News Analysis (14 Apr, 2020)

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Floor Test is Governor's Discretion: SC

Why in News

Recently, the **Supreme Court of India** has held that a **Governor** can call for a **floor test** any time he/she objectively feels a government in power has **lost the confidence of the House** and is on shaky ground.

Key Highlights

- The S.C. held that a **Governor can call for a trust vote (confidence motion)** if he/she has arrived at a prima facie opinion, based on objective material, that the incumbent State government has lost its majority in the Assembly.
  - However, while **directing a trust vote,** the **Governor should not favour a particular political party.**
  - Timing of a trust vote may tilt the balance towards the party possessing a majority at the time the trust vote is directed.
- Governor's power to call for a floor test is **not restricted only before the inception of a State government** immediately after elections, but **continues throughout its term.**
- The SC has clarified that the **Governor's power of trust vote does not hamper any disqualification proceedings pending before the Speaker.**
  - A **Governor need not wait for the Speaker's decision** on the resignation of rebel Members of Legislative Assembly (MLAs) before calling for a trust vote.

Trust Vote

- A **confidence motion** or a **vote of confidence** or a **trust vote,** is sought by the government in power on the floor of the House.

- It **enables the elected representatives to determine** if the **Council of Ministers commanded the confidence** of the House.
- The idea underlying the trust vote is to **uphold the political accountability of the elected government to the State legislature.**
- **No-confidence motion:**
    - A **no-confidence motion,** or **vote of no-confidence,** or a **no-trust vote,** can be **sought by any House member to express that they no longer have confidence in the government.**

Floor Test

- It is a **term used for the test of the majority.** If there are **doubts against the Chief Minister** (CM) of a State, he/she can be **asked to prove the majority in the House.**
    - In case of a **coalition government,** the **CM** may be **asked to move a vote of confidence and win a majority.**
- In the **absence of a clear majority,** when there is more than one individual staking claim to form the government, the **Governor may call for a special session** to see who has the majority to form the government.
    - Some legislators may be absent or choose not to vote. The numbers are then considered based only on those MLAs who were present to vote.

Constitutional Provisions Related to Governor

- **Article 163:** It talks about the discretionary power of the governor.
- **Article 256:** The executive power of the Union shall extend to the giving of such directions to a State as may appear to the Government of India to be necessary for that purpose.
- **Article 257:** The executive power of the Union shall also extend to the giving of directions to a State as to the construction and maintenance of means of communication declared in the direction to be of national or military importance:
- **Article 355:** It entrusts the duty upon the Union to protect the states against "external aggression" and "internal disturbance" to ensure that the government of every State is carried on in accordance with the provisions of the Constitution.
- **Article 356:** In the event that a state government is unable to function according to constitutional provisions, the Central government can take direct control of the state machinery. The state's governor issues the proclamation, after obtaining the consent of the President of India.
- **Article 357:** It deals with Exercise of legislative powers under Proclamation issued under Article 356 by the central government.

Release Prisoners Due to Covid-19

Why in News

Recently, the Supreme Court passed orders in a **suo motu** hearing on measures taken **to decongest prisons, correction homes and detention centres due to the Covid-19 outbreak.**

Key Points

- Earlier, the Bench had ordered the States and the Union Territories to **set up special** committees to examine the cases of prisoners and shortlist those who could be granted bail or parole.
- The SC ordered not to release prisoners on **interim bail or parole** who test positive for **Covid-19**.
- The court ordered to **release prisoners or detenus who have been under detention for two years in the foreigners' detention centres in Assam** on account of the Coronavirus pandemic.
    - The court modified its May 2019 order to allow these detenus to furnish a bond of Rs. 5,000 instead of Rs. 1 lakh. The Court also asked them to furnish two Indian citizens as sureties.
    - The central government objected to their release on the grounds that they will mix with the local population again
- The Court ordered that **appropriate tests for Covid-19** should be conducted on prisoners scheduled for release.
- In case a prisoner who has been released is suffering from coronavirus after the release, he/she shall be put in an appropriate **quarantine facility** by the concerned authorities.
- The court directed that transportation of prisoners would be done in full compliance of the rules and norms of **social distancing.**

Source: TH

Supreme Court on Free Testing of Covid-19

Why in News

The **Supreme Court** modified its April 8, 2020 order to clarify on free testing for **Covid-19.**

Key Points

- Private labs would continue to **charge the <u>Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR)</u> rates of up to ₹4,500** for tests from people who can afford to pay.
- **<u>Free testing for Covid-19</u>** shall continue to be made available to the poor eligible under the **<u>Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana.</u>**
- Free testing would also be made available to any other category of **economically weaker sections of society as notified by the government from time to time.**
- The Supreme Court directed the Ministry of Health & Family Welfare to identify beneficiaries among the weaker sections of society.
    - This includes workers belonging to low income groups in the informal sectors and beneficiaries of **<u>Direct Benefit Transfer</u>** who can be made eligible for free testing.
- It also directed the Ministry to issue **appropriate guidelines** in this regard within a week.

Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya

- PM-JAY offers a sum insured of **Rs.5 lakh per family** for secondary care (which doesn't involve a super specialist) as well as tertiary care (which involves a super specialist).
- It is an entitlement-based scheme that targets the beneficiaries as identified by latest **Socio-Economic Caste Census (SECC) data.**
    - Once identified by the database, the beneficiary is considered insured and can walk into any empanelled hospital.
- The insurance cost is shared by the **centre and the state mostly in the ratio of 60:40.**
- **Packaged rates (Rates that include everything so that each product or service is not charged for separately):**
    - They also mention the number of average days of hospitalization for a medical procedure and supporting documents that are needed.
    - They are flexible, but they can't charge the beneficiary once fixed by the hospitals.
    - The scheme also has prescribed a daily limit for medical management.
- **The National Health Agency** has been constituted as an autonomous entity under the Society Registration Act, 1860 for effective implementation of PM-JAY in alliance with state governments.
- **The State Health Agency (SHA)** is the apex body of the State Government responsible for the implementation of AB PM-JAY in the State.

<u>**Source : TH**</u>

Science of Covid-19 Spread

Why in News

The **novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2)** has already left a large footprint and is still spreading itself. Fighting this **pandemic** needs an understanding of how it works and spreads and preventive measures to stop it.

Key Points

- **Basic Reproductive Ratio (R0)**
  - It tells the **average number of people who will catch the disease from one contagious person.**
    - It is pronounced as **R-nought.**
  - The **larger this number, the more contagious** is the disease caused by the virus and the faster it will spread in the community.
  - R-nought can be **viewed as the product of three numbers:**
    - The number of days an infected person remains infectious (that is, can infect others).
    - The number of susceptible persons available to infect.
    - The chance that a susceptible person gets infected.
  - The **easiest way to keep R-nought low** is by observing **social-distancing.**
    - **However,** maintaining distance from those who show symptoms of infection is not sufficient.
    - It is suggested to keep distance from **every other person as many apparently normal persons may actually be infected** without showing symptoms of infection.
  - Therefore, just as R-nought influences the spread of **Covid-19**, **human behaviour also influences R-nought.**
- **How R-naught works?**
  - A person infected with SARS-CoV-2 can remain infective for 10-14 days.
    - During the initial phases of spread, there is a large number of uninfected persons to infect.
  - For **SARS-CoV-2, R-nought has been estimated to be between 2 and 3.** For example:
    - Assuming R-nought to be 2 and the infective period to be 10 days, the first person will infect two others, each of whom will infect two others (22), each of these four persons will infect two others (23) and so on. In 10 days, one infected person will have infected 2,046 persons.
  - As **herd immunity increases** in the community, many infected persons stop infecting others. Then, R-nought becomes less than one, on average.
  - Consequently, there are **few new cases arising** and existing cases either recover or die, slowing down the disease spread.

- **Herd Immunity**
  - It **happens when so many people in a community become immune to an infectious disease that it stops the disease from spreading.**
  - A person who is infected or has recovered **cannot be infected again.** At least, not in the next several months or even years.
    - An infection activates the immune system which learns to recognize the virus and remembers it. The next time the virus tries to infect a person, her/his immune defenses are able to recognise and protect against further infection.
  - Therefore, with the spread of the infection, there is less and less number of uninfected persons to infect. An increasing number of persons in the community gains immunity from having been infected earlier.
  - However, **if there was a vaccine for SARS-CoV-2,** it would have **helped achieve herd immunity without a large number of persons being infected.**
    - A vaccine stimulates the effect of an infection and builds immune resistance to the virus.
    - **India has eradicated polio** by using vaccines against it.
- **Series Interval**
  - During an outbreak, people in the community get symptomatically infected one after another. The **length of time between appearance of two successive persons with symptoms of infection is called the Series Interval.**
  - This interval **informs about the spreadability of the virus.**
    - The shorter this interval, the greater the speed of spread through the community.
  - For **SARS-CoV-2, the Series Interval is between 5 and 7 days.**
    - For normal influenza, this interval is 1.3 days.
  - However, Covid-19 is spreading through the community slowly and herd immunity will therefore arise slowly which implies a **longer duration of the pandemic.**

- **Herd Community Threshold and Lockdown**
  - The **proportion of individuals in the country who are immune to the disease is called the herd immunity threshold.**
  - It is **calculated as 1-(1/R0).**
    - For SARS-CoV-2, R0 is 2 or 3.
    - An R0 of 2 would mean a herd immunity threshold of 1-(1/2) or 50%.
    - An R0 of 3 would mean a herd immunity threshold of 1-(1/3) or 67%.
  - **Lockdown can be safely lifted if about two-thirds of the population attains immunity to the virus.** Then the chances of an infected person finding another person to infect are sufficiently low and the virus stops spreading.
  - However, **estimating the number of those who have gained immunity is a tough task.** It can be done by **testing the citizens randomly and in large numbers** through surveillance testing in communities.

Preventive Measures

- **Contract tracing reduces the likelihood of the infection** thereby reducing R-naught in the region.
    Contact tracing:
    > It is the identification and listing of persons in close contact with an infected person, testing to identify infected persons among contacts and isolating them or, if testing of all contacts is infeasible, isolating all contacts and following them up for signs of infection.
- **Identification of most affected geographical regions** and **extending lockdowns** there, **intensifying surveillance-testing, more strict monitoring** of cases and isolation of infected people is required.
    > There will be an overall reduction of infection in the country if the spread of the infection from these high-intensity regions can be arrested.
- All large **gatherings, including religious and political gatherings, must continue to be banned.**
- **Government needs to provide food and basic amenities** to the people whose life has come to a halt due to the lockdown.
  - The lockdown needs to be to soften and daily wage earners should be allowed to work.
  - A **policy should be framed on allowing a minority of citizens to work.** However, it should only be done if social distancing is maintained and the net of symptom-monitoring and community-testing is casted more widely.
- Surveillance-testing and deep monitoring should continue at all levels throughout the country to identify new pockets of high-intensity.

Source: TH

Retail Inflation Dropped

Why in News

According to the **Consumer Price Index (CPI) data released by the National Statistical Office (NSO)**, the **retail inflation in March 2020 dropped to 5.91%** due to decrease in demand and lowered food prices.

Key Points

- **Retail inflation (or CPI-based inflation) decreased to 5.91%** in March 2020 from 6.58% in February 2020.
  - The retail inflation rate was based on 66% of the usual price quotations as the **nationwide lockdown** to counter **Covid-19 pandemic** had led to suspension of fieldwork for price collection after March 19,2020.
- The **inflation rate in March 2020 remained within the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI's) medium-term target of 4±2%** for **Consumer Price Index (CPI) inflation.**
  - This was due to suppressed demand, especially for non-essential items, as the lockdown was imposed towards the end of March,2020.
  - This **inflation range (4% within a band of +/- 2%) was recommended by the committee headed by Urjit Patel** in 2014.
- **Fuel and Light segment:** The inflation rose to 6.59% from 6.36% in February 2020.
- **Food inflation moderated to 8.76%** from 10.81% in March 2020.
  - The food price inflation of various items like vegetables, spices, pulses continue to be in double digits.
  - Pressure is expected due to the shortages witnessed in different centres with mandi arrivals being affected due to lockdown.
- According to economists, inflation is expected to be brought down by **low energy prices and subdued economic activity.** However, the food price inflation of 8.7% will tend to increase.
  - It is expected that the **Reserve Bank of India (RBI)** undertakes further repo **rate cuts,** though inflation may not remain the primary deciding factor in view of the **other economic impact due to Covid-19.**
  - **Repo Rate** is the rate at which the RBI lends money to commercial banks in the event of any shortfall of funds.
    - When RBI increases the repo rate, this acts as a disincentive for banks to borrow from the central bank. This ultimately reduces the money supply in the economy and thus helps in arresting inflation.
    - The RBI reduces the repo rate in the event of a fall in inflationary pressures. Ideally, a low repo rate should translate into low-cost loans for general masses.

Inflation

- Inflation refers to the **rise in the prices of most goods and services** of daily or common use, such as food, clothing, housing, recreation, transport, consumer staples, etc.
- Inflation measures the average price change in a basket of commodities and services over time.
- Inflation is indicative of the decrease in the purchasing power of a unit of a country's currency. This could ultimately lead to a deceleration in economic growth.
- However, a **moderate level of inflation is required in the economy** to ensure that production is promoted.
- In India, the **Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation** measures inflation.
- In India, inflation is primarily measured by two main indices — **WPI (Wholesale Price Index) and CPI (Consumer Price Index)** which measure wholesale and retail-level price changes, respectively.
  - The CPI calculates the difference in the price of commodities and services such as food, medical care, education, electronics etc, which Indian consumers buy for use.
  - The CPI has five sub-groups including food and beverages, fuel and light, housing and clothing, bedding and footwear.

The National Statistical Office

- NSO is the **central statistical agency of the Government** mandated under the **Statistical Services Act** 1980 under the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation.
- It is responsible for the development of arrangements for **providing statistical information services** to meet the needs of the Government and other users for information on which to base policy, planning, monitoring and management decisions.
  - The services include collecting, compiling and disseminating official statistical information.
  - All business operations in NSO are done in compliance with **international standards, procedures and best practices.**

Source : IE

Petition Demanding Wages for MGNREGA Workers

Why in News

- **A <u>Public Interest Litigation (PIL)</u> petition** has been filed **in the <u>Supreme Court</u>** demanding that the **government pay full wages** to all active job card holders of MGNREGA during lockdown.
- According to data, employment under the **<u>Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)</u>** declined to just over 1% of the usual rate in April, 2020 due to the **<u>Covid-19</u>** lockdown.

Key Points

- **Less than 1.9 lakh families** have been provided work under the scheme in April 2020, in comparison to almost 1.6 crore households which were provided work in March,2020 and the 1.8 crore households employed under the scheme in February, 2020 before the lockdown began.
- **Chhattisgarh was the highest employment generator** under the scheme in April, providing work to more than 70,000 families. It was followed by Andhra Pradesh with more than 53,000 households given work.
- **Concerns**
  - The decline in employment rates under the scheme is despite the fact that **migrant workers returning to villages** should have increased demand in rural areas.
  - **No exceptions from restrictions** were provided for the MGNREGA under the lockdown.
      - This was despite States being asked to continue implementing the scheme while following social distancing guidelines.
  - The Ministry of Finance had said MGNREGA daily wages would be increased by ₹20, and would support the 13.6 crore families who hold job cards.
      - This relief is meaningless when most States have closed down MGNREGA worksites to curb the spread of Covid-19.

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005

- The Act aims at **enhancing the livelihood security of people in rural areas** by guaranteeing **hundred days of wage employment in a financial year** to a rural household whose adult members (at least 18 years of age) volunteer to do unskilled work.
- The central government bears the **full cost of unskilled labour, and 75% of the cost of material** (the rest is borne by the states).
- It is a demand-driven, social security and labour law that aims to enforce the 'right to work'.
- **The Ministry of Rural Development (MRD)**, Government of India in association with state governments, monitors the implementation of the scheme.

- **Agriculture and allied activities constitute more than 65%** of the works taken up under the programme.
- Social inclusion, gender parity, social security and equitable growth are the founding pillars of MGNREGA.
- Overall, 7.6 crore families hold active job cards under the scheme, and almost 5.5 crore families found work under the scheme in 2019.

Source : TH

Interoperable Set Top Boxes: TRAI

Why in News

Recently, the **Telecom Regulatory Authority of India** (TRAI) has recommended that all **Set Top Boxes (STBs)** in the country **must be made interoperable.**

> It means that consumers should be able to use the **same STB across different DTH (direct-to-home) or cable TV providers.**

Key Points

- **STBs** deployed in the cable **TV networks** are **non-interoperable.** STBs in the **DTH players** comply with **licence conditions to support common interface module based interoperability.** So, in practice, they are also not readily interoperable.
- **Issues** due to the lack of interoperability:
  - It deprives the customer of the **freedom to change** her/his service provider.
  - Creates a **hindrance to technological innovation** and improvement in service quality.
  - Hampers the **overall sector growth.**
- **Universal STB has technical and commercial constraints** so the interoperability should be **platform-specific.**
  > Interoperable STBs within the cable TV segment and similarly within the DTH segment should be developed.
- The **Ministry of Information and Broadcasting** has been suggested to make the **required amendments in licensing and registration conditions to make interoperability mandatory.**
  - It has also been recommended to set up a **coordination committee** to **steer implementation of revised STB standards** for both the DTH and the cable TV segments.
  - The committee may **maintain continuous oversight for setting up of the digital TV standards** by **Bureau of Indian Standards** (BIS).

Telecom Regulatory Authority of India

- It was established by an **Act of Parliament (Telecom Regulatory Authority of India Act, 1997)** to regulate telecom services, including fixation/revision of tariffs for telecom services.
- It provides a fair and transparent policy environment which promotes a level playing field and facilitates fair competition.
- The **TRAI Act was amended to establish a Telecommunications Dispute Settlement and Appellate Tribunal (TDSAT)** to take over the adjudicatory and disputes functions from TRAI.
    - TDSAT was **set up to** adjudicate any dispute between a licensor and a licensee, between two or more service providers, between a service provider and a group of consumers, and to hear and dispose of appeals against any direction, decision or order of TRAI.

Source: TH

Dr B. R. Ambedkar's 129th Birth Anniversary

Why in News

Dr. B R Ambedkar's Birth Anniversary is observed every year on 14th April.

Key Points

- Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was born in 1891 in **Mhow,** Central Province (now Madhya Pradesh).
- He is known as the **Father of the Indian Constitution** and was **India's first Law Minister.**
    - He was the **Chairman of the Drafting Committee** for the new Constitution.
- Dr. Ambedkar was a social reformer, jurist, economist, author, polyglot (knowing or using several languages) orator, a scholar and thinker of comparative religions.
- He led the **Mahad Satyagraha** in March 1927 against Hindus who were opposing the decision of the Municipal Board.
    - In 1926, Municipal Board of Mahad (Maharashtra) passed an order to throw open the tank to all communities. Earlier, the untouchables were not allowed to use water from the Mahad tank.
- He **participated** in **all** three **Round Table Conferences.**

- In 1932 Dr. Ambedkar **signed the Poona pact with Mahatma Gandhi,** which **abandoned the idea of separate electorates** for the depressed classes (Communal Award).
  - However, the **seats reserved for the depressed classes were increased** from 71 to 147 in provincial legislatures and to 18% of the total in the Central Legislature.
- His ideas before the **Hilton Young Commission** served as the **foundation of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI).**
- In 1936, he was **elected to the Bombay Legislative Assembly** as a legislator (MLA).
- He was **appointed to the Executive Council** of Viceroy as a **Labour member** in 1942.
- In 1947, Dr. Ambedkar accepted PM Nehru's invitation to become Minister of Law in the first Cabinet of independent India.
- He resigned from the cabinet in 1951, over differences on the **Hindu Code Bill.**
- He converted to **Buddhism.** He passed away on 6th December 1956. **Chaitya Bhoomi** is a memorial to B. R. Ambedkar, located in Mumbai.

Contributions of Dr. Ambedkar

- **Journals:** Dr. Ambedkar launched various journals like:
  - Mooknayak (1920)
  - Bahishkrit Bharat (1927)
  - Samatha (1929)
  - Janata (1930)
- **Books:**
  - Annihilation of Caste
  - Buddha or Karl Marx
  - The Untouchable: Who are They and Why They Have Become Untouchables
  - Buddha and His Dhamma
  - The Rise and Fall of Hindu Women
- **Organisations:**
  - Bahishkrit Hitkarini Sabha (1923)
  - Independent Labor Party (1936)
  - Scheduled Castes Federation (1942)

Panchteerath

- The Indian Government has set up Panchteerath **in the memory of Dr BR Ambedkar.**

- Panchteerath include:
    - Amedbkar's **birthplace** in Mhow,
    - The place in London where he stayed while **studying** in the UK
    - **Deeksha Bhoomi** in Nagpur, where he took education
    - **Mahaparinirvan** Sthal in Delhi, and
    - **Chaitya Bhoomi** in Mumbai

Round Table Conferences

- **First Round Table Conference:** It was held in London on Nov. 12, 1930 but the Congress did not participate in it.
    > In March 1931, Mahatma Gandhi and Lord Irwin (Viceroy of India 1926-31) entered into a Pact, called **Gandhi-Irwin Pact,** by which the Congress called off the Civil Disobedience Movement and agreed to participate in the Round Table Conference.
- **Second Round Table Conference:** It was held in London on the 7th of September, 1931.
- **Third Round Table Conference:** It was held in London on the 17th of November, 1932 to consider the reports of various sub-committees appointed from time to time. It ultimately led to the passage of **Govt. of India Act, 1935.**
    > **The Congress did not participate** as most of the leaders were in jail.

Jallianwala Bagh Massacre

Why in News

The Prime Minister of India paid tributes to the martyrs of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 1919.

> 13th April, 2020 marks the 101 years of the incident.

Key Points

- Jallianwala Bagh Massacre, **also called Massacre of Amritsar** was an incident on April 13, 1919, in which British troops fired on a large crowd of unarmed Indians in an open space known as the Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar in Punjab.
    > The **Jallianwala Bagh site in Amritsar is now a national monument.**
- It killed several hundred people and wounded many hundreds more. It marked a **turning point in India's modern history,** in that it left a permanent scar on Indo-British relations and was the precursor to Mahatma Gandhi's full commitment to the cause of Indian nationalism and independence from Britain.

- **Events Before the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre**
  - During **World War I (1914–18)** the British government of India enacted a series of **repressive emergency powers** that were intended to combat subversive activities.
  - By the war's end, expectations were high among the Indian populace that those measures would be eased and that India would be given more political autonomy. The **Montagu-Chelmsford Report,** presented to the British Parliament in **1918,** did in fact recommend **limited local self-government.**
  - Further, the then government of India passed what became known as the **Rowlatt Acts** in early 1919, which essentially extended the repressive wartime measures. The acts were met by widespread anger and discontent among Indians, notably in the Punjab region. **Gandhi** in early April called for a one-day **general strike (Rowlatt Satyagraha)** throughout the country.
  - In Amritsar the news that **prominent Indian leaders (Satya Pal and Saifuddin Kitchlew) had been arrested** and banished from that city sparked violent protests on April 10, in which soldiers fired upon civilians and angry mobs killed several foreign nationals.
  - A force of several dozen troops commanded by **Brig. Gen. Reginald Edward Harry Dyer was given the task of restoring order.** Among the measures taken was a ban on public gatherings.
- **On the Date of the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre**
  - On the afternoon April 13, a crowd of at least 10,000 men, women, and children gathered in the Jallianwala Bagh, which was nearly completely enclosed by walls and had only one exit.
  - It is not clear how many people there were protesters who were defying the ban on public meetings and how many had come to the city from the surrounding region to **celebrate Baisakhi, a spring festival.**
  - Dyer and his soldiers arrived and sealed off the exit. Without warning, the troops opened fire on the crowd, reportedly shooting hundreds of rounds until they ran out of ammunition.
- **After the Incident**
  - The **Bengali poet and Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore renounced the knighthood** that he had received in 1915. Gandhi soon began organizing his first large-scale and sustained nonviolent protest (satyagraha) campaign, the **Non Cooperation Movement (1920–22).**
  - The then government of India ordered an investigation of the incident **(the Hunter Commission)**, which in 1920 censured Dyer for his actions and ordered him to resign from the military.

IMF Cancels Debt Payments

Why in News

Recently, the **International Monetary Fund (IMF)** approved a $500 million grant to cancel six months of debt payments for 25 of the world's most impoverished countries.

Key Points

- This will provide grants to the poorest and most vulnerable member countries of the IMF to tackle the **Covid-19 pandemic**.
- Many of these 25 countries have less than 50 critical care unit beds per country. They will be able to channel more of their scarce financial resources towards vital emergency medical and other relief efforts.
- The money will come from the IMFs revamped **Catastrophe Containment and Relief Trust (CCRT)** which will use recent pledges of **185 million from the United Kingdom** and **100 million from Japan.**
   - The IMF urged other donors to help replenish the trusts resources.
- The IMF approved the immediate debt service relief for **19 African countries including Afghanistan, Haiti, Nepal, Solomon Islands, Tajikistan and Yemen.**

Catastrophe Containment and Relief Trust (CCRT)

- The CCRT **allows the IMF to provide grants for debt relief for the poorest and most vulnerable countries hit by catastrophic natural disasters** or **public health disasters.**
- The relief on debt service payments frees up additional resources to meet exceptional balance of payments needs created by the disaster and for containment and recovery.
- It was established in February 2015 during the **Ebola outbreak** and modified in March 2020 in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

International Monetary Fund (IMF)

- The IMF came into existence after the **UN conference in Bretton Woods** in 1944.
- The 44 countries at that conference sought to build a framework for economic cooperation to avoid a repetition of the competitive devaluations that had contributed to the **Great Depression of the 1930s.**
- IMF currently has 189 member countries, each of **which has representation on the IMF's executive board** in proportion to its financial importance. The **most powerful countries in the global economy have the most voting power.**

Objective

- Foster global monetary cooperation
- Secure financial stability

- Facilitate international trade
- Promote high employment and sustainable economic growth
- And reduce poverty around the world

Functions

- **Provides Financial Assistance: To provide financial assistance to member countries with balance of payments problems, the IMF lends money** to replenish international reserves, stabilize currencies and strengthen conditions for economic growth. Countries must embark on structural adjustment policies monitored by the IMF.
- **IMF Surveillance:** It oversees the international monetary system and monitors the economic and financial policies of its 189 member countries. As part of this process, which takes place both at the global level and in individual countries, the IMF highlights possible risks to stability and advises on needed policy adjustments.
- **Capacity Development:** It provides technical assistance and training to central banks, finance ministries, tax authorities, and other economic institutions. This helps countries raise public revenues, modernize banking systems, develop strong legal frameworks, improve governance, and enhance the reporting of macroeconomic and financial data. It also helps countries to make progress towards the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**.

Source: IE

US Approves Sale of Military Hardware

Why in News

The **US State Department has approved the sale of missiles and torpedoes worth $155 million to India.**
- The sale of **10 AGM-84L Harpoon Block II air launched missiles** is estimated to cost USD 92 million.
- The sale of **16 MK 54 All Up Round Lightweight Torpedoes** and **3 MK 54 Exercise Torpedoes** are estimated to cost $63 million.
- Indian Government has requested the US for these military hardware.

Key Points

- India intends to utilize MK 54 Lightweight Torpedoes on its **P-8I aircraft.**
  - The MK 54 Lightweight Torpedo would provide the capability to conduct **anti-submarine warfare missions.**

- The Harpoon missile system would be integrated into the P-8I aircraft to conduct **anti-surface warfare missions** in defense of critical sea lanes.
    - This will also enhance interoperability with the United States and other allied forces.
- **Harpoon Block II Missile**
    - It is capable of **executing both land-strike and anti-ship missions.**
    - To strike targets on land and ships in port, the missile uses GPS-aided inertial navigation to hit a designated target aimpoint.
    - It can be used against a wide **variety of land-based targets,** including coastal defense sites, surface-to-air missile sites, exposed aircraft, port/industrial facilities and ships in port.
- **MK 54 Torpedoes**
    - Torpedo is a cigar-shaped, self-propelled underwater missile, launched from a submarine, surface vessel, or airplane and designed for exploding upon contact with the hulls of surface vessels and submarines.
    - The MK 54 uses sophisticated processing algorithms to analyze the information, edit out false targets or countermeasures, and then pursue identified threats.
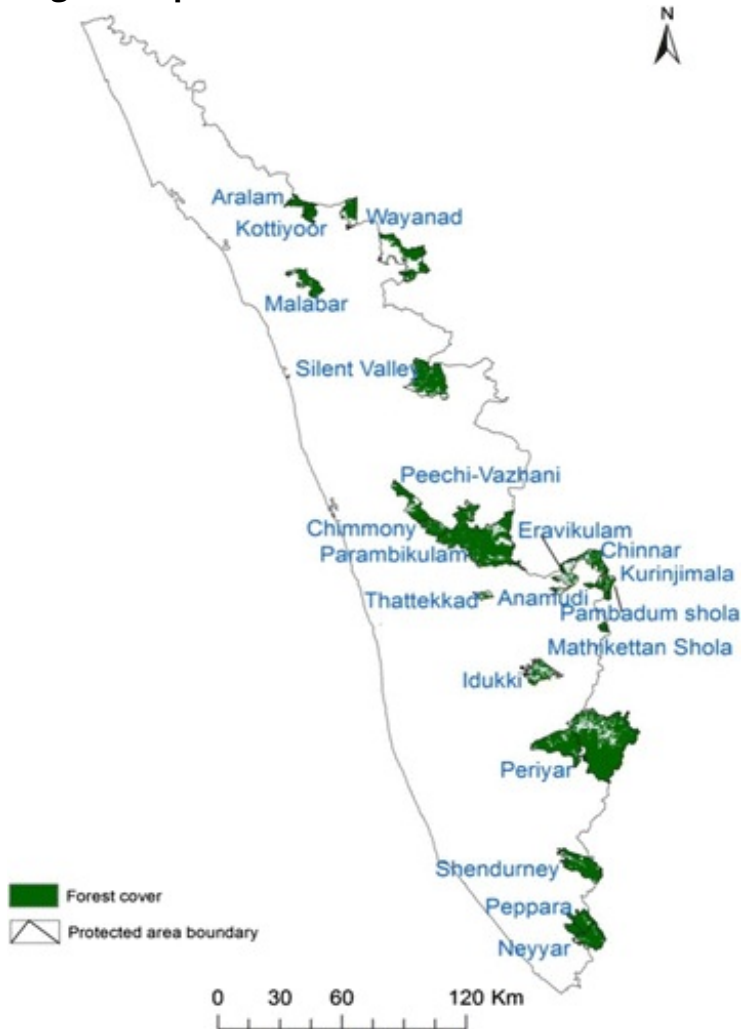
P-8I Aircraft

- The P-8I aircraft is a variant of the P-8A Poseidon aircraft that Boeing company developed as a replacement for the US Navy's ageing P-3 fleet.
- With a maximum speed of 907 kmph and an operating range of over 1,200 nautical miles, the P-8Is **detect threats and neutralize them** if required, far before they come anywhere near Indian shores.
- **Indian Navy became the first international customer for the P-8 aircraft** with the conclusion of the nearly US $ 2.1 billion contract on 01 Jan 2009 for a total of eight aircraft. The **P-8s Indian variant is referred to as P-8I.**
- The aircraft are **based at INS Rajali.**

Source : IE

Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary

- Located in **Kerala,** Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary (WWS) is an **integral part of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve**. It was established in 1**973.**

  - Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve was the first from India to be included in the **UNESCO designated World Network of Biosphere Reserves** (designated in 2012).
  - Other wildlife parks within the Reserve are: Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary, Bandipur National Park, Nagarhole National Park, Mukurthi National Park and Silent Valley.
- Spread over 344.44 sq km, **Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary** is **contiguous** to the tiger reserves of **Nagerhole** and **Bandipur** of **Karnataka** and **Mudumalai** of **Tamil Nadu.**
- **Kabini river (a tributary of Cauvery river)** flows through the sanctuary.
- The **forest types** include South Indian Moist Deciduous forests, West coast semi-evergreen forests and plantations of teak, eucalyptus and Grewelia.
- Elephant, Gaur, Tiger, Panther,Sambar, Spotted deer, Barking deer, Wild boar, Sloth bear, Nilgiri langur, Bonnet macaque, Common langur, Wild dog, common otter, Malabar giant squirrel etc are the major **mammals.**

Source: TH

Rongali Bihu

Why in News

For the first time, **Assam is celebrating Bohag or Rongali Bihu without rong** (meaning merriment), because of the **Covid-19 lockdown.**

Key Points

- Bihu is the **main festival of Assam.** It is **celebrated three times a year.**
- **Rongali or Bohag Bihu** is observed in **April. Kongali or Kati Bihu** observed in **October** and **Bhogali or Magh Bihu** observed in **January.**
- Rongali or Bohag Bihu is the **Assamese new year and spring festival.** The Rongali Bihu **coincides with Sikh New Year- Baisakhi.**
- The Bohag Bihu dates are April 13 to April 21. It is a harvest or sowing festival. It **marks the first day of the Hindu solar calendar** and is also observed in Bengal, Manipur, Mithila, Nepal, Orissa, Punjab, Kerala and Tamil Nadu.
- **Festive food -** pitha (rice cake) and larus (traditional food made of rice, coconut) are prepared.
- Men and women in traditional **Muga silk (golden silk)** attires dance to the rhythm of Bihu tunes and beatings of the bihu dhol (traditional drum) across the State.
    Bihu dance is Assam's most popular folk dance.
- The **traditional gamocha** woven on handlooms is offered as bihuwan to one's near and dear and also to guests.
    - The gamosa's graph as a symbol of protest rose during the anti-foreigners Assam Agitation from 1979 to 1985.
    - The gamosa staged a comeback as a political statement with the protests against the **Citizenship (Amendment) Act** from mid-December 2019.
    - The Covid-19 has turned gamosas into masks.

Source: TH