



News Analysis (12 Mar, 2020)

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COVID-19 Now Pandemic: WHO

Why in News

According to the latest assessment of the **World Health Organisation (WHO)**, **COVID-19** can be characterised as a **pandemic** now.

- According to the WHO, a **pandemic** is declared when a new disease for which people do not have immunity spreads around the world beyond expectations.
- On the other hand, an **epidemic** is a large outbreak, one that spreads among a population or region. It is less severe than pandemic due to a limited area of spread.

Key Points

WHO noted with concern that 1,18,000 positive cases have been reported globally in 114 countries and more than 90% of cases are in just four countries.

81 countries had not reported any cases and 57 countries had reported 10 cases or less.

Preventive Measures by India

- The Indian government has issued a **new travel advisory** stating that all existing visas, except diplomatic, official, U.N./International Organisations, employment, project visas, stand suspended till 15th April, beginning from 13th March.
- **Visa-free travel facility** granted to **OCI cardholders** is also **suspended** for the same duration.
- Any **foreign national** who intends to travel to India **for compelling reason** may **contact the nearest Indian Mission**.
- All incoming travellers, including Indian nationals, arriving from or having visited China, Italy, Iran, Republic of Korea, France, Spain and Germany after 15th Feb shall be quarantined for a minimum period of 14 days.

- **International traffic** through land borders will be **restricted** as well.
- The **Union Ministry of Road Transport and Highways** has issued an **advisory** to take all necessary steps in public transport vehicles to ensure sanitation of seats, handles and bars.
- India will **send a team of doctors to Italy** for testing its nationals for coronavirus to bring them back, while samples of 529 more people have been brought from Iran.
- The Union **Home Ministry** has **transferred some of its power to the Union Health Ministry** for tackling the COVID-19 if the outbreak turns out to be a disaster of national proportions.

Source: TH

Invocation of Disaster Management Act, 2005 to Deal with COVID-19

Why in News

Various government authorities have invoked their respective powers under **the Disaster Management (DM) Act, 2005** to deal with the **novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak** in the country.

Key Points

- **Delegation of Powers to the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare:**
 - The powers exercised by the home secretary for being the **Chairman of the National Executive Committee (NEC)** under **section 10 of the DM Act (2005)** have been delegated to the Ministry of Health and Family welfare.
 - **Section 10 evaluates the preparedness** at all governmental levels for the purpose of responding to any threatening disaster situation or disaster and **give directions**, where necessary, for enhancing such preparedness.
 - It also **lays down guidelines for, or give directions to, the concerned Ministries or Departments** of the Government of India, **the State Governments and the State Authorities** regarding measures to be taken by them in response to any threatening disaster situation or disaster
 - Thus it majorly **monitors and implements** the national plan and the plans prepared by the ministries or departments of the central government and gives **superintendence power to the officer executing plans**.
 - The delegation would help **to enhance preparedness and containment of novel coronavirus (COVID-19)** in the country.

- **Invocation of Powers by District Authorities:**

- Some of the district authorities in the COVID-19 affected states like Maharashtra have also invoked power under the **DM Act**.
 - The Act gives power to the district administration under **Sections 33 and 34** to deal with any disaster-related situation.
 - Under Section 33 and 34 the district authorities may opt for **requisition powers for any officer or any department at the district level or any local authority** to take measures for **prevention or mitigation of disaster** or to effectively respond to it and such **officer or department is bound to carry out such order**.
- This step will help to create **awareness among the public regarding COVID-19** and will also help to **regulate the medical supply of masks, injections and medicines**, etc.

National Executive Committee

- A National Executive Committee (NEC) is constituted under **Section 8 of the DM Act, 2005** to assist the National Disaster Management Authority in the performance of its functions.
- **Union Home secretary** is its ex-officio chairperson.
- NEC has been given the responsibility to act as the coordinating and monitoring body for disaster management, to prepare a National Plan, monitor the implementation of National Policy etc.

Source: BS

States to be Asked to Invoke Epidemic Diseases Act

Why in News

In a cabinet secretary meeting, it has been decided that states and Union Territories should invoke provisions of **Section 2 of the Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897**.

- **Health is a State subject**, but by invoking Section 2 of the Epidemic Diseases Act, advisories and directions of the Ministry of Health & Family Welfare will be enforceable.
- At present, at least 60 COVID-19 cases have been confirmed in India.

Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897

- The Epidemic Diseases Act was **introduced by the British** to tackle the epidemic of bubonic plague that broke out in the then state of Bombay.

- This law aims to provide for the better prevention of the spread of dangerous epidemic diseases. Under the act, temporary provisions or regulations can be made to be observed by the public to tackle or prevent the outbreak of a disease.
- **Section 2A of the Act** empowers the central government to take steps to prevent the spread of an epidemic. It allows the government to inspect any ship arriving or leaving any port and the power to detain any person intending to sail or arriving in the country.
- **Section 3** provides penalties for disobeying any regulation or order made under the Act. These are according to section 188 of the Indian Penal Code (Disobedience to order duly promulgated by public servant).
- **Section 4** gives legal protection to the implementing officers acting under the Act.
- The Epidemics Diseases Act is routinely enforced across the country for dealing with outbreaks of diseases such as Swine Flu, Dengue.

For Example in 2009, to tackle the swine flu outbreak in Pune, Section 2 powers were used to open screening centres in civic hospitals across the city, and swine flu was declared a notifiable disease.

Source : TH

Sahyadri Megha: New Paddy Variety

Why in News

The University of Agricultural and Horticultural Sciences (UAHS), Shivamogga (Karnataka), has developed a new variety of paddy, 'Sahyadri Megha'.

The University has developed the new variety to prevent decline in the area under paddy cultivation.

Reasons Behind Developing the New Variety

- Paddy growers are switching over to commercial crops like arecanut, ginger and rubber for lucrative returns.

The area under paddy that was around 1.5 lakh hectares in Shivamogga district in 1990, has come down to around 1.05 lakh hectares.
- The '**Jyothi**' variety which is widely cultivated in the command areas of the Bhadra and the Tunga reservoirs and in semi-arid areas in Sorab, Shikaripur, Hanagal and Sirsi taluks in Karnataka has become vulnerable to blast disease and other infestations.
- Demand by customers in urban areas for red rice which is rich in fibre and protein.

The red variety gets its rich colour from an antioxidant called **anthocyanins**, which are also found in deep purple or reddish fruits and vegetables. The compound is believed to have properties that can reduce inflammation, allergy, prevent risks of cancer and help in weight management.

Sahyadri Megha

- Sahyadri Megha is a red variety of paddy that is **resistant to blast disease and rich in nutrients**.
- It was developed under the **hybridization breeding method** by cross-breeding the best among the '**Jyothi**' variety with that of '**Akkalu**', a disease-resistant and protein-rich paddy variety.
- The new variety will be notified under the **Indian Seed Act 1966** shortly after which it will become part of the seed chain.
- **Key Attributes**
 - The **protein content in it is 12.48%, higher** than the other red rice varieties grown.
 - The **yield per hectare** from 'Sahyadri Megha' is around 65 quintals, substantially higher than other red paddy varieties.
 - It is a **medium-term paddy** that can be grown when there is a delay in the onset of monsoon. It can be **harvested after 120 days of sowing**.

Blast Disease

- It is caused by **fungus Pyricularia grisea (P. oryzae)**.
- Also known as **rotten neck or rice fever**.
- First recorded in India during 1918.
- Expected grain loss : 70 to 80%.

Source : TH

National Supercomputing Mission

Why in News

Recently, a **Right to Information (RTI)** reply has revealed that India has produced **just three supercomputers since 2015** under the **National Supercomputing Mission (NSM)**.

National Supercomputing Mission

- The National Supercomputing Mission was announced in **2015**, with an aim to connect national academic and R&D institutions with a grid of more than **70 high-performance computing facilities at an estimated cost of ₹4,500 crores** over the **period of seven years**.
- It supports the government's vision of '**Digital India**' and '**Make in India**' initiatives.

- The mission is being implemented by the Department of Science and Technology (Ministry of Science and Technology) and Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY), through **the Centre for Development of Advanced Computing (C-DAC), Pune** and Indian Institute of Science (IISc), Bengaluru.
- It is also an effort to improve the number of supercomputers owned by India.
 - These supercomputers will also be networked on the National Supercomputing grid over the National Knowledge Network (NKN). The NKN connects academic institutions and R&D labs over a high-speed network.
- Under NSM, the long-term plan is to build a strong base of 20,000 skilled persons over the next five years who will be equipped to handle the complexities of supercomputers.

Key Points

- **Progress of NSM:**
 - NSM's first supercomputer named **Param Shivay** has been installed in IIT-BHU, Varanasi, in 2019. It has 837 TeraFlop High-Performance Computing (HPC) capacity.
 - The **second supercomputer** with a capacity of **1.66 PetaFlop** has been installed at IIT-Kharagpur.
 - The **third system, Param Brahma**, has been installed at IISER-Pune, which has a capacity of **797 TeraFlop**.
- **Incomplete Utilization of Funds allocated to NSM:**
 - The **NSM** envisaged setting up a network of **70 high-performance computing** facilities in the country but **skewed funding** for the mission **during the initial years slowed down the overall pace** of building supercomputers.
 - **Only 16.67 % of the total budget of Rs 4,500 crore**, has been utilised during the **last four-and-a-half years** for execution of the mission.
- **Global Scenario:**
 - Globally, **China has the maximum number of supercomputers** and maintains the top position in the world, followed by the US, Japan, France, Germany, Netherlands, Ireland and the United Kingdom.

Note:

- **Teraflops:** It is a unit of computing speed equal to one million million (10^{12}) floating-point operations per second (FLOPS).
- **Petaflops:** It is a unit of computing speed equal to one thousand million million (10^{15}) floating-point operations per second (FLOPS).

Source: IE

Sericulture in India

Why in News

Cocoon production in Karnataka has picked up to meet the growing demand for indigenous silk.

Silk imports from China have been badly hit on account of **Coronavirus**.

Key Points

- **Sericulture:**
 - It is an **agro-based industry**.
 - It involves **rearing of silkworms** for the production of raw silk, which is the yarn obtained out of cocoons spun by certain species of insects.
 - The major activities of sericulture comprise of food-plant cultivation to feed the silkworms which spin silk cocoons and reeling the cocoons for unwinding the silk filament for value-added benefits such as processing and weaving.
 - **Domesticated silkworm (Bombyx mori)** are raised for the purpose of sericulture.
- The **Government of India** has allocated ₹2161.68 crores for three years i.e. **2017-2020** to its **Central Sector Scheme 'Silk Samagra'** for the development of sericulture in the country.
- **Silk Production in India:**
 - There are **five major types of silk of commercial importance**, obtained from different species of silkworms. These are **Mulberry, Oak Tasar & Tropical Tasar, Muga and Eri**.
 - Except for mulberry, other non-mulberry varieties of silks are **wild silks**, known as **vanya silks**.
 - India has the **unique distinction of producing all these commercial varieties** of silk.
 - **South India** is the leading silk producing area of the country and is also known for its famous silk weaving enclaves like **Kancheepuram, Dharmavaram, Arni**, etc.

Sl no	State	Silk Centre
1	Andhra	Dharmavaram, Pochampalli, Venkatagiri, Narainpet
2	Assam	Sualkuchi
3	Bihar	Bhagalpur
4	Gujarat	Surat, Cambay
5	Jammu & Kashmir	Srinagar
6	Karnataka	Bangalore, Anekal, Ilkal, Molakalmuru, Melkote, Kollegal
7	Chattisgarh	Champa, Chanderi, Raigarh
8	Maharashtra	Paithan
9	Tamil Nadu	Kanchipuram, Arni, Salem, Kumbhakonam, Tanjavur
10	Uttar Pradesh	Varanasi
11	West Bengal	Bishnupur, Murshidabad, Birbhum

Source: TH

White Giraffe

Why in News

Poachers have killed two extremely rare white giraffes in northeast Kenya, leaving just one such animal in the world.



Key Points

- The white giraffes were first spotted in 2016.

- The white appearance of the giraffe is **due to leucism**, a genetic condition that causes skin cells to have no pigmentation.
- **Leucism is different from albinism** where no melanin is produced at all.
Melanin is a dark biological pigment found in skin, hair, feathers, scales, eyes, and some internal membranes.

Giraffe

- Giraffes are most often found in savanna/woodland habitats and range widely throughout Africa.
- The **International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)** had classified giraffes as **vulnerable** in the Red List in December 2016, when it noted that their population had dropped by over 40% since 1985.
- According to IUCN, the **four principal factors that have led to a population decline** among giraffes are **habitat loss, civil unrest, poaching** and **ecological issues**.
- Giraffes are listed under **Appendix II of the CITES**.

Source: IE

Zero Accident Mission of Railways

- **Mission Zero Accident** was one of the Missions announced in the **Railway Budget 2016-17**. It comprises the following two sub-missions.
 - **Elimination of Unmanned Level Crossings (UMLC)**: All unmanned level crossings on Broad Gauge were eliminated in January 2019.
 - **Train Collision Avoidance System (TCAS)**: Train Collision Avoidance System is an indigenous Automatic Train protection (ATP) system developed in association with Indian manufacturers. The system is under implementation South Central Railway.
- In the **Budget 2017-18**, an exclusive fund called **“Rashtriya Rail Sanraksha Kosh”** (RRSK) was created with a corpus of ₹1 lakh crore over a period of 5 years for giving a major boost to safety related works.
 - Safety category staff is given training in Disaster Management with emphasis on Relief, Rescue and Rehabilitation (three ‘R’s), Threat Perception and Emergency Response, Fighting and use of fire Extinguishers and First Aid.
 - Railway Training Institutes are allocated funds on an annual basis for development of infrastructure, development of training modules/training materials, conduct of training programmes etc.
- Further, in compliance with orders of the Supreme Court of India and as recommended by a committee of experts constituted at All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), instructions have been issued to provide a **Medical Box** containing life saving medicines, equipments, oxygen cylinder etc. **at all Railway stations** and passenger carrying trains.

Source: PIB

Divya Kala Shakti: Witnessing the Abilities in Disabilities

Why in News

The first ever regional event “**Divya Kala Shakti: Witnessing the Abilities in Disabilities**” is being organized in Chennai (Tamil Nadu) on 12th March, 2020.

Key Points

- Divya Kala Shakti is a **cultural event** which provides a wider and unique platform to showcase the **potential of Persons with Differently Abled in the field of performing art**, music, dance, acrobatics etc.
- The Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment had organized the event at national level on 18th April and 23rd July 2019.
- In Chennai, the event is being organized by the **National Institute for Empowerment of Persons with Multiple Disabilities (Divyangjan), Chennai** in collaboration with **Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (Divyangjan)**, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India.
 - About 98 children and youth with different disabilities from the Southern region will participate in the event. They **will perform dance, music, etc. in classical, folk and modern style.**
 - This event also includes for the first time Yoga and Acrobatics.
- **National Institute for Empowerment of Persons with Multiple Disabilities (NIEPMD)** was established in the year **2005** in Chennai under the **Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities**. It serves as a national resource center for empowerment of persons with Multiple Disabilities.

Source: PIB
