

07 Jul 2020: UPSC Exam Comprehensive News Analysis

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Category: GOVERNANCE

1. 1.4 lakh families reach MGNREGA's annual work limit

Context:

- At least 1.4 lakh poor rural households have already completed their quota of 100 days of work under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA).
- Another seven lakh households have completed 80 days.

Issue:

- With the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown resulting in thousands of unemployed migrant workers returning to their villages, many are now dependent on MGNREGA wages.
- Having completed the quota of 100 days of work, in the first three months of the year, they will not be eligible for further benefits under the scheme for the rest of the year.
- With work running out, the families are in a huge crisis.
- While the construction sector, which usually absorbs a large number of workers, has also collapsed, the demand for MGNREGA work has been increasing.

Way forward:

- Activists are urging the government to increase the limit to at least 200 days per household.
- The scheme contains a provision for districts affected by natural disasters to request an expansion of the scheme to allow for 150 days of work per household.
 - Given that COVID-19 was declared a national disaster, activists have demanded that this provision be implemented immediately.
- Activists have argued that the limit should be imposed per adult individual rather than per household.

Read more about [MGNREGA](#).

Category: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

1. U.K. imposes new human rights sanctions

Context:

Under its new powers to punish human rights offenders, Britain has announced economic sanctions against individuals and organisations from Russia, Saudi Arabia, Myanmar and North Korea.

Details:

- Britain had previously imposed sanctions as part of the [European Union](#) or under the auspices of the United Nations.
- Since leaving the EU in January 2020, it has implemented its own version of the U.S.'s Magnitsky Act.
 - This allows authorities to ban or seize assets of individuals guilty of human rights abuses.
- The U.K. law authorises the British government to prevent sanctioned individuals from entering the country, channeling money through British banks, or profiting from the U.K. economy.

Sanctions:

- The sanctions include 49 individuals and organizations:
 - Saudi intelligence officials accused of involvement in the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul.
 - Russian authorities implicated in the death of Sergei Magnitsky, a lawyer who died in a Moscow prison after exposing a tax fraud scheme involving Russian officials.
 - Commander-in-chief of the Myanmar armed forces, and Myanmar army commander - accused of orchestrating systematic violence against Myanmar's Rohingya minority.
 - North Korean organisations: the Ministry of State Security Bureau and the Ministry of People's Security Correctional Bureau, sanctioned for running prison camps in the authoritarian state.

2. PLA pulls back from Galwan clash site

Context:

Three weeks after the worst military clashes in decades, India and China have begun the process of disengagement at contentious locations along the disputed Line of Actual Control (LAC).

Details:

- The disengagement between India and China along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) comes after a long and detailed conversation between National Security Adviser (NSA) Ajit Doval and Chinese State Councillor Wang Yi.
 - Both are the Special Representatives on the boundary talks, and had last met in December 2019.
- The two military commanders indicated that at first, the de-escalation would take place at all the friction points — Galwan, Pangong Tso, Hot Springs — and then depth areas such as Depsang plains in the north, where China had amassed troops, would be looked into.
- In the first signs of de-escalation, Chinese troops moved back some distance and dismantled tents at some locations along the LAC.
- Pangong Tso is one of the most contentious areas of the current stand-offs, with the PLA moving about 8 km inside up to Finger 4.
 - India's claim is till Finger 8 as per the alignment of the LAC.

Differing Perspectives:

- Both presented differing perspectives of the broader strategic relationship.
- However, the Special Representatives agreed that “both sides should take guidance from the consensus of the leaders that maintenance of peace and tranquillity in the India-China border areas was essential for the further development of our bilateral relations and that two sides should not allow differences to become disputes.” “Therefore, they agreed that it was necessary to ensure at the earliest complete disengagement of the troops along the LAC and de-escalation from India-China border areas for full restoration of peace and tranquillity.”

Way forward:

- According to experts, the government must not agree to de-escalate the situation at the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Ladakh without an agreement on returning to “status quo ante” or the situation before the stand-off began.
 - This is because, the experts point that, while the disengagement brought an end to hostilities between India and China over China's attempt to build a road near the India-China-Bhutan tri-junction area, transgressing into Bhutanese territory, it did not stop the PLA's construction work right across the Doklam plateau.
- Ashok Kantha, former Ambassador to China and the Director of the Institute of Chinese Studies said, “If the military only agrees on disengagement and de-escalation, it could end up at a disadvantage. As the PLA has constructed major infrastructure and consolidated its position in Doklam.”

Category: HEALTH

1. Chinese region reports bubonic plague case

Context:

A herdsman in China's northern Inner Mongolia region has been confirmed to have the bubonic plague.

Details:

- According to China's National Health Commission, at least five people have died from it since 2014.
- The highly-contagious plague is rare in China and can be treated.

Bubonic Plague:

- Bubonic Plague first appeared in the 14th century and surfaced for a second time in London in 1665 and killed about 20% of its population.
- The outbreak tapered off in 1666.
- The bubonic plague is caused by the bacteria *Yersinia pestis*. It can spread through contact with infected fleas.

C. GS 3 Related

Category: DISASTER MANAGEMENT

1. 'Negligence to blame for styrene leak'

Context:

- The high-power committee (HPC) formed by the government to investigate the styrene vapour leak at LG Polymers in Visakhapatnam submitted its 4000-page report to the Chief Minister.
- It stated that human negligence and serious lapses in safety and security led to the accident.

Background:

A gas leak in Visakhapatnam in Andhra Pradesh had claimed at least 11 lives and affected thousands of residents in five villages. The source of the leak was a styrene plant owned by South Korean electronics giant LG.

This topic has been covered in the 8th May 2020 Comprehensive News Analysis. [Click here](#) to read.

Key findings of the report:

- The panel found fault with the management for the lack of proper safety response preparedness at the plant.
- Poor design of the storage tank, inadequate refrigeration and faulty cooling system, absence of circulation and mixing systems, inadequate measures and parameters, poor safety protocol and inadequate safety awareness were found to be the reasons that led to the accident.
- Inadequate risk assessment response, poor process safety management system and insufficient knowledge among staff about the chemical properties of styrene during storage conditions were also highlighted.
- The company had failed in activating the emergency siren system and did not keep sufficient stock of inhibitors, other terminating chemicals to control the runaway reaction.

- The report also noted that the protocols pertaining to emergency response and safety were not followed by the authorities during the lockdown period.

Category: SECURITY

1. Opium seizures: India in top five list

Context:

Findings of the World Drug Report 2020.

Details:

- The global area under opium poppy cultivation declined for the second year in a row in 2019.
 - Despite the decline in cultivation, opium production remained stable in 2019, with higher yields reported in the main opium production areas.
- Globally, 47 countries reported opium seizures, 30 countries reported morphine seizures and 103 countries reported heroin seizures in 2018.
 - It suggests that trafficking in heroin continues to be more widespread in geographical terms than trafficking in opium or morphine.
- Quantities of seized opiates remained concentrated in Asia, notably in south-west Asia (70%).
 - Most opiates seized were reported in or close to the main opium production areas.
 - Asia, which is host to more than 90% of global illicit opium production and the world's largest consumption market for opiates, accounted for almost 80% of all opiates seized worldwide in 2018.
- Outside Asia, the largest total quantity of heroin and morphine was seized in Europe.

Opium Seizure:

- Opium is illicitly produced in about 50 countries.
- The fourth highest seizure of opium in 2018 was reported from India, after Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan.
- Close to 97% of the total global production of opium in the past five years came from only three countries.
- About 84% of the total opium was produced in Afghanistan, from where it is supplied to neighbouring countries, Europe, West Asia, South Asia and Africa. A small percentage also reaches North America and the Oceania region.

Heroin Seizure:

- In terms of heroin seizure (1.3 tonnes), India was at the 12th position in the world.
- Iran reported the highest seizure of heroin (25 tonnes), followed by Turkey, the United States, China, Pakistan and Afghanistan.
- Heroin is manufactured from the morphine extracted from the seed pod of opium poppy plants.

Note:

- World Drug Report is published by the [United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime \(UNODC\)](https://www.unodc.org/).

E. Editorials

Category: ECONOMY

1. Rolling back the induced livelihood shock

Context:

- The article discusses the lockdown-induced livelihood shock and its impact on the poor and vulnerable sections.

Background:

Poverty estimation in India:

- India's poverty line has been based on unrealistically low thresholds leading to conservative poverty numbers. Irregular updating of official poverty lines and unavailability of data on consumption expenditure from National Sample Surveys in recent years have added to the **ambiguity around poverty estimation in India**.
- According to the **household consumption expenditure reported in the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS)**, 2017-18 and applying State-specific poverty lines (used by the erstwhile Planning Commission in 2011 based on the **Tendulkar Committee recommendations**, adjusted with current price indices), about **42% or around 56 crore people were 'officially' poor** before the lockdown was announced.

Concerns:

Livelihood shock:

- The pandemic and the stringently enforced lockdown have had a devastating impact on India's labour class.
- There have been reports of a **massive scale of falling incomes and loss of means of livelihood**. The livelihood shock to such a large proportion of the population is unprecedented in the nation's history.
- There could be severe implications with increasing **hunger-related deaths and destitution, leading to social unrest and crime**.

Increase in poverty:

- Around 20 crore people were within a narrow band of 20% above the poverty line implying that these people were only a few hundred rupees over the poverty line threshold. A modest dip in earnings — and hence a fall in consumption spending — would push a majority of them into poverty and hunger.
- **The lockdown seems to have pushed such vulnerable sections into poverty.**
 - The extrapolation of the PLFS data extrapolated for the year 2020 suggests that about an additional 40 crore people were pushed below the poverty line due to the lockdown.
 - Around 12 crores of this lockdown-induced newly poor are in urban areas and another 28 crore people in rural areas.

Poverty deepening:

- Those who were already poor are going to suffer a further worsening in their quality of life, a phenomenon known as poverty deepening.
- Even before the lockdown, around 16% of the population had per capita consumption expenditure of about a third of the poverty line.
- The lockdown would have **pushed the already poor to extreme poverty**.

Destabilization of the urban economy:

- **Massive reverse migration flows out of the urban informal sector** will hinder the economic recovery in the post-lockdown scenario.

Inadequate state responses:

- The article notes that the formal responses of the state to address the economic impact of the pandemic have been **mostly inadequate and poorly conceived**.
 - The second economic stimulus package announces only a token increase of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) wage by Rs. 20 (Rs. 182 to Rs. 202).
 - The demand for work is anticipated to increase by 25% with the reverse migration-fuelled increase in rural labour supply. The additional grant made to the MGNREGS seems insufficient.

For more related information, refer to:

[CNA dated July 1, 2020](#)

Policy failure:

- The article argues that the neo-liberal growth that India has experienced since the 1990s has been largely through the **exploitation of the labouring class**. The economy grew by paying less to workers and allowing surplus to accumulate in the hands of the owners of the means of production, with the expectation that this would be reinvested.
- This model seems to have made the **labouring class increasingly vulnerable**, weakening their collective bargaining power, pushing them away from their native towns out of desperation, forcing them to accept any wage that is offered to them, making them live in conditions which take away their sense of dignity, and curtailing any social security benefit that could help them survive in times of difficulties.

Way forward:

- The article argues for specific policy measures to reverse the lockdown-created shock and stop it from snowballing into chronic poverty.

Rural specific schemes:

- **A revamped, expanded NREGA** needs to be made the fulcrum of the government's rural interventions.
- The revamped scheme would require providing 90 million workers guaranteed employment of 20 days of work/month for at least the next six months. This would entail an additional financial stimulus of Rs. 1.6-lakh crore.

Focussing on equity:

- Recent experience with respect to government schemes shows the inherent challenge of the exclusion of marginalised communities at the lowest strata of the hierarchy.
- Though universalisation of the Public Distribution System may be an ideal objective, there is a need for **better equity focus in the implementation** of such schemes.
- This would involve identification of the most vulnerable and including them into the programme before expanding it to the relatively better-off.

Stabilising urban economy:

- Given the magnitude of the destabilisation in the urban economy, **an urban employment guarantee programme** becomes a dire necessity to stabilise the urban economy.
- A **'direct' employment programme implemented through municipal corporations** could be introduced to guarantee 20 days of work. The wages could be fixed with a 30% premium over prevalent MNREGA benchmark average wage in the State.
- This programme can be used to **develop key social infrastructure in urban areas** including slum development, drinking water supply, toilet construction, parks and common areas, urban afforestation and social forestry. Such public works programmes can make a major difference in both the condition of public utilities and absorbing the spurt in demand for work in towns and smaller cities.

Reorienting policies:

- There is a need to alter the course of economic progress and **reorient development programmes based on equity and sustainable development.**

Category: ENVIRONMENT AND ECOLOGY

1. Before the next health crisis

Context:

- The article analyzes the inter-relation between health disasters and air pollution and greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions causing global warming.

Background:

Lockdown effect:

- The **lockdown has had a positive impact on air pollution levels and GHG emissions.**
 - In Europe, 11,000 air-pollution related deaths were estimated to have been averted since the start of lockdowns.
- However, despite the plunge during the lockdown, atmospheric carbon emissions are a record high because of past accumulation and the respite from the air pollution that blankets Indian cities is only but transitory.

Details:

- The article claims that apart from the current pandemic, there are two **impending dangers to people's health — air pollution and greenhouse gases — and a weak public health system.**

Issue of air pollution:

- Globally, some **9 million premature deaths a year are associated with air pollutants**, such as fine particulate matter, known as PM 2.5.
- Recent experience seems indicative of the **association between pollution levels in cities and COVID-19 infections and death rates**, a link observed in New York City and the northern provinces of Italy. Delhi, Maharashtra, Gujarat, and Tamil Nadu, in the top tier of pollution concentration, have also seen high deaths and infections per thousand people.
- 14 of the world's 20 most polluted cities are in India.

Issue of GHG emissions:

- GHGs, like carbon dioxide, which contribute to global warming also have a **damaging impact on human health**.
- There have been studies indicating the **link between communicable diseases and global warming**.
 - Mosquito-borne diseases in India have been connected to global warming through both increased rainfall and heatwaves. Europe reported its first local transmissions of dengue in 2010.
- Global warming intensifies heat waves and worsens respiratory illnesses.
- **India has been ranked as the world's fifth most vulnerable country to climate change.**

Issue of public health system:

- The **government spending on health in India is 1.6% of GDP**, which is low for a lower middle-income country.
- Given the weak state of affairs of the public health system, India fails the test of readiness for health disasters, according to the **2019 Global Health Security Index**.

Way forward:

Emission reduction:

- There is an urgent need to confront air pollution and global warming.
- Big cities like Delhi need to deal with transport which is responsible for two-fifth of the PM 2.5 emissions.
- Reforms should **encourage public transportation** in place of private vehicles by providing inter-connectivity between the metro and buses. Reforms should also focus on **expanding electric vehicles**.

Strengthening public health system:

- In managing health risks, emission reduction should be coupled with a stronger public health system.
 - Kerala and Tamil Nadu have recorded lower COVID-19 mortality rates because of the good healthcare systems in place in these states.
- There is a need for **higher budgetary allocation** to the critical health sector along with a **dominant state presence in the sector**.
- A **preventive health care approach**, along with a **decentralized approach**, should be a policy priority for the administration.

Re-orienting development approaches:

- India should avoid the scramble to return to the traditional ways of boosting short-term growth at the cost of environmental degradation and should capitalise on the increasing interest towards a **more sustainable development model**. This approach would not only lead to a cleaner world but would also lead to a healthier world.

- Spending on reducing air pollution and GHGs provides estimated health benefits of 1.4 to 2.5 times more than the cost of the actions.

F. Prelims Facts

1. Zardozi

- It is a world-renowned textile embroidery.
- Zardozi is an art patronised by the Mughals that involves weaving metallic threads on fabric to create intricate patterns.
- It flourished during the reign of Mughal Emperor Akbar.
- Zardozi is a Persian word that means "Sewing with gold string".
- Lucknow Zardozi has a Geographical Indication tag.

G. Tidbits

1. Coronavirus is airborne, 239 experts warn in letter to WHO18

While the WHO has long held that the coronavirus is spread primarily by large respiratory droplets that, once expelled by infected people in coughs and sneezes, fall quickly to the floor, in an open letter to the [World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#), 239 scientists in 32 countries have outlined the evidence showing that smaller particles can infect people, and are suggesting a revision of its recommendations.

- If the airborne transmission is a significant factor, especially in crowded spaces with poor ventilation, the consequences for containment will be significant.
- Masks may be needed indoors, even in socially distant settings.
- Health care workers may need N95 masks that filter out even the smallest respiratory droplets as they care for coronavirus patients.
- Ultraviolet lights may be needed to kill viral particles floating in tiny droplets indoors.

H. UPSC Prelims Practice Questions

Q1. Consider the following statements:

1. Golden Triangle is located in the area where the borders of Thailand, Myanmar and Laos meet at the confluence of the Ruak and Mekong Rivers.
2. Golden Crescent overlaps between the mountain ranges of Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan.
3. Golden Crescent is much older than the Golden Triangle.

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

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

CHECK ANSWERS:-

Answer: c

Explanation:

- The Golden Crescent overlaps between the mountain ranges of Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan whose mountainous peripheries give the network its eponymous name.
- The Golden Triangle is located in the area where the borders of Thailand, Myanmar and Laos meet at the confluence of the Ruak and Mekong Rivers.
- The Golden Crescent is much older than its counterpart in Southeast Asia. While the Golden Triangle began as an opium-producing entity during the 1980s, the Golden Crescent has been doing the same since the 1950s.

Q2. Consider the following statements:

1. Zardozi is an art patronised by the Mughals that involves weaving metallic threads on fabric to create intricate patterns.
2. Bhopal Zardozi has a Geographical Indication tag.

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

- a. 1 only
- b. 2 only
- c. Both 1 and 2
- d. Neither 1 nor 2

CHECK ANSWERS:-

Answer: b

Explanation:

- Zardozi is an art patronised by the Mughals that involves weaving metallic threads on fabric to create intricate patterns.
- It flourished during the reign of Mughal Emperor Akbar.
- Lucknow Zardozi has a Geographical Indication tag.

Q3. Consider the following statements with respect to Humayun's tomb:

1. Humayun's garden-tomb is an example of the charbagh.
2. It is the first garden-tomb built in India.
3. It is included in UNESCO's list of World Heritage Sites in India.

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

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

CHECK ANSWERS:-

Answer: d

Explanation:

- Humayun's tomb, built in 1570, is of particular cultural significance as it was the first garden-tomb on the Indian subcontinent.
- Humayun's garden-tomb is an example of the charbagh (a four quadrant garden with the four rivers of Quranic paradise represented), with pools joined by channels.

Q4. Which of the following is/are Green House Gas/es:

1. Ozone
2. Carbon dioxide
3. Nitrous oxide

Choose the correct option:

- a. 1 and 2 only
- b. 1, 2 and 3
- c. 3 only
- d. None of the above

CHECK ANSWERS:-

Answer: b

Explanation:

Atmospheric gases like carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide (N_2O), water vapour, and chlorofluorocarbons are capable of trapping the out-going infrared radiation from the earth's surface thereby causing the greenhouse effect. Hence, these are known as greenhouse gases. Ozone is also a greenhouse gas.

I. UPSC Mains Practice Questions

1. Given that the stringently implemented lockdown has led to a livelihood shock and has had a devastating impact on the poor, suggest suitable measures to address this challenge. (10 marks, 150 words)
2. Apart from the current pandemic, there are two impending dangers to people's health — air pollution and greenhouse gases — and a weak public health system. Comment. (15 marks, 250 words)

