

17 Apr 2020: UPSC Exam Comprehensive News Analysis

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Nothing here for today!!!

B. GS 2 Related

Category: HEALTH

1. Delhi govt. gets Centre's nod to start plasma enrichment technique trial

Context:

The Chief Minister of Delhi has announced that the Delhi Government has been given permission by the Centre to start clinical trials of plasma enrichment technique on COVID-19 patients who are critically ill.

Details:

- The plasma transfusion technology involves taking the blood of a person who has recovered from [COVID-19](#) that has anti-bodies that helped the person recover in the first place.
- Plasma is then extracted from the blood, is enriched, and is then injected into an infected person.
- The antibodies from the recovered person then enter the body of the infected patient and help him/her recover.

This topic has been covered in detail in 11th April 2020 PIB Summary and Analysis. [Click here](#) to read.

2. U.P. starts pool testing COVID-19 samples

Context:

The Uttar Pradesh Government has said that it has started pool testing COVID-19 samples in the State.

This topic has been covered in 15th April 2020 Comprehensive News Analysis. [Click here](#) to read.

Category: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

1. Extend Brexit transition, says IMF

Context:

The head of the International Monetary Fund ([IMF](#)) has said that Britain should ask for an extension to its post-Brexit transition period to ease uncertainty at a time when the world economy is being hammered by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Details:

- The transition period is due to end on December 31 2020, and barriers to exports and imports will go up if a new trade agreement is not reached by then, a challenge which has been made harder by the pandemic.
- With the world economy heading for its steepest downturn this year since the Great Depression of the 1930s, the IMF head has advised to seek ways in which the element of uncertainty is reduced in the interests of everybody, of the U.K., of the EU, and the whole world.
- The EU, which insists it is up to Britain to make an extension request, says it is ready to negotiate a delay but that a request for a one-off extension of up to two years must be made by July, 2020 according to the terms of the Withdrawal Agreement.

Britain's Viewpoint:

- Despite the risk of Britain leaving the Single Market without a free trade agreement – meaning trade with the EU would be on [WTO](#) terms – Britain continues to insist that the deadline, enshrined in law, will never be extended.
- Britain's chief negotiator has asserted that the extension is not in the UK's interest.
- It is opined that extending would simply prolong negotiations, create even more uncertainty, and leave Britain liable to pay more to the EU in future.

2. China may have conducted N-test: U.S.

Context:

The U.S. State Department, in a report, has said that China may have secretly set off low-level underground nuclear test explosions despite claiming to observe an international pact banning such blasts, a development that could fuel U.S.-Chinese tensions.

Details:

- The U.S. State Department has said that the concerns about Beijing's possible breaches of a "zero yield" standard for test blasts have been prompted by activities at China's Lop Nur nuclear test site throughout 2019.
 - China's possible preparation to operate its Lop Nur test site year-round, its use of explosive containment chambers, extensive excavation activities at Lop Nur and a lack of transparency on its nuclear testing activities have raised concerns regarding its adherence to the zero yield standard, the report said, without providing evidence of a low-yield test.
 - Beijing's lack of transparency included blocking data transmissions from sensors linked to a monitoring centre operated by the international agency that verifies compliance with Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) banning nuclear test explosions.
- The 1996 [Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty \(CTBT\)](#) allows activities designed to ensure the safety of nuclear weapons.
- The finding may worsen ties already strained by U.S. charges that the global COVID-19 pandemic resulted from Beijing's mishandling of a 2019 outbreak of the coronavirus in the city of Wuhan.
- However, a spokeswoman for the CTBT Organization, which verifies compliance with the pact, has said that there had been no interruptions in data transmissions from China's five sensor stations since the end of August 2019 following an interruption that began in 2018.
- Also, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman said that China was committed to a moratorium on nuclear tests and said the U.S. was making false accusations.

'Zero yield'

- Zero yield refers to a nuclear test in which there is no explosive chain reaction of the type ignited by the detonation of a nuclear warhead.

New START Treaty:

- A senior U.S. official said the concerns about China's testing activities supported President Donald Trump's case for getting China to join the United States and Russia in talks on an arms control accord to replace the 2010 New START treaty between Washington and Moscow that expires in February 2021.
- New START is a nuclear arms reduction treaty between the United States and the Russian Federation with the formal name of Measures for the Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms.
- New START restricted the United States and Russia to deploying no more than 1,550 nuclear warheads, the lowest level in decades, and limited the land- and submarine-based missiles and bombers that deliver them.

Note:

- Russia, France and Britain - three of the world's five internationally recognized nuclear powers - signed and ratified the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, which still requires ratification by 44 countries to become international law.

- China and the United States are among eight signatories that have not ratified it.
 - But, China has declared its adherence to its terms.
 - The United States has observed a unilateral testing moratorium since 1992.

C. GS 3 Related

Category: ECONOMY

1. India eyes record food production

Context:

On the back of a normal monsoon forecast, the Agriculture Ministry is targeting a record foodgrain production of 298.3 million tonnes for 2020-21, higher than the 291.95 million tonnes estimated for 2019-20.

- India Meteorological Department has issued its first forecast for the monsoon, predicting normal rainfall, with a chance of above normal rain in August and September 2020.
- Measures to be taken have been announced to ensure a smooth and safe Rabi harvest in the midst of the lockdown.

Details:

- Both rice and wheat production targets are minimally higher than the previous year.
 - The main Kharif season crop is rice, and the Agriculture Ministry is targeting a harvest of 102.6 million tonnes, slightly higher than the last Kharif season harvest of 101.95 million tonnes.
 - However, it has lowered its rice production target for the next Rabi season to 14.9 million tonnes. This means that the total rice production target for 2020-21 is barely higher than the previous year's target.
 - Wheat production is also expected to remain steady.
- The focus is on driving the growth in pulses, coarse cereals and oilseeds.
- The Agriculture Ministry hopes to ramp up production of coarse cereals this year.
 - The Ministry admits that the challenge is how to create demand for nutri-cereals or millets.
- Oilseeds are a major priority, especially due to the disruption in edible oil imports caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.
 - One challenge could be a shortfall in supply of soyabean seeds due to unseasonal rains at the time of harvesting the seed crop.
 - The Ministry has also created an action plan for oil palm plantation, given the disruptions in imports.

2. SBI to extend additional term loan facilities to borrowers, including NBFCs

Context:

State Bank of India, the country's largest lender, has decided to extend term loan facilities to non-banking finance companies (NBFCs) as well as other companies to help tide over the liquidity mismatch these entities are facing due to the nationwide lockdown.

Details:

- SBI has over 100 NBFCs as its customers and whoever applies for the loan, a decision will be taken on extending the term loan facility after reviewing the company's financial position.
- The extend term loan facility would be offered on a case-to-case basis and on proper appraisal.
- There is no limit, upper or lower, as to the quantum of loan to be extended to these firms.
- Previously, the SBI opened emergency credit lines for working capital loans for all its clients, which was 10% of the existing facilities, provided the asset classification was standard.
 - This facility was offered to all customers.
 - However, NBFCs typically do not opt for working capital loans. Banks generally extend term loans to these entities.
- The NBFC sector faced a double whammy when **RBI** announced a loan moratorium for three months.
 - While banks have not offered a moratorium to NBFC borrowers, these entities had to offer the moratorium to their customers who had taken a home or car loan, resulting in a liquidity mismatch for NBFCs.

D. GS 4 Related

Nothing here for today!!!

E. Editorials

Category: INDIAN DIASPORA

1. Across the gulf

Context:

The vast majority of migrant workers stranded in West Asia who are on subsistence wages are facing a tough situation in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. From the little information available, it appears that Indians are badly hit by the disease.

Workers in West Asia:

- Around eight million people in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries constitute a unique cohort among Indian diaspora communities around the world.
 - Around 50% of them are unskilled.
 - Another 30% are semi-skilled.
 - Only a small minority of 20% of them are skilled and lucratively employed.
- But all these migrant workers together form the backbone of India's ties with the region.
- Their contribution of nearly 40% of the total foreign exchange remittances to India is critical to its economy.
- Their labour is vital for the GCC economy.
- With no option of assimilation into their host countries, their link to the home country remains intact, unlike Indian immigrants to the West.

Issue:

- The vast majority of migrant workers in West Asia are facing a tough situation in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Vast sectors of the economy are shut, rendering many of them jobless. Thousands are without documentation.
- Living and working conditions make it extremely difficult for them to practise social distancing or get treatment if infected.
- Many of them suffer from pre-existing medical conditions and are used to procuring medicines from India, which is now impossible.
- Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Doha being important transits for international travel, thousands of Indian travellers are also stuck in the region.

Way forward:

- Prime Minister has nurtured good relations with all rulers of the region but the ongoing crisis is testing the endurance of India's ties with some of the GCC countries.
- The UAE Government has said it might revise current partnerships concerning labour relations with nations refusing to cooperate with measures to repatriate private sector expatriates who wish to return home.
 - The country's ambassador to India has promised that only those who are tested negative for the virus would be repatriated.
 - Some of these migrants want to be evacuated, while many might want to remain where they are.
- The Chief Minister of Kerala, which is home to more than two million Indian immigrants in the Gulf, has said the State is prepared to receive returnees and provide them care.
- Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Punjab have a significant number of people in the Gulf.
- The Centre must take the initiative to bring together State governments, and work out arrangements with national governments in the region in a manner acceptable to all.
- India cannot abandon them to their helpless fate. It must work closely with governments of the region to bring them aid.

Category: HEALTH

1. Virtual reality – On Telemedicine

Context:

The COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to the understanding of the myriad ways in which available technologies have not been put to better use, and presented people with multiple opportunities to harness these devices, techniques and methods to get on with life in the time of lockdown. The Editorial explains how Telemedicine can help reach patients where access to medical care is difficult.

Use of Technology:

- Technology remains one of the very few devices left to fight COVID-19 with.
- It is clear that technology will serve humanity at one of its darkest moments; whether it is using state-of-the-art technology in the discovery of cures or vaccines, or traditional technology services to enhance health care and consultations, or even tools that keep people at home occupied/productive.
- Among the primary uses is telemedicine, rendered inevitable now, due to a freeze on movement.
- **Telemedicine** refers to the practice of caring for patients remotely when the provider and patient are not physically present with each other. Modern technology has enabled doctors to consult patients by using video-conferencing tools.

Details:

- Telemedicine Society of India has for long been battling to use the technology in its complete arc to reach remote areas in India.
- It was way back in 2000 that telemedicine was first employed in India, but the progress has been excruciatingly slow, until the pandemic.
- The medical community was only held back by the lack of legislation to enable tele consultations. For, no sooner was the policy announced than hospitals and clinicians hurried to jump onto the bandwagon, advertising contact information for patients.
- The Centre's recent guidelines allowing for widespread use of telemedicine services came as an encouragement for the telehealth crusaders in the country.
- This move finds consonance with the rest of the world where several nations have deployed telemedicine to reach people who have been unable to come to hospital, to reduce footfalls in hospitals, and to even provide medical and mental health counselling to countless people.

Advantages:

- The advantages are peculiar in the current context, when putting distance between people is paramount.
- Tele consultations are of paramount importance when health care professionals and patients may have to be quarantined.
- The advancement of telecommunication capabilities over the years has made the transmission of images and sound files (heart and lung sounds, coughs) faster and simpler.
- Pilot telemedicine experiments in ophthalmology and psychiatry have proven to be of immense benefit to the communities.

Concerns:

- Confidential medical information can be leaked through faulty electronic systems.
- Virtual clinical treatment decreases human interaction among healthcare professionals and patients and that increases the risk of error in clinical services.
- Low quality of health informatics records, like, X-ray or other images, clinical progress reports, etc. run the risk of faulty clinical treatment.
- Low internet speed or server problems may come in the way of effective diagnosis, prescription and treatment.

Conclusion:

Telemedicine's time is finally here. While unleashing the full potential of telemedicine to help people, experts and government agencies must be mindful of the possible inadequacies of the medium, and securing sensitive medical information; such cognisance should guide the use of the technology. Telemedicine system requires tough legal regulation to prevent unauthorized and illegal service providers in this sector.

Category: ECONOMY

1. A blueprint to revive the economy

The Editorial touches upon how saving lives and protecting livelihoods can be achieved through a smart lockdown and careful economic management. It gives the details of a carefully crafted economic proposal for consideration of the Indian government in the current situation where every sector of the economy in every nation has come to a screeching halt and the phrase 'Greater Depression', (being used by most of the economists) highlights the gravity of the humanitarian and economic crisis confronting the world today.

Details:

Demand, supply challenges:

First, it is important to diagnose the scale of the economic crisis accurately. The economic crisis needs a demand side and a supply side response.

- It is morally imperative that the miseries of the poor and vulnerable must be addressed immediately by providing money as well as food.
- The bottom half of all households (13 crore out of 26 crore families) must be given ₹5,000 per family in their bank account. This will cost a maximum of ₹65,000 crore.
 - The list of households and the bank details (largely Aadhaar-seeded) are available in the government's various schemes such as PMJAY and [MGNREGA](#). Besides, the States have their 'below poverty line' lists.
 - Further, depending on the need, these families can be given ₹3,000 each. This will cost an additional ₹39,000 crore.
- Scholars like Jean Dreze have observed that it is food that people need most urgently. India has far in excess of the buffer stock requirement.
 - The government must universalise food distribution immediately, to remove identity requirements.
 - It should work with State governments to rush supplies to every ration shop so that every family gets free grain.
- For ensuring livelihood support, the district collectors should be given the freedom to start and expand works under MGNREGA.
 - If work cannot be given for some reason, 10 days' wages every month should be paid to the registered MGNREGA workers until the scheme is resumed.
 - Economists Amartya Sen, Raghuram Rajan and Abhijit Banerjee have also called for urgent implementation of these measures.
- The next step is to resume commercial activities, which can be done by re-opening the economy gradually.
 - The Central and State governments must work in tandem to identify COVID-19 hotspots, preferably at the level of the block/mandal and not just at the district level.
 - This can be done with the help of public health experts and epidemiologists through strategic testing.

Planning ahead:

- Guidelines must be expanded to permit all economic activity (with a few exceptions) in non-hotspot areas.
- There is a need to at least, boost local economic activity.
- The new guidelines permit agricultural activity during the Rabi harvest season. This is a step in the right direction.
- Mass rapid transit as well as private transport must be gradually opened in non-hotspot areas, as availability of labour would be crucial for commercial and agricultural activities.
- Continuous testing and monitoring will be needed as new areas may turn into hotspots and hotspots may become non-hotspots.

Funding the revival:

- The other essential ingredient for resumption of economic activity is access to capital, especially working capital.
- The government must step in to provide credit guarantees that can incentivise banks to SMEs. Since,

- a majority of the small and medium enterprises (SMEs) would have run out of cash and lost significant revenues.
- no bank is likely to lend to them.
- the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has already instructed banks to issue a moratorium on loan obligations for three months. If needed, this can be extended.
- For the formal sector, the idea is for the government to help formal sector businesses to keep workers on their payroll without resorting to retrenchment or lay-offs.
 - The 2017-18 Economic Survey estimated, using the [Employees' Provident Fund Organisation \(EPFO\)](#) data set, that there are 40 million employees earning less than ₹15,000 per month who are employed in firms registered under the Goods and Services Tax (GST).
 - The government could fund their employers to pay them for one or two months. This can be implemented using data from the EPFO and GST databases.
- Capital must be made available liberally to sectors such as tourism and manufacturing, which need specific interventions.
- India must do whatever it takes through export incentives and strategic use of foreign exchange reserves to capitalise on the export opportunity arising out of this crisis and stimulate exports dramatically over the next few years.
 - Exports can be the key to jobs for hundreds of millions of skilled and unskilled workers, as it was during the boom years 2004-2010.
- Fiscal stimulus measures on the demand and supply side must be supplemented by monetary stimulus from the RBI with re-designed measures such as moratorium, loan forgiveness, regulatory forbearance, revised NPA regulations and easing the cycle of credit flow.

Conclusion:

- It is estimated that the total fiscal package for revival and recovery will cost ₹5-6 lakh crore. That amount is available.
 - The Centre and the States have a total expenditure budget of over ₹70 lakh crore for 2020-21.
 - The Centre alone has budgeted to spend ₹4 lakh crore on capital expenditure this fiscal year. In a crisis, much of the capital expenditure may not be possible at all, and even if it is, must be deferred to the next fiscal year.
 - Besides, more savings can be identified by eliminating wasteful expenditure.
- Further, the Centre can borrow money during times like this without crowding out private investment or pushing up interest rates.
- As a final resort, the government can monetise part of additional deficit, otherwise known as printing money.

F. Prelims Facts

Nothing here for today!!!

G. Tidbits

1. Zoom not a safe platform, says MHA

What's in News?

The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) has issued an advisory that Zoom video conference is not a safe platform.

Details:

- U.S. based Zoom video communication has seen an exponential rise in usage in India as office-goers remain at home owing to the present lockdown.
- The software used in the online platform is said to be made in China and some calls were being routed through servers in China.
- The Cyber Coordination Centre of the MHA issued a set of guidelines for its safe usage.
 - The Ministry asked the users to set strong passwords and enable waiting room feature so that call managers could have a better control over the participants.
 - Users are warned against sharing links on public platforms.
 - Users have been asked to avoid using personal meeting ID to host events and instead use randomly generated meeting IDs for each event.
- However, the MHA noted that it was not for use by government offices and officials.

Advisory by CERT-In:

- The Indian Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT-In) had also issued two advisories cautioning on the use of Zoom for office meetings.
 - It cautioned that insecure usage of the platform may allow cybercriminals to access sensitive information such as meeting details and conversations.
 - It said that multiple vulnerabilities had been reported in the video conferencing platform which could allow an attacker to gain elevated privileges or obtain sensitive information.

2. China says no plans to limit export of anti-virus supplies

What's in News?

A government spokesman has clarified that China will not restrict exports of medical goods needed to fight the COVID-19 pandemic, amid global tension over scarce masks and ventilators.

- U.S. President Donald Trump said that he would try to block manufacturing giant 3M Co. from exporting N95 masks. 3M warned other governments might retaliate and said later, an agreement was reached to allow foreign sales.
- China, the biggest maker of surgical masks and other products, announced that it would start inspecting exports to make sure they meet quality standards following Western complaints that some test kits and other products were faulty.
- The Chinese customs agency has said that it would start treating masks, ventilators, surgical gowns, goggles and other supplies as medical goods.
 - That requires exporters to submit proof that their products are approved by regulators in destination countries.
 - The government said goods will be inspected to confirm they meet quality standards.

3. Israeli President asks Parliament to pick PM

What's in News?

Israel's President has asked the Knesset to choose a new Prime Minister, giving Parliament three weeks to agree upon a leader or plunge the country into an unprecedented fourth consecutive election in just over a year.

- President Reuven Rivlin made the move after his Prime Minister-designate, former military chief Benny Gantz, and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu failed to reach a power-sharing deal by a midnight deadline.
- In a letter to the Parliament, the President has entrusted the formation of a government to the Knesset.
- He expects the Knesset members to form a majority in such a way that a government can be formed as soon as possible to prevent a fourth round of elections.
- However, the decision by the President, a figurehead position that oversees post-election coalition talks, does not rule out a deal between Netanyahu and Gantz.
 - They now have a final three-week deadline to wrap up a deal.
 - Otherwise, the Knesset would dissolve and trigger another election for no later than August 4, 2020.
 - Also, Netanyahu is awaiting trial on charges of bribery, breach of trust and fraud.

H. UPSC Prelims Practice Questions

Q1. Consider the following statements with respect to New START Treaty:

1. New START is a nuclear arms reduction treaty between the United States and China.
2. New START restricts both the parties from deploying not more than 1,550 strategic nuclear warheads and bombs.
3. The Treaty's duration is fifty years, unless superseded by a subsequent agreement.

Which of the given statement/s is/are incorrect?

- a. 2 only
- b. 1 and 3 only
- c. 1 only
- d. 1 and 2 only

Answer: b

Explanation:

The Treaty between the United States of America and the Russian Federation on Measures for the Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms is also known as the New START Treaty. New START restricted the United States and Russia to deploying no more than 1,550 nuclear warheads, the lowest level in decades, and limited the land- and submarine-based missiles and bombers that deliver them. The Treaty's duration is ten years, unless superseded by a subsequent agreement. New START Treaty, entered into force on February 5, 2011 is due to expire in February, 2021.

Q2. Arrange the following from North to South:

1. Golan Heights
2. Gaza Strip
3. West Bank
4. Dead Sea

Options:

- a. 1, 4, 3, 2
- b. 1, 2, 3, 4
- c. 1, 3, 4, 2

d. 2, 4, 1, 3

Answer: c

Explanation:



Q3. Consider the following statements:

1. Ethanol can be produced from sugarcane, maize, wheat.
2. At 95% purity, ethanol is used for blending with petrol as it allows the engine to more completely combust the fuel resulting in fewer emissions.
3. Once blended, Ethanol cannot be separated from Petrol.

Which of the given statement/s is/are correct?

- a. 2 and 3 only
- b. 1, 2 and 3
- c. 1 and 2 only

d. 1 and 3 only

Answer: d

Explanation:

Ethanol, an anhydrous ethyl alcohol having chemical formula of C_2H_5OH , can be produced from sugarcane, maize, wheat, etc. which are having high starch content. In India, ethanol is mainly produced from sugarcane molasses by fermentation process. Ethanol can be mixed with gasoline to form different blends. As the ethanol molecule contains oxygen, it allows the engine to more completely combust the fuel, resulting in fewer emissions and thereby reducing the occurrence of environmental pollution. Since ethanol is produced from plants that harness the power of the sun, ethanol is also considered as renewable fuel. At 95% purity, it is called rectified spirit and is used as the intoxicating ingredient in alcoholic beverages. At 99%-plus purity, ethanol is used for blending with petrol. Once blended, Ethanol cannot be separated from Petrol.

Q4. Which of the following countries have signed and ratified the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty?

1. Russia
2. U.S.A
3. France
4. China
5. Britain

Options:

- a. 1, 2 and 3 only
- b. 1, 3 and 5 only
- c. 1, 3, 4 and 5 only
- d. 1, 2 and 4 only

Answer: b

Explanation:

Russia, France and Britain - three of the world's five internationally recognized nuclear powers - signed and ratified the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, which still requires ratification by 44 countries to become international law. China and the United States are among eight signatories that have not ratified it.

I. UPSC Mains Practice Questions

1. Comment on the recent developments with respect to Telemedicine in India. Examine the possible inadequacies of the medium. (10 Marks, 150 Words)
2. Discuss the immediate measures to be taken by India in confronting a humanitarian and economic crisis it is facing in the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic. (15 Marks, 250 Words)

