



Helping Hand to Sri Lanka

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Why in News

An India-funded **free ambulance service** is playing a vital role in Sri Lanka's **Covid-19** response.



Key Points

- **Background:**
 - India provided a **grant of 7.56 million USD** for the **Suwa Seriya** [vehicle or journey for good health] **service** which was launched in 2016, on a pilot basis. Later, this was extended throughout the country with additional grants from India.
 - **India also helped with Capacity Building:**
Training and refresher programmes for **Sri Lankan emergency medical technicians** which further **generated employment** for the local population.

- It is India's **second largest grant project to Sri Lanka** after the **housing project** of more than **60,000 houses**, with a nearly 400 million USD grant.

India Sri Lanka Relations

- **Geopolitical Significance of Sri Lanka:**

Sri Lanka's location in the **Indian Ocean region** has been of strategic geopolitical relevance to several major powers.

- China's **string of pearl's strategy** is aimed at encircling India to establish dominance in the Indian Ocean.

China is building state of the art gigantic modern ports all along the Indian Ocean and to the south of it, in Gwadar (Pakistan), Chittagong (Bangladesh), Kyauk Phru (Myanmar) and **Hambantota (Sri Lanka)**. Thus Sri Lanka is vital for China's **String of Pearls strategy**.

- Sri Lanka has a list of **highly strategic ports** located among **busiest sea lanes of communication**.

- **Political Relations:**

- **The Reserve Bank of India** (RBI) has signed an agreement for extending a **USD 400 million currency swap** facility to Sri Lanka to boost the foreign reserves and ensure financial stability of the country, which is badly hit by Covid-19 pandemic.
- Political relations between India and Sri Lanka have been marked by **high-level exchanges of visits at regular intervals**.
- Sri Lanka is a member of regional groupings like **BIMSTEC** (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) and **SAARC** in which India plays a leading role.
- India and Sri Lanka conduct **joint Military (Mitra Shakti)** and **Naval (SLINEX)** exercises.

- **Commercial Relations:**

- Sri Lanka is one of India's **largest trading partners among the SAARC countries**. India in turn is Sri Lanka's **largest trade partner globally**.
- India's exports to Sri Lanka amounted to 5.3 billion USD in 2015-17 whereas its imports from the country were at 743 million USD.
- Trade between the two countries grew particularly rapidly after the **India-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement** which came into force in March 2000.

- **Cultural and Educational Relations:**

- The Indian Cultural Centre in Colombo actively promotes awareness of Indian culture by offering classes in **Indian music, dance, Hindi and Yoga**. Every year, cultural troupes from both countries exchange visits.
- The **India-Sri Lanka Foundation**, set up in December 1998 as an **intergovernmental initiative**, also aims towards enhancement of scientific, technical, educational and cultural cooperation through civil society exchanges and enhancing contact between the younger generations of the two countries.
- The People of Indian Origin (PIOs) comprise **Sindhis, Borahs, Gujaratis, Memons, Parsis, Malayalis and Telugu** speaking persons who have settled down in Sri Lanka (most of them after partition) and are engaged in various business ventures.
- In April 2019, India and Sri Lanka also concluded agreement on **countering Drug and Human trafficking**.

- **Issues and Conflicts**

- **China Factor:**

- Sri Lanka also handed over the **strategic port of Hambantota**, which is expected to play a key role in **China's Belt and Road Initiative, to China on a 99-year lease**.
- China has also supplied arms as well as provided huge loans to Sri Lanka for its development.
- The two countries have signed a civil nuclear cooperation agreement which is Sri Lanka's first nuclear partnership with any country.

- **Fishermen issue:**

- Given the proximity of the territorial waters of both countries, especially in the **Palk Straits** and the **Gulf of Mannar**, incidents of straying of fishermen are common.
- Fishermen often **risk their lives** and cross in to Srilankan rather than return empty-handed, but the Sri Lankan Navy is on alert, and have either arrested or destroyed fishing nets and vessels of those who have crossed the line.
- The 4th meeting under **Joint Working Group (JWG)** on fisheries was held recently between the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare of India and Ministry of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Development of Sri Lanka as the mechanism to help find a permanent solution to the fishermen issue.

Source:TH