middle of a civil war?

From 1971, Syria was in the control of Hafez al-Assad, Bashar’s father and all-powerful President, seen by many as a dictator. Bashar took over in 2000 after Hafez died. In 2011, when the Arab Spring saw dictators being toppled across West Asia, protests began against Assad too.

Many in Syria believed that while Sunnis were the majority, power and resources were concentrated in the hands of the Alawites. After coming to power, Assad had opened up the

economy, but the gains had largely been limited to the elites. Thus, when protests began — initially peacefully — price rise and unemployment were among the major issues.

Assad's regime cracked down on the protesters, and the agitation soon spiralled into armed civil war.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Issues

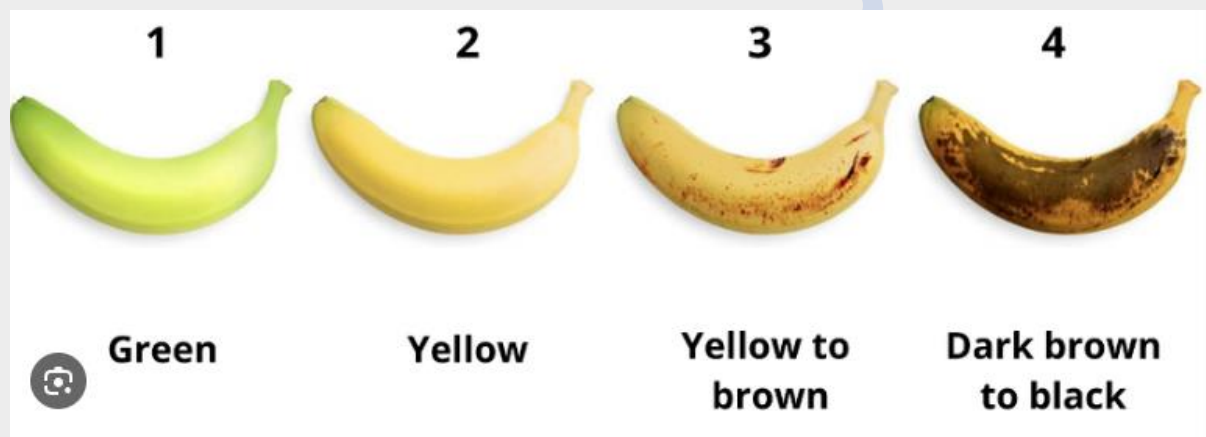
Source: The Hindu

2. How a gene-edited banana may help reduce food waste

Introduction

Brown, over-ripe bananas often end up in dustbins, even when they are perfectly edible. This has led to scientists developing a new genetically-engineered banana which has a longer shelf-life, and does not brown as much.

Tropic, the UK-based biotech company which has developed these bananas, claims that their fruit remains fresh and yellow for 12 hours after being peeled, and is also less likely to turn brown when bumped during harvesting and transportation.



Why do bananas turn brown?

Bananas boast a colourful life cycle — they start at a deep green, change to a delicious yellow, and end (if not consumed beforehand) as brown. These changes are a product of their ripening process, which is caused by a hormone called ethylene.

Although many fruits produce ethylene, bananas produce a lot of it. And unlike melons and citrus fruits, they keep producing ethylene even after being harvested. Contact with ethylene triggers the activity of a number of genes, including one which linked to the production of the enzyme polyphenol oxidase (PPO).

It is this enzyme that makes bananas turn brown. PPO coming in contact with oxygen breaks down the yellow pigment in bananas to a brown hue.

Bruising of the fruit — as is common during its handling — leads to the production of higher quantities of ethylene, and thus speeds up the ripening and browning process.

How was a non-browning banana produced?

The company made precise changes to existing banana genes such that the production of PPO is disabled. This does not stop a banana from ripening, but helps keep up appearances so that the fruit continues to look appetising for longer.

Why does this matter?

Bananas are extremely perishable, with some estimates saying that as much as 50% of the crop goes to waste each year. Preventing bananas from browning may reduce food waste by encouraging people to eat older but edible fruit.

Relevance: GS Prelims; Science & Technology

Source: Indian Express

3. As Prime Minister Modi lands in Mauritius, why the island country matters to India

Introduction

Prime Minister Narendra Modi is in Mauritius for a two-day State visit, his second since 2015. He is the Chief Guest at Mauritius' National Day Celebrations on March 12.

Close ties with India

Mauritius, a strategically located island nation in the western Indian Ocean, is an important neighbour for India. A key reason for the special ties is that people of Indian-origin comprise nearly 70% of the island's population of 1.2 million.

Mauritius was once a French colony, before being taken over by the British. Under the nearly century-long French rule (in the 1700s), Indians were first brought to Mauritius from the Puducherry region to work as artisans and masons. Under British rule, about half a million Indian indentured workers came to Mauritius between 1834 and the early 1900s. About two-thirds of these workers settled in Mauritius.

National Day

The National Day of Mauritius has an interesting Indian connection. Mahatma Gandhi had briefly stopped in Mauritius on his way to India from South Africa in 1901. He inspired the Indian workers in Mauritius for their rights and welfare. As tribute to Gandhi, the National Day of Mauritius is celebrated on March 12, the date of the Mahatma's Dandi march.

History of ties

Mauritius was among the first few countries with which independent India established diplomatic relations in 1948. Since its independence from the British in 1968, Mauritius has mainly been ruled by two major political families, the Ramgoolams (Seewoosagur Ramgoolam and his son, Navin) and the Jugnauths (Anerood Jugnauth and son, Pravind). Navin Ramgoolam, who won the elections last year, has been the PM of Mauritius twice before (from 1995 to 2000, and from 2005 to 2014).

His father led the country's freedom struggle and was the first PM of independent Mauritius. He worked closely with many Indian freedom fighters, including Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and

Sarojini Naidu. He had strong links with Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose and even proofread one of Bose's books, *The Indian Struggle* (1934).



Ties today: Infra, China factor

In March 2015, when PM Modi visited Mauritius, India signed a Memorandum of Understanding to improve transport facilities at Agaléga island.

Agaléga island is located 1,100 km north of Mauritius and is closer to the Indian southern coast. It is spread over an area of 70 sq km. In February 2024, India and Mauritius jointly inaugurated the air strip and the jetty projects.

For India, China's increasing footprint in the Indian Ocean region has been a cause of concern. It thus wants to work closely with island countries like Mauritius.

Trade

India is amongst the largest trading partners of Mauritius. Mauritius is the second largest source of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) into India for FY 2023-24, after Singapore. Mauritius and India signed the Comprehensive Economic Cooperation and Partnership Agreement on February 22, 2021, after nearly 15 years of negotiations. It is the first trade agreement signed by India with an African country.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Relations

Source: Indian Express

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