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Editorial

An image makeover of the Belt and Road Initiative

- ◆ As the Second Belt and Road Forum (BRF), reviewing progress of the **Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)**, concluded in Beijing on April 27, 2019, China had reason to be satisfied. The summit segment was attended by 37 heads of state or government. The list included strategic partner Russia and almost all from Central and Southeast Asia, two important areas of BRI operation.
- ◆ If the attendance from South Asia was somewhat disappointing (only Pakistan and Nepal at the leaders' level), South Asian countries, except India and Bhutan, joined various initiatives launched at the forum. The east coast of Africa, which is on the Maritime Silk Road, sent five leaders. Particularly in the context of recent U.S. tirades against the “predatory economics” of the BRI, it was significant that nine European leaders attended, including seven from the European Union. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe sent a special envoy, conveying that the BRI “is a grand vision with great potential”. The UN Secretary General and IMF Managing Director were in attendance, the latter extolling the BRI’s achievements, “from stimulating infrastructure investment to developing new global supply chains”. China claimed participation from 150 countries at the forum, which included a CEO conference, where agreements worth \$64 billion were signed.

Litany of complaints

- ◆ The Chinese leadership claimed the attendance rebutted allegations that BRI is a geopolitical tool and exploitative “debt trap” driving countries into dependence on China. It would be more realistic to see it as indicating China’s economic clout and the desire of most countries to hedge their bets in the current turbulence in great power relations. Concerns about the viability of BRI projects have not dissolved; it is just that immediate benefits sometimes obscure the direness of future consequences.
- ◆ Over the years, the structure and implementation of the BRI have attracted negative comment, including from some of the countries represented at the forum. There is a litany of complaints: that projects are selected as per Chinese priorities, with inadequate consultation with recipients; terms are agreed bilaterally and non-transparently with the leadership, and benefits do not trickle down to the population; contracts go to Chinese companies, are implemented by Chinese labour, with raw materials and products from China; most projects are over-valued and economically unviable; most financing is by Chinese loans on unrealistic terms, leading eventually to “debt traps”; foreign companies and private investment are spurned; corruption flourishes in the absence of transparency, labour laws are flouted and environmental compliance is lax. Above all, the BRI exhibits China’s geostrategic ambition for economic dominance and political hegemony.

China promises a makeover

- ◆ President Xi Jinping’s speeches and the final forum communique silenced this criticism by promising a total makeover of the BRI. They declared that it will be guided by extensive consultation, joint contribution and shared benefits. Cooperation should be transparent, people-centric, and green and clean, with zero

tolerance for corruption. Project evaluation, tendering, bidding and implementation would meet international standards. The right of participating countries to define their developmental priorities would be respected, as also their laws, sovereignty and territorial integrity. Foreign investment would be welcomed. Economic, social, fiscal and environmental sustainability of projects should be ensured, with emphasis on debt sustainability. In short, it was a promise to transform the BRI, in one fell swoop, from all that it was into all that it should have been. The question is how this rhetoric will translate into action.

- ◆ The other remarkable feature was the launch of the “Belt and Road” as an overarching framework for bilateral and plurilateral cooperation. China announced a clutch of “Belt and Road” scholarships, training courses and exchange programmes. Groups of countries launched cooperation mechanisms for ports administration, accounting standards, tax administration, banking, intellectual property, sustainable cities, energy and dispute settlement, among many others. Some of these mechanisms were facilitated by UN agencies. China listed 283 “deliverables” from the forum, comprising Chinese initiatives, bilateral and multilateral agreements, investment projects and financing arrangements. The message was the BRI is now more than a bunch of Chinese infrastructure projects; it is truly a “community of common destiny” (as Mr. Xi termed it in 2017) to reshape global governance – a sort of G-150, promoting multilateralism, globalisation, development and human rights, whose members could forge plurilateral cooperation under its umbrella.
- ◆ All in all, it was a show of China’s self-confidence about its place in the world at a time of churn in global politics. The U.S. absence was barely mentioned, nor did the shadow of the increasingly strident U.S. campaign against China’s “militarism”, “predatory economics” and “technology theft” intrude into the bonhomie of forum proceedings. India’s absence was gracefully handled, with the Chinese Foreign Minister confirming that it would not affect the ongoing high-level India-China dialogue.
- ◆ An important – potentially the most impactful – initiative of the BRI has gone relatively unnoticed. Mr. Xi announced in 2017 that it would enhance digital connectivity and integration of big data to build the “digital silk road of the 21st century”. Digital connectivity infrastructure is to be built in tandem with physical connectivity. This arouses U.S. (and wider) concerns that with its lead in 5G network technology and deep pockets, China will establish dominance of its 5G standards and equipment in Eurasia and beyond. The sudden image makeover of the BRI may well be intended to open up a more accommodating attitude to this technology insertion.

India and the BRI

- ◆ The debate in India about whether or not we should join the BRI will probably be reignited in the wake of its new avatar. The opposition to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor determined absence at the forum. There is no specific opportunity for India in any other element of the BRI. India’s attitude to it has to be set in the larger picture of the relationship with China, which combines a strong economic partnership with major strategic challenges, further complicated by the global geopolitical flux.

Source: The Hindu



Art and Culture, Society, Social and National Issues

Bodhisattva figure unearthed from Phanigiri

Why in news?

- ☞ Historians have recently unearthed a stucco figure at Phanigiri, Telangana, which is presumed to be that of Bodhisattva.

Phanigiri Buddhist site

- ◆ Phanigiri is a Buddhist site in Suryapet district, Telangana. It dates back to the 1st Century BCE.
- ◆ The place consists of a Buddhist complex which is adorned with a massive stupa along with two apsidal halls with stupas in it.
- ◆ Vardhamanukota, an early historic Buddhist site is located 8 kms from Phanigiri on the left bank of the rivulet Bikkeru or Aleru, on Phanigiri-Suryapet road.
- ◆ The Buddhist site at Phanigiri was selected for preliminary excavations in the year 1941 and the operations continued upto 1944.
- ◆ The excavations for four field seasons i.e., 2001-2002, 2002-2003, 2004-2005 and 2006-2007 brought to light a Mahastupa, apsidal Chaityagrihas, Votive stupas, pillared congregation halls, viharas, platforms with staircases at various levels, sculptural panels with Brahmi label inscriptions of the Satavahana and Ikshvaku times.

Bodhisattva

- ◆ The word “bodhisattva” is a compound word formed from bodhi (spiritual awakening, enlightenment) and sattva (a being, essence, spirit).
- ◆ In Buddhism, a Bodhisattva is any person who is on the path towards Buddhahood but has not yet attained it.
- ◆ In early Buddhism, bodhisattva meant “the previous lives of a (or the) Buddha.
- ◆ Bodhisattva may also refer in Mahayana Buddhism to archetypal bodhisattvas: mythical beings such as Avalokiteshvara and Manjushri, who are objects of devotion.

Source: The Hindu

Battle of Kangla Tongbi

Why in news?

- ☞ The Platinum Jubilee of the Battle of Kangla Tongbi, also known as Battle of Imphal, was commemorated on April 7, 2019 by the Army Ordnance Corps at Kangla Tongbi War Memorial near Imphal, Manipur.
- ☞ The 75th anniversary celebrations honoured the martyrs of Ordnance Personnel of 221 Advance Ordnance Depot who made their supreme sacrifice during the World War-II on the night of April 6/7, 1944.
- ☞ The Battle of Imphal or Kangla Tongbi is referred to as one of the bloodiest battles of World War-II.

Battle of Kangla Tongbi

- ◆ The Battle of Kangla Tongbi was fought during March 8 to July 3, 1944 by the Ordnance personnel of 221 Advance Ordnance Depot (AOD) on the night of April 6-7, 1944 against the Japanese aiming to capture the logistics base of the allied forces.
- ◆ Japanese forces had planned to capture Imphal and the surrounding areas. After establishing themselves firmly on the main Kohima-Manipur highway, they advanced towards Kangla Tongbi.
- ◆ However at Kangla Tongbi, Ordnance personnel of 221 AOD had put up stiff resistance against the Japanese.
- ◆ The position of 221 AOD was not at all safe from a tactical point of view; it was exposed to the enemy from all sides.
- ◆ Major Boyd, the Deputy Chief of Ordnance Officer (DCOO) was made in charge of the operations for defence of the 221 Advance Ordnance Depot.
- ◆ On the night of Apr 6/7, 1944, the Japanese mounted a heavy attack on the Depot, rushing into a deep nallah which was used as a covered approach to the Depot. However to their shock, the Bren Gun Section, hidden in a well camouflaged bunker placed by the Depot, opened fire.
- ◆ This shook the enemy and forced the Japanese to withdraw leaving many dead. It is estimated that 5000 soldiers belonging to Indian National Army, 5000 to British Commonwealth Force and 30000 to Japanese Army sacrificed their lives.
- ◆ The Bren Gun Section was manned by Hav/ Clerk Store Basant Singh.
- ◆ For this act of gallantry, Major Boyd was awarded the Military Cross (MC), and Hav/ Clerk Store Basant Singh was honoured with the Indian Distinguished Service Medal (IDSM).

Source: The Hindu

Upgradation of Unnat Bharat Abhiyan

Why in news?

- ☛ E-Governance Services India Limited, an initiative of Common Service Centre's (CSC), a special purpose vehicle under the Ministry of Electronics & IT, has tied up with Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Kanpur to upscale Unnat Bharat Abhiyan.

Highlights

- ◆ IIT Kanpur has adopted five villages Baikantapur, Hridayapur, Pratappur Hari, Ishwariganj, and Saxupurva situated on the outskirts of Kanpur for its overall development.
- ◆ About fifteen affiliated educational institutions under Unnat Bharat Abhiyan will adopt gram panchayats and equip them with all citizen centric services through CSCs.
- ◆ These institutions will train village level entrepreneurs (VLEs) who run CSCs as part of the village development plan.
- ◆ The VLEs will also be skilled about the use of solar energy, cleanliness and use of modern technologies through interventions of IIT-Kanpur.

Unnat Bharat Abhiyan (UBA)

- ◆ Unnat Bharat Abhiyan (UBA) is an initiative of the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD). Its second edition was launched in the year 2018.
- ◆ The Mission of Unnat Bharat Abhiyan is to enable higher educational institutions to work with the people of rural India in identifying development challenges and evolving appropriate solutions for accelerating sustainable growth.
- ◆ It also aims to create a virtuous cycle between society and an inclusive academic system by providing knowledge and practices for emerging professions.
- ◆ One of its goals is to build an understanding of the development agenda within institutes of Higher Education and an institutional capacity and training relevant to national needs, especially those of rural India.

Source: PIB

CBSE to allow visual aids for disabled kids from 2020

Why in news?

- ☞ The Central Board of Secondary Education has decided to allow students to use magnifying glasses and portable video magnifiers during the Class X final examination, from 2020.
- ☞ The CBSE, while notifying the exemption stated that alternative-type questions will be provided in lieu of questions having visual inputs for visually impaired candidates in social science.

Highlights

- ◆ Under the new order, CBSE students will be allowed to use magnifying glasses or portable video magnifiers, in lieu of large-font question papers, with effect from 2020.
- ◆ The CBSE affiliated schools have also been directed to ensure that premises are disabled friendly by 2020 with all the educational institutions, including hostels, libraries and laboratories to have barrier-free access.
- ◆ The schools have also been directed not to deny admission to children with special needs in mainstream education.
- ◆ The agencies and organisations authorised to grant a medical certification for any specific disability as listed by CBSE include the chief medical officer, civil surgeon, medical superintendent of government hospitals under the control of either central or state governments, recognised institutes of national level such as National Association for the Blind and Spastic Society of India and non-governmental organisations practitioners registered with the Rehabilitation Council of India or government of the respective states.

Source: Times of India

100 years of Jallianwala Bagh Tragedy

Why in news?

- ☞ April 13, 2019 was the 100th anniversary of Jallianwala Bagh Massacre.
- ☞ On this date (on the occasion of Baisakhi) people gathered in Jallianwala Bagh to discuss and protest peacefully against the arrest of Satya Pal and Saifuddin Kitchlew and implementation of the Rowlatt Act.
- ☞ Brigadier-General Dyer ordered soldiers to open fire on the crowd gathered in the park.
- ☞ About 1000 innocent civilians were killed in the firing, leaving a black mark on the face of the British administration.

Rowlatt Act

- ◆ The Anarchical and Revolutionary Crimes Act of 1919, called the Rowlatt Act was a legislative act passed by British administration.
- ◆ It extended the emergency measures of preventive indefinite detention, incarceration without trial and judicial review.
- ◆ Also, the accused were denied the right to know the accusers and the evidence used during the trial.
- ◆ Convicted people were required to deposit securities after release, and were restricted from taking part in any political, educational, or religious activities.
- ◆ The aim of the act was to curb the growing nationalist feeling in the country.

Source: The Hindu



Polity & Governance, Social Justice, Social Development

Zero pendency court project

Why in news?

☞ Delhi High Court has recently released a report that talks about the problem of increasing backlog and pendency of cases. Prompted by the urgent need to ensure timely justice, the Delhi High Court started a Pilot Project titled “Zero Pendency Courts” in certain subordinate courts in Delhi. The primary goal of the project was to study the flow of cases in the absence of backlog.

Objectives of the Zero Pendency Courts Project

- ◆ To study the actual, real-time ‘Flow of Cases’ from the date of institution till final disposal.
- ◆ To identify the variables responsible for delays in disposal of cases.
- ◆ To assess realistic time lines needed for the final disposal of newly instituted cases relating to different jurisdictions.
- ◆ To stipulate norms designating the acceptable or tolerable time schedules for disposal of different types of cases.
- ◆ To assess the realistic time lines required for various stages of the ‘flow of cases’ in different jurisdictions.
- ◆ To appreciate the institution patterns and mapping the nature of litigation in different jurisdictions in different District Courts.

Key Highlights

- ◆ Delhi needs 43 more Judges above the current strength of 143 to clear all pending cases in one year.
- ◆ As on March 2019, there were 5.5 lakh criminal cases and 1.8 lakh civil cases pending in subordinate courts in Delhi. The number of criminal cases in Delhi is far more than the number of civil cases.
- ◆ The highest amount of time per hearing on average was spent on the final arguments stage followed by the final order or judgement.
- ◆ A considerable amount of time is taken on dictation, researching on case laws etc. before pronouncing the final judgement. Thus, a lot of time is spent on each of the hearings.
- ◆ The conclusions from this project would help in identifying benchmarks for different types of cases time lines, number of judges, case flow management rules and a host of other relevant factors. Further, the project would not only provide information on the judicial time required to dispose a case but also gather stage wise details in each case. The various data analyses presented in the report have been done diligently keeping in view the different types of cases that judges handle and comparison between courts that handle similar types of cases have been carried out.

Source: The Hindu

Supreme Court seeks EC response on plea against voter prosecution

Why in news?

- ☞ The Supreme Court recently sought a response from the Election Commission on a plea seeking abolition of a provision in election rules that provides for prosecution of an elector if a complaint alleging malfunctioning of EVMs and VVPATs turns out to be false.

Highlights

- ◆ The petition contended that the obligation of proving an allegation cannot be on the voter when machines used for voting showed ‘arbitrary deviant behaviour’.
- ◆ It also alleged that putting the responsibility on the elector in cases of arbitrary deviant behaviour of machines used in the election process, infringes upon a citizen’s right to freedom of expression under the Constitution.
- ◆ The plea sought a direction to the EC to register a complaint of any deviant behaviour of equipment used in the election process.
- ◆ The petition said that presently, the burden of proof rests on the elector for reporting any deviant behaviour of EVMs and VVPATs, who will face criminal charges irrespective of whether the complaint was truthful and honest.
- ◆ It said that when an elector is asked to cast test vote as prescribed under Rule 49MA, he may not be able to reproduce the same result which he was complaining about, one more time in a sequence, because of the pre-programmed deviant behaviour of the electronic machines.

The plea argued that holding an elector accountable for deviant behaviours of EVMs and VVPATs could deter them from coming forth and making any complaint, which is essential for improving the process.

What is the process of reporting malfunctioning of EVMs?

- ◆ While reporting the deviant behaviour of an EVM used in the election process, an elector is required to cast two votes, first one in secrecy and the second a test vote in the presence of the candidates or polling agents.
- ◆ According to the petition, the test vote cast subsequently in the presence of others cannot become conclusive evidence of the deviant behaviour or otherwise of the previous vote cast in absolute secrecy.
- ◆ It also added that since only an elector could be a witness to the secrecy of his vote cast, it would violate Article 20(3) of the Constitution which says that no person accused of an offence shall be compelled to be a witness against himself.

Source: The Hindu

Election Commission bans release of Narendra Modi biopic

Why in news?

- ☞ The Election Commission of India has banned the release of any biopic, including a film on Prime Minister Narendra Modi, which was scheduled to release on April 11, the same day when the seven-phase Lok Sabha elections are scheduled to begin.

Highlights

- ◆ The Election Commission stated that the creative contents that are claimed to either diminish or advance the electoral prospect of a candidate or a political party in the garb of creative freedom are a kind of surrogate publicity by the candidate or the political party during the period of MCC.
- ◆ The commission stated that though the display materials claim to be a part of creative content, it is contended that these have propensity and potentiality to affect the level playing field, which is not in consonance with the provisions of the Model Code of Conduct.
- ◆ The commission further stated that as these contents are incorporated in the storyline of the programmes being shown and there would be difficulty in proving the payment of money, they may not fall under the category of ‘advertisement’ strictly and may remain outside the purview of MCC certification requirement and thereby evade the directive given by the Supreme Court.
- ◆ According to the commission, such political contents pose a serious threat to the level playing field, as they may create an impression of the truthfulness of such content being shown through television, cinema, internet-based entertainment programmes or the social media.
- ◆ Therefore, the commission felt that in the larger interest of conducting free and fair elections, such political content ought to be regulated during the election period to prevent violation of the MCC.

Rationale Behind the move

- ◆ Under Article 324 of the constitution, superintendence, directions and control of elections are bestowed upon the commission and it is its main duty to take necessary measures to create a level playing field and provide a conducive electoral environment to all the stakeholders.
- ◆ The film, titled “PM Narendra Modi” and directed by Omung Kumar, has been criticised by the opposition parties, who claim that the biopic could give undue advantage to the BJP in the polls as it will arrive in theatres before the 2019 Lok Sabha elections.

Source: The Hindu, Indian Express

SC: Relative of victim can file dowry harassment complaint

Why in news?

- ☞ The Supreme Court of India recently ruled that any relative of a woman, who is undergoing cruelty and dowry harassment by her husband or in-laws, can file a complaint against them.

Section 498A of IPC

- ◆ The section 498A of the Indian Penal Code was passed by the Indian Parliament in 1983. It was introduced to protect married women from being subjected to matrimonial cruelty.
- ◆ It is a criminal law that states that “Husband or relative of husband of a woman subjecting her to cruelty—Whoever, being the husband or the relative of the husband of a woman, subjects such woman to cruelty shall be punishable with imprisonment for a term which may extend to three years and shall also be liable to fine.”

When is the section invoked?

- ◆ The section is invoked when a husband or in-laws indulge in cruelty on a woman or seek dowry.

Highlights of the judgement

- ◆ The bench observed that there is nothing in Section 498A, which may indicate that when a woman is subjected to cruelty, a complaint has to be filed necessarily by the women so subjected.
- ◆ The bench noted that Section 498A of IPC indicates that the provision does not contemplate that complaint for an offence under Section 498A should be filed only by the woman, who is subjected to cruelty by husband or his relative.
- ◆ Hence, the bench stated that it will have to take into consideration the complaint filed by relatives of the victim and cannot deem such complaints as not maintainable on this ground.

What is the significance?

- ◆ As per the order, any relative can lodge a complaint on behalf of the victim, which will be deemed to be maintainable.
- ◆ The landmark judgement will help the women victims, who are unable to lodge a complaint against her husband and in-laws.

Source: The Hindu, Indian Express

Usage of VVPAT Machine in Lok Sabha Election

What is VVPAT Machine?

- ☞ The Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) is a method of providing feedback to voters using a ballot less voting system.
- ☞ The VVPAT is an independent printer system attached with Electronic Voting Machine (EVM) that allows the voters to verify that their votes are cast as intended. It generates a paper slip every time a voter casts his vote, recording the party to whom the vote was made. The VVPAT slip is kept in a sealed cover.
- ☞ VVPAT slip counting takes place in the VVPAT counting booths under the close monitoring of the returning officer and direct oversight of the observer.

How does the VVPAT work?

- ◆ The voting in India is done using the Electronic Voting Machine (EVM) that is designed with two units: the control unit and the balloting unit.
 - ◆ The balloting unit of the machine has a list of candidate names and party symbols with a blue button next to it. The voter can press the button next to the candidate's name they wish to vote for.
 - ◆ When the voter casts the vote on the EVM, printer-like VVPAT apparatus linked to the EVM generates a slip showing serial number, name and symbol of the candidate to whom the vote was made.
 - ◆ With this slip, the voter can verify his casted vote.
 - ◆ This VVPAT slip is displayed for 7 seconds before it's automatically cut.
 - ◆ The slip, once viewed, is cut and dropped into the drop box in the VVPAT machine and a beep will be heard.
 - ◆ The VVPAT machines can only be accessed by the election officers in the rarest of rare cases.
- A VVPAT consists of a Printer and a VVPAT Status Display Unit (VSDU). The control unit of the EVMs and VSDU are kept with the presiding officer or polling officer, while the balloting unit and printer are kept in the voting compartment.

Significance of VVPAT with EVM

- ◆ The VVPAT helps to detect potential election fraud or malfunction in the Electronic Voting Machine. It provides a means to audit the stored electronic results. It serves as an additional barrier to change or destroy votes.
- ◆ The EVMs with VVPAT system ensure the accuracy of the voting system with fullest transparency and restores the confidence of the voters.
- ◆ EVMs and VVPATs also speed up the election process as counting votes on EVMs takes much lesser time than counting paper ballots.

Maiden use of VVPAT with EVM

- ♦ The idea of using VVPAT was for the first time suggested during an All Party Meeting in October 2010. Subsequently, the Union Government issued a notification in August 2013 amending the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961, to enable the Commission to use VVPAT with Electronic Voting Machines.
- ♦ The VVPAT with the EVM was used for the first time in the bye-election for the Noksen Assembly seat in Tuensang district of Nagaland in September 2013. Thereafter, the VVPATs have been used in select constituencies in every election to the State Assemblies.

Use of VVPATs in Lok Sabha Elections 2019

- ♦ The VVPAT with the EVMs were deployed in eight Parliamentary constituencies during the 2014 Lok Sabha elections.
- ♦ In the Lok Sabha Elections 2019, the VVPATs will be used in all the constituencies.

Source: The Hindu, Indian Express

Mental illness to spare death row convicts:SC

Why in news?

- ☞ The Supreme Court of India has recently directed that mental illness of people on death row, if developed post-conviction, would now be a mitigating factor for appellate courts for sparing them from the gallows.

Highlights

- ♦ The bench was faced with complex questions concerning the relationship between mental illness and crime and as to how culpability of a convict can be assessed if he develops a mental condition after the court finds him guilty.
- ♦ While outlining directions to be followed by appellate courts on sentencing mentally-ill accused, the bench stated that the post-conviction severe mental illness will be a mitigating factor that the Appellate Court, in appropriate cases, needs to consider while sentencing an accused to the death penalty.
- ♦ The bench stated that the assessment of such a disability will be conducted by a multi-disciplinary team comprising qualified professionals including professional with expertise in accused person's particular mental illness.

How to prevent misuse of the judgement?

- ♦ In order to prevent the misuse of the direction, the top court stated that the burden would be on the accused to prove by a preponderance of clear evidence that he is suffering with severe mental illness.
- ♦ The court stated that the accused will have to demonstrate active, residual or prodromal symptoms that the severe mental disability was manifesting.

- ◆ The court stated that the state government would be at liberty to offer evidence to rebut such claim of insanity or mental illness.
- ◆ It also stated that in appropriate cases, a panel could be set up to submit an expert report on the claim of mental illness of convicts.
- ◆ Further, to understand the phenomenon of post-conviction mental illness, the bench took note of the reports of the World Health Organisation and the International Red Cross.

Background

- ◆ The ruling came while the Supreme Court was hearing the case of a prisoner with an alleged mental condition, who was given death penalty in a barbaric murder of two minor cousins in Maharashtra in 1999.
- ◆ The condemned prisoner who had not been identified in the verdict owing to his mental condition was spared by the three-judge bench of the apex court.
- ◆ The court, however, took note of “barbaric and brutal manner of commission of the crime” and awarded the jail term to the convict for “remainder of his life” with the direction to the government to ensure proper mental health care to him.

Source: The Hindu



International Relations, India & the World and International Affairs

Iran withdraws from key commitments under 2015 nuclear deal

Why in news?

- ◆ **Recently, Iran** has announced its **withdrawal from some commitments under the 2015 international nuclear deal**. The nation stated that it will **resume higher enrichment of uranium** in 60 days unless a new agreement can be reached.
- ◆ The announcement comes exactly a year after US President Donald Trump decided to pull the US out of the landmark accord and re-introduced sanctions against Iran.

Highlights

- ◆ Iran announced the suspension of two key commitments under the 2015 international nuclear deal, **first being the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)** that Iran was adhering to, which includes the sale of surplus enriched uranium and heavy water.
- ◆ In the second suspension, **Iran gave the European Union, Russia and China 60 days** to implement their financial and oil commitments to the deal, upon the failure of which, Iran would resume production of higher-enriched uranium, which is currently capped.
- ◆ Iran further stated that if the commitments of the remaining parties do not come through within the set time period, it would also begin developing its Arak heavy water reactor based on plans made prior to the deal.
- ◆ The nation's Supreme National Security Council stated that the measure was necessary to secure its rights and bring back the balance after the US announced its exit from the agreement.
- ◆ Iranian President announced that he would be keeping enriched uranium stocks in the country rather than selling them abroad.
- ◆ However, Iran clarified that it was not pulling out of the deal.

2015 nuclear Deal

- ◆ The Iran nuclear deal or **Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)** was a preliminary framework agreement signed in 2015 between Iran and a group of world powers, known as the P5+1 (permanent members of the United Nations-the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia, France, China plus Germany) and the European Union.
- ◆ Under the agreement, Iran agreed to limit its sensitive nuclear activities and allow international inspectors to inspect all of its nuclear facilities, supply chains and uranium mining sites in return for the lifting of all US, EU, UN sanctions on Iran that crippled its economy and cut its oil exports roughly in half.
- ◆ Iran also agreed to reduce its uranium enrichment activities. The deal had been an effective arms control deal that has kept Iran's nuclear program frozen for three years.

Crisis

- ◆ US President Donald Trump recently announced US withdrawal from the landmark 2015 nuclear deal with Iran.
- ◆ Trump also said that the United States will be instituting the highest level of economic sanctions on the Islamic nation and warned that any nation that helps Iran in its quest for nuclear weapons could also be strongly sanctioned by the United States. The statements came as a blow to US allies, which are supporting the deal.
- ◆ Ever since the United States has re-imposed sanctions on Iran, the nation's economy has been severely hit; the value of its currency has since been pushed to record lows, its annual inflation rate quadrupled and foreign investment driven away.

Background

- ◆ Recently, the United States raised the pressure on Iran, by ending the sanction waivers extended to five Iranian oil importers including China, Japan, India and Turkey
- ◆ It also blacklisted Iran's elite Islamic Revolution Guard Corps, designating it as a foreign terrorist group.
- ◆ The US also recently announced the deployment of an aircraft carrier strike group to the Middle East in a warning message to Iran.

Source: The Hindu, Indian Express

World Press Freedom Index 2019

Why in news?

- ☞ The Reporters Without Borders (RSF) has recently released the World Press Freedom Index 2019, reflecting growing animosity towards journalists.
- ☞ India's rank in the World Press Freedom Index 2019 dropped down to 140th from 138th in 2018, two points below the previous year.
- ☞ As per the Index, one of the most striking features of the current state of press freedom in India is violence against journalists including police violence, attacks by Maoist fighters, criminal groups and corrupt politicians. At least six Indian journalists were killed on duty during 2018.

Highlights of the Index

- ◆ This year, the index has been topped by Norway again for the third year, followed by Finland and Sweden at second and third positions, respectively.
- ◆ At the bottom of the Index, Vietnam (176th) and China (177th) fell one place; Eritrea that moved up 1 place from last year ranked at 178th; North Korea fetched 179th position; and Turkmenistan moved two positions down to 180th rank.

- ◆ Only 24 percent of the 180 countries and territories were classified as “good” or “fairly good”, as opposed to 26 percent last year.
- ◆ Of all the world’s regions, Americas (North and South) suffered the greatest deterioration, falling by 3.6 percent, in its regional score.
- ◆ The European Union and Balkans registered the second biggest deterioration of 1.7 percent in its regional score.
- ◆ The Middle East and North Africa region continues to be the most difficult and dangerous for journalists. Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi’s murder in October 2018 shed a harsh light on the same. Syria (174th) continues to be extremely dangerous for media personnel and as does Yemen (168th).
- ◆ Africa registered the smallest deterioration in its regional score in the 2019 Index. The rankings of Ethiopia (up 40 positions at 110th) and Gambia (up 30 positions at 92nd) significantly improved from last year’s Index.
- ◆ The Eastern Europe and Central Asia region continues to rank second last in the Index. Over half of the region’s countries are still ranked near or below 150th position in the Index. Russia and Turkey continue to persecute independent media outlets.
- ◆ The Asia-Pacific region continues to rank third last. The number of murdered journalists was extremely high in Afghanistan, India and Pakistan. Disinformation is becoming a big problem in the region.

World Press Freedom Index

- ◆ Published annually by Reporters Without Borders since 2002, the World Press Freedom Index measures the level of media freedom in 180 countries.
- ◆ It is based on an evaluation of media freedom that measures pluralism, media independence, the quality of the legal framework and the safety of journalists in 180 countries. It also includes indicators of the level of media freedom violations in each region.
- ◆ The global indicator and the regional indicators show that there has been a deep and disturbing decline in respect for media freedom throughout the world.
- ◆ It is compiled by means of a questionnaire in 20 languages that is completed by experts all over the world.
- ◆ This qualitative analysis is combined with quantitative data on abuses and acts of violence against journalists during the period evaluated.

Source: The Hindu

China defends Belt and Road Initiative

Why in news?

- ☞ Chinese President Xi Jinping recently defended his ambitious ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ (BRI), vowing to prevent debt risks and saying that his global infrastructure project is not an exclusive club.

Key facts

- ◆ The clarification came after various nations accused that Belt and Road is a “debt trap” and a geopolitical tool for Beijing’s ambitions of becoming a global superpower.
- ◆ The BRI aims to bring about much-needed transformation in developing countries; however, critics believe that the initiative favours Chinese companies while burdening other nations with debt and causing environmental damage.
- ◆ President Xi took the stand at the second edition of the three-day Belt and Road Forum. The three-day forum was attended by leaders of 37 countries and officials from scores of other nations. However, India once again managed to skip the event.
- ◆ Russian President Vladimir Putin, Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan and Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte were among the prominent dignitaries.

Why India skipped the Belt and Road Forum?

- ◆ It was for the second time that India skipped the Belt and Road Forum in a protest against the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a key component of the Belt and Road Initiative.
- ◆ The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor passes through the disputed Kashmir held by Pakistan and claimed by it. The corridor connects the Chinese city of Kashgar with Pakistan’s Gwadar port on the Arabian Sea.
- ◆ The CPEC project runs through the strategic Gilgit-Baltistan region in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK), an integral part of India. It portends that China may emerge as a ‘direct party’ in the Kashmir dispute in future.

What is Belt and Road Initiative?

- ◆ The Belt and Road Initiative is a development strategy, which was proposed by Chinese President Xi Jinping.
- ◆ The initiative aims to create ‘**One Belt, One Road**’ by establishing new routes linking three continents - Asia, Europe and Africa by 2049.
- ◆ The initiative focuses on connectivity and cooperation among countries primarily between the People’s Republic of China and the rest of Eurasia, which consists of two main components, the land-based “Silk Road Economic Belt” and oceangoing “Maritime Silk Road”.
- ◆ The initiative was unveiled in two separate announcements in September 2013 and October 2013, revealing the Silk Road Economic Belt and Maritime Silk Road, respectively.
- ◆ The Belt and Road Initiative aims to reinvent the ancient Silk Road to connect Asia to Europe and Africa through massive investments in maritime, road and rail projects.
- ◆ The initiative is geographically structured along 6 corridors and the maritime Silk Road. They are:
 1. New Eurasian Land Bridge, running from Western China to Western Russia
 2. China - Mongolia - Russia Corridor, running from Northern China to Eastern Russia
 3. China - Central Asia - West Asia Corridor, running from Western China to Turkey
 4. China - Indochina Peninsula Corridor, running from Southern China to Singapore
 5. China - Pakistan Economic Corridor, running from South-Western China to Pakistan
 6. Bangladesh - China - India - Myanmar Corridor, running from Southern China to India
 7. Maritime Silk Road, running from the Chinese Coast over Singapore and India to the Mediterranean

Source: The Hindu, Indian Express

Vladimir Putin signs controversial internet bill into law

Why in news?

- ☞ President Vladimir Putin recently signed a new measure into law that will allow Russian authorities to isolate the country's internet from the rest of the world and create a new national network.
- ☞ The 'sovereign internet' bill aims to expand government control over the Internet. Russian lawmakers insist the new law is necessary to ensure the security of Russia's online networks, while critics argue that the vaguely worded bill gives new censorship powers to government monitors.

Objective

- ◆ The new law aims to protect Russia from foreign online restrictions by creating a "sustainable, secure and fully functioning" local internet.

Highlights

- ◆ The key measures of the bill include creating technology to monitor internet routing and steering Russian internet traffic away from foreign servers allegedly to prevent a foreign country from shutting it down.
- ◆ As per the authors of the initiative, Russia must ensure the security of its networks after US President Donald Trump unveiled a new American cyber security strategy in 2018 that said that Russia had carried out cyber attacks with impunity.
- ◆ However, the bill has been decried by rights groups. Thousands of people recently rallied in Russia against this bill and other bills, which according to critics aim to restrict information and communication online.

Criticism

- ◆ According to critics, the bill would create a system that gives the authorities the capacity to block access to parts of the Internet in Russia. The blocking would be extrajudicial and non-transparent.
- ◆ Further, under the new law, the Russian Internet access providers will need to ensure that their networks have the technical means for "centralized traffic control" to counter potential threats.
- ◆ This control will pass notably to the Russian FSB security service and the telecoms and media monitoring agency Roskomnadzor, which is often accused of arbitrarily blocking content on the web.

Source: The Hindu, Indian Express

India re-elected as Observer to ‘Arctic Council’

Why in news?

- ☞ Recently, India has been re-elected as Observer to the Arctic Council, an intergovernmental forum. The decision was taken during the 11th Arctic Council ministerial meeting at Rovaniemi, Finland.
- ☞ The Council also appointed the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) as a new Observer.

India’s Observer status

- ◆ India successfully got the Observer status in 2013 during the Kiruna Ministerial meeting held in Sweden.
- ◆ India has its Arctic research station ‘*Himadri*’ in Svalbard, Norway since 2008. Located at the International Arctic Research base, the research station was established by India’s National Centre for Polar and Ocean Research, which is an institute under the Ministry of Earth Sciences.
- ◆ The station works on the mass balance of glaciers, studies the effect of the global warming on the water bodies, and observes the formation of clouds and precipitation.

Arctic Council

- ◆ The Arctic Council is the leading intergovernmental forum that “*promotes cooperation and interaction among the Arctic States, Arctic indigenous communities and inhabitants of Arctic region on issues pertaining to sustainable development and environmental protection*”.

Members of Arctic Council

- ◆ The Members of the Arctic Council are - the *United States, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, and Sweden*.

Permanent Participants

The Arctic Council has 6 Permanent Participants, representing Arctic indigenous peoples. These are:

- ◆ Aleut International Association
- ◆ Arctic Athabaskan Council
- ◆ Gwich’in Council International
- ◆ Inuit Circumpolar Council
- ◆ Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North
- ◆ Saami Council

Indian researchers have been studying whether there is a co-relation between Indian monsoon and the Arctic region.

Observer Status

- ♦ The Arctic Council also consists of Observers. This position is open to all non-Arctic states, inter-governmental organisations, non-governmental organisations, global and regional organisations. The Observers engage at the level of Working Groups in the Council.

Non-Arctic Observers

- ♦ So far, 13 Non-arctic States have been accredited as Observers to the Council. These are:
- ♦ France, Japan, Poland, Singapore, United Kingdom, Germany, The Netherlands, India, Spain, Italy, China, Korea and Switzerland.

Source: PIB, The Hindu

India, US agree to strengthen economic co-operation

Why in news?

- ☞ India and the United States have agreed to strengthen economic co-operation and bilateral trade by ensuring greater collaboration amongst stakeholders, including government, businesses and entrepreneurs.
- ☞ This was agreed upon during a bilateral trade meeting that was held between the two countries in recently.

Key Highlights

- ♦ During the talks, the two leaders appreciated the strong, robust and growing bilateral ties between their countries across the entire spectrum of trade and commerce.
- ♦ They also expressed satisfaction over last year's progress, with bilateral trade in Goods and Services registering a growth of 12.6 per cent. They also discussed various outstanding trade issues.
- ♦ The Indian Government recently extended its deadline to impose retaliatory import duties on 29 US products, including almond, walnut and pulses, till May 16.
- ♦ The deadline has been extended several times since June 2018, when India decided to impose these duties in retaliation to a move by the US to impose high customs duties on certain steel and aluminium products.
- ♦ The extension comes in the backdrop of the US decision to withdraw export incentives being provided to them to Indian exporters under Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) programme, which is expected to impact India's exports to the US worth USD 5.6 billion under this scheme.

Generalized System of Preference

- ◆ The Generalized System of Preference (GSP) is the largest and oldest US trade preference programme and is designed to promote economic development by allowing duty-free entry for thousands of products from designated beneficiary countries.
- ◆ In March 2019, US President announced that the US intends to terminate India's designations as a beneficiary developing country under the GSP programme.
- ◆ In response, 25 members of the US House of Representatives, in a letter, urged the US Trade Representative not to terminate the GSP programme with India after the expiry of the 60-day notice on May 3.
- ◆ They requested the Trade Representative to continue negotiating a deal that protects and promotes jobs that rely on trade, both imports and exports, with India.
- ◆ The lawmakers argued that terminating GSP for India would hurt American companies seeking to expand their exports to India.

Source: PIB, The Hindu

Indonesia to relocate its capital from Jakarta

Why in news?

- ☞ Indonesia recently announced its plans to move its capital away from Jakarta. President Joko Widodo's government plans to establish a new Capital out of the crowded Java Island to ensure more equitable development of the country amid environmental concerns and overcrowding issues.

Reasons behind the capital relocation

- ◆ One of the major concerns behind the move is traffic congestion in the Capital. As per a survey of 2016, Jakarta had the world's worst traffic congestion.
- ◆ Another reason is that Jakarta is prone to annual flooding and is one of the world's fastest sinking cities. The World Bank has earlier mentioned in one of its reports that half of Jakarta is below sea level and it continues to sink at an alarming rate.
- ◆ As per the estimates, the capital could probably be 40 to 60 centimeters lower in 2025 than it was in 2008. In such case, the sea water may enter the Presidential Palace, which is located some five kilometers inland. By 2050, the large parts of the megacity could be entirely submerged.
- ◆ One of the main causes of this sink is the extraction of groundwater which is used as drinking water and for bathing.

Three alternatives

- ◆ The first alternative was to keep Jakarta as the capital but establish a new government district around the Presidential Palace and the National Monument to improve efficiency.
- ◆ The second alternative was to establish a new capital located 50 to 70 kilometers outside of Jakarta.
- ◆ The third alternative was to confer the capital status upon a city outside the Java Island, preferably located in the centre of Indonesia to speed up development throughout eastern Indonesia.
- ◆ Considering that the capital relocation shall serve the vision of long-term development agenda of Indonesia, the Government decided to resort to the third alternative.

Source: The Hindu

Global Food Policy Report

Why in news?

- ☞ International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) has recently released Global Food Policy Report-2019.

Key facts

- ◆ IFPRI's flagship report reviews the major food policy issues, developments, and decisions of 2018, and considers challenges and opportunities for 2019.
- ◆ This year's Global Food Policy Report highlights the urgency of rural revitalization to address a growing crisis in rural areas.

Highlights

- ◆ Rural population account for 45.3% of the world's total population and at least 70% of the world's population remains extremely poor.
- ◆ The rural population suffers from rapid population growth rates, inadequate job and enterprise creation, poor infrastructure, scarce financial services.
- ◆ In addition, rural communities bear the brunt of climate change impacts.
- ◆ Nearly 50% of rural youth all over the world do not have any formal job they are either unemployed or under-employed.
- ◆ Rural revitalization is important to end hunger and malnutrition.

- ◆ The Changing consumption patterns driven largely by urbanization, demographic transitions, increasing income, and growing integration of food supply chains and food systems in India offer new opportunities for entrepreneurship and employment in rural areas.
- ◆ The world is not yet on track to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. Poverty and malnutrition rates are falling in many places, but not fast enough.
- ◆ An estimated three quarters of the world’s poor live in rural areas, and most are among the 2.5 billion people who work in small-scale agriculture in developing countries.
- ◆ Energy is crucial to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and ensuring durable rural growth and development. But almost one billion people, most living in rural areas of Africa and South Asia, still lack access to electricity.

Findings about South Asia

- ◆ South Asia remained the fastest growing region in the world in 2018, as economic growth continued to strengthen. However, growth rates varied greatly across the region—exceeding 7.0 percent in Bangladesh, India, the Maldives, and Nepal, and reaching 5.8 percent in Pakistan, but only 2.6 percent in Afghanistan.
- ◆ Rice and wheat are the region’s major staple crops, accounting for about two-thirds of total dietary energy. But food consumption patterns have changed in the region over the past few decades.
- ◆ India, home to 70 percent of the region’s rural population, has unveiled a number of measures to bolster the rural economy: The government will maintain minimum support prices for major crops (25 at present) equal to at least 1.5 times their production costs.

What are the challenges?

- ◆ The rural transformation in South Asia is at a crossroads. The rural sector has been gradually transforming, but agricultural livelihoods still provide more than 43 percent of employment, meaning that most jobs in South Asia are in the informal sector.
- ◆ Implementing a “decent employment agenda” will require improving rural livelihoods.
- ◆ The predominance of smallholder farming communities, their increasing political voice, and national commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals are prompting governments in the region to emphasize inclusive rural development strategies.

Source: The Hindu

US places India on ‘Priority Watch List

Why in news?

- ☞ The United States has yet again placed India on its ‘Priority Watch List’, alleging lack of sufficient measurable improvements to its Intellectual Property (IP) framework on long-standing and new challenges, which has negatively affected American right holders over the past year.
- ☞ The office of the US Trade Representative identified 11 countries, including India, in its ‘Priority Watch List’. The list topped by China also includes Indonesia, Russia, Saudi Arabia and Venezuela. Besides this, the US Trade body has placed 25 countries, including Pakistan, Turkey and the UAE, on the watch list.

Highlights

- ◆ In its report, the US said that these countries will be the subject of increased bilateral engagement with the USTR to address Intellectual Property (IP) concerns.
- ◆ Over the coming weeks, the USTR would be reviewing the developments against the benchmarks established in the Special 301 action plans for countries that have been on the ‘Priority Watch List’ for multiple years.
- ◆ For countries that fail to address US’ concerns, the USTR will take appropriate actions, such as enforcement actions under Section 301 of the Trade Act or pursuant to World Trade Organisation or other trade agreement dispute settlement procedures, necessary to combat unfair trade practices and to ensure that trading partners follow through with their international commitments.

Why is India in the list?

- ◆ India, in the past year, has taken steps to address intellectual property challenges and promote IP protection and enforcement.
- ◆ However, many of the actions have not yet translated into concrete benefits for innovators and creators and long-standing deficiencies persist.
- ◆ India remains one of the world’s most challenging major economies with respect to protection and enforcement of IP.
- ◆ In the pharmaceutical and agricultural chemical sectors, India continues to lack an effective system for protecting against the unfair commercial use, as well as the unauthorised disclosure, of test or other data generated to obtain marketing approval for such products.
- ◆ Despite India’s justifications of limiting IP protections as a way to promote access to technologies, the nation maintains extremely high customs duties directed to IP-intensive products, such as medical devices, pharmaceuticals, information communications technology products, solar energy equipment and capital goods.

Source: The Hindu, Indian Express

Global Talent Competitiveness Index 2019

Why in news?

- ☞ The Global Talent Competitiveness Index (GTCI) 2019 has been released by INSEAD, Adecco Group and Tata Communications recently.

Key Facts

- ◆ This year's report has a special focus on entrepreneurial talent - how it is being encouraged, nurtured and developed throughout the world and how this affects the relative competitiveness of different economies.

GTCI-2019: Major Highlights

- ◆ The report measures levels of Global Talent Competitiveness by looking at 68 variables. The 2019 index covers 125 national economies and 114 cities (respectively 119 and 90 in 2018) across all groups of income and levels of development.
- ◆ In this sixth edition, Switzerland continues to lead the 2019 Global Talent Competitiveness index, while Singapore and the United States come in second and third respectively.
- ◆ The top three is followed by Scandinavian countries, Norway (4th), Denmark (5th), Finland (6th), and Sweden (7th).
- ◆ Yemen has finished at the bottom of this year's index at 125th, just below Congo (124th) and Burundi (123rd).

India specific findings

- ◆ India (80th) remains the laggard of this group. It performs better than its lower-income peers when it comes to growing (48th) talent, primarily by virtue of the possibilities for Lifelong Learning (38th) and Access to Growth Opportunities (41st).
- ◆ An above-average Business and Labour Landscape (38th) and Employability (34th) raise the scores of the pillars related to Enable (70th) and Vocational and Technical Skills (72nd) that are otherwise hampered by the remaining sub-pillars.
- ◆ Notwithstanding the scope for improvement across the board, India's biggest challenge is to improve its ability to Attract (95th) and Retain (96th) talent.
- ◆ Above all, there is a need to address its poor level of Internal Openness (116th)—in particular with respect to weak gender equality and low tolerances towards minorities and immigrants—and its disappointing showing in Lifestyle indicators.

Source: The Hindu, Indian Express

India pushes African right to permanent membership in UNSC

Why in news?

- ☞ India recently stressed upon Africa's right to representation among the ranks of the permanent members of the UN Security Council. The move aims to bring in a sense of urgency to the long-stalled reform process of the UNSC.

Highlights

- ◆ The 55 African nations, who are the single largest group at the UN making up more than a quarter of its membership, do not have a permanent member on the Council.
- ◆ Yet of the 13 UN peacekeeping operations mandated by the Council and overseen by it, seven are in Africa.
- ◆ When the UN was set up at the end World War II, the permanent seats were allocated to the nations on the winning side, which included the US, Soviet Union (now held by Russia), Britain, France and China.
- ◆ Breaking the blockade would allow India's claim to a permanent seat on a reformed Council to also move forward.

The high-level meeting was convened by Assembly President Maria Fernanda Espinosa formally to commemorate the First International Day of Multilateralism and Diplomacy for Peace on April 24, 2019.

Background

- ◆ India has been calling for the reform of the UN Security Council along with Brazil, Germany and Japan for long, emphasising that it rightly deserves a place at the UN high table as a permanent member.
- ◆ France, which assumed the Presidency of the United Nations Security Council for the month of March, reiterated its support for India as the permanent member of the powerful UN body. The nation also reiterated its support for Germany and Japan as permanent members of an expanded UNSC.
- ◆ In fact, both France and Germany together stressed on the need to have reforms, adding that the UNSC will lose its legitimacy if reforms are not brought on soon.
- ◆ India's bid for permanent membership of UNSC is now backed by four of the five permanent members, namely France, Russia, United Kingdom and the United States.

Significance

- ◆ India is stressing on Africa's right to permanent membership in the UNSC to break the decades-long blockade of the reform process by a small group of countries.
- ◆ The group led by Italy and which includes Pakistan will be made to directly confront African nations, who have demanded two permanent seats on a reformed Council and point to the historic injustices done to the continent.

Source: The Hindu

Malaysia to revive second major China-linked project

Why in news?

- ☞ Malaysia has resumed a China-backed rail link project, after the Chinese contractor agreed to cut the construction cost by one third to 10.6 billion US dollars.
- ☞ The Malaysian government said it will also take up a multibillion-dollar property and transportation project in Kuala Lumpur involving a Chinese state company, calling it a contribution to China's global "Belt and Road" infrastructure initiative.
- ☞ The two projects are expected to boost Malaysia's ties with China and add economic value.

Highlights

- ◆ The multibillion-dollar Bandar Malaysia project is expected to cost around 140 billion ringgit (\$33.8 billion).
- ◆ The project, which is 40 percent owned by the government, will be developed with the same consortium partners, Malaysian developer Iskandar Waterfront Holdings and China Railway Engineering Corp.
- ◆ The 500-acre (202-hectare) project will boost urban development and serve as a hub to woo global finance, technology and entrepreneurial firms.
- ◆ It was initiated by the indebted 1MDB state investment fund in 2011 but it later sold a 60 percent stake to the consortium.
- ◆ The government took over 1MDB's stake due to its debt problems, but the project was terminated by the previous government in May 2017 due to a payment dispute with the consortium.
- ◆ The 1MDB scandal led to the election ouster last May of former Prime Minister Najib Razak, who is currently on trial for alleged corruption.
- ◆ The revived project will now include construction of 10,000 affordable homes and a people's park and will prioritize the use of local construction material.

China's Belt and Road Initiative

- ◆ Chinese President Xi Jinping has made the Belt and Road initiative a signature policy.
- ◆ The estimated \$1 trillion-plus plan aims to weave a network of ports, bridges and power plants linking China with Africa, Europe and beyond.

Source: The Hindu

Resilient Cities Asia Pacific Congress 2019

Why in news?

- ☞ The 4th Resilient Cities Asia-Pacific (RCAP) 2019 Congress was organised by ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability and hosted by South Delhi Municipal Corporation from April 15 to 17, 2019 in New Delhi.

Key Facts

- ◆ It offered cities and regions from Asia-Pacific a variety of innovative solutions that build resilience to climate change at the sub-national level.
- ◆ The event also offered a combination of high-level planarians and technical sessions on the implementation and achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), and the New Urban Agenda of 2016.

Objectives

- ◆ To share and learn about good urban resilience practices and show-case innovative ideas, solutions and initiatives.
- ◆ To provide local governments with exposure and access to tools and processes that help mainstream resilience considerations into policy and practice.
- ◆ To provide a networking platform to promote concerted and coordinated action in Asia among the main players in the field of urban resilience.
- ◆ To explore tangible opportunities for creating partnerships between local governments and the private sector.
- ◆ To bring together funders and cities and facilitate the match-making between available financial resources and current cities' needs.

Highlights

- ◆ The United Nations session at the 4th Resilient Cities Asia-Pacific Congress 2019 brought together representatives from various UN agencies like UNDP-GEF, UNESCAP, UN-HABITAT and UNIDSR to discuss the role of local and sub-national governments in the implementation and achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), the Sendai Framework and the New Urban Agenda of 2016.

- ◆ The session, organized by ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability, witnessed discussions on the need for localizing the global frameworks; ensuring that targets that go along with Sustainable Development Goals consider local contexts, challenges, and realities.
- ◆ Some of the challenges discussed at the session were lack of continuous engagement with relevant stake holders; limited involvement of private sector, lack of infrastructure is increasing the vulnerability and suchlike.

Background

- ◆ RCAP was launched in 2010. Resilient Cities is the annual global platform for urban resilience and climate change adaptation where dialogues are conducted to forge partnerships, with the ultimate goal of identifying implementable solutions and creating lasting impacts for cities in the region.

Source: The Hindu



Indian Economy and Economic Development

More than one lakh bee-boxes distributed under ‘Honey Mission’

Why in news?

- ☞ More than one lakh bee boxes were distributed to the farmers and unemployed people across the country by Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC) recently.
- ☞ Its *objective is to boost Honey-Mission* and providing source of income to unemployed people.

Vision

- ◆ As per the Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC) India should grow with well-informed and skilled beekeepers/beekeeping entrepreneurship, healthy and plentiful honeybees raise, prosperous beekeeping industry, as well as widespread appreciation for honey and hive products, and take advantage of critical role that honeybees play in pollination.

About Honey-Mission

- ◆ Honey Mission was launched in year 2017 with PM Narendra Modi’s call for ‘Sweet Revolution’ in year 2016.
- ◆ Its aim is to provide sustainable employment and income to rural and urban unemployed youth, both educated and uneducated, men and women by conserving the honeybee habitat and tapping untapped natural resources, while inducing Good Beekeeping Practices for qualitative and quantitative increase in all hive products in the country.
- ◆ Another objective is to promote beekeeping for increasing the crop productivity and pollination services avenue for beekeepers and farmers.

Source: Business Standard

Rules revised for Phase-2 of FAME scheme

Why in news?

Centre government has recently announced that Electric and hybrid vehicle (xEVs) manufacturers will have to indigenize a significant portion of components to avail benefits under a revised set of rules of the phase 2 of the Faster Adoption and Manufacturing of Hybrid and Electric Vehicles (FAME) scheme.

Major revised rules

- ◆ Department of Heavy Industry (DHI) has listed components used in the xEVs across vehicle categories including electric two-wheelers, electric three-wheelers and e-rickshaws, four-wheelers and electric buses (eBuses).
- ◆ Electric vehicle manufacturers across the above-mentioned categories will have to localize manufacturing of wheel rims integrated with hub motor from 1 October 2019.
- ◆ The HVAC units (heating, ventilation and air conditioning) for electric cars are also scheduled for indigenization from the same date.
- ◆ Key components like electronic throttle, vehicle control unit along with the onboard charger for all approved vehicle categories, and electric compressor and the DC charging inlet, both for the electric cars and buses are aimed for indigenization from 1 October 2020.

Objective

- ◆ The main objective of the scheme is to encourage faster adoption of Electric and hybrid vehicle by way of offering upfront Incentive on purchase of Electric vehicles and also by way of establishing a necessary charging Infrastructure for electric vehicles.
- ◆ The scheme will help in addressing the issue of environmental pollution and fuel security.

FAME-2 Scheme

- ◆ The first phase of Faster Adoption and Manufacturing of (Hybrid &) Electric Vehicles Scheme or the FAME scheme was introduced on 1 April 2015, while the second phase was notified in March earlier this year, and has been under implementation April onwards.
- ◆ The scheme is part of the government's increased thrust to boost electric mobility through greater indigenization and has an outlay of Rs 10,000 crore till 2022 for the phase 2.
- ◆ The scheme proposes for establishment of charging infrastructure, whereby about 2700 charging stations will be established in metros, other million plus cities, smart cities and cities of Hilly states across the country so that there will be availability of at least one charging station in a grid of 3 km x 3 km.

Source: Economic Times

RBI issues norms for banks to set up Currency Chests

Why in news?

- ☞ The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has issued “Minimum Standards for a Currency Chest”, the guidelines for banks to set up new currency chests.

What are Currency Chests?

- ◆ The Currency Chests are part of banks wherein currency notes and coins are stored.
- ◆ The currency chests can be a strong room or a vault. When the cash is taken out of the vault, it becomes bank’s cash and is used for the payments.
- ◆ The RBI has authorised few branches of selected banks to stock rupee notes and coins on its behalf. The vault of the Currency Chest which stores cash belongs to RBI.
- ◆ The responsibility for managing the currency in circulation is vested in the RBI.

Committee on Currency Movement

- ◆ The RBI had in 2016 constituted a ‘Committee on Currency Movement’ (CCM) chaired by DK Mohanty.
- ◆ The Committee recommended that the Reserve Bank should encourage banks to open large Currency Chests (CCs) with modern facilities and minimum Chest Balance Limit (CBL) of Rs 10 billion (Rs 1,000 crore).
- ◆ Accordingly, the RBI came out with these minimum standards for setting up currency chests.
- ◆ As per the RBI’s Annual Report 2017-18, the currency management infrastructure consists of a network of 19 issue offices of the Reserve Bank, 3975 currency chests and 3654 small coin depots of commercial, co-operative and regional rural banks spread across the country.

Source: The Hindu, Business Standard

India highest recipient of remittances in 2018: World Bank

Why in news?

- ☞ India was positioned as the world's top recipient of remittances with its diaspora sending USD 79 billion back home in 2018, according to the World Bank's latest Migration and Development Brief.

Key Facts

- ◆ India managed to retain its top spot in remittances by registering a significant flow of remittances from USD 62.7 billion in 2016 to USD 65.3 billion 2017 and to USD 79 billion in 2018, a significant growth over the last three years.
- ◆ The remittances in 2018 grew by over 14 percent in India, where natural disasters like Kerala floods likely boosted the financial help that migrants sent to their families.

Highlights of the Migration and Development Brief

- ◆ The remittances to low-and middle-income countries reached a record high of USD 529 billion in 2018, an increase of 9.6 percent from USD 483 billion in 2017.
- ◆ Global remittances, including flows to high-income countries, reached USD 689 billion in 2018, up from USD 633 billion in 2017.
- ◆ The **top remittance recipients** were India with USD 79 billion, followed by China (USD 67 billion), Mexico (USD 36 billion), the Philippines (USD 34 billion), and Egypt (USD 29 billion).
- ◆ In Pakistan, remittance growth was moderate at 7 percent due to significant declines in inflows from Saudi Arabia, its largest remittance source.
- ◆ Remittances to **South Asia region** grew 12 percent to USD 131 billion in 2018.
- ◆ Remittances to the **East Asia and Pacific region** grew around 7 percent to USD 143 billion in 2018.
- ◆ Remittances to **Europe and Central Asia** grew by 11 percent to USD 59 billion in 2018.
- ◆ Remittances flows to **Latin America and the Caribbean** grew 10 percent to USD 88 billion in 2018, supported by the strong US economy.
- ◆ Remittances to the **Middle East and North Africa** grew 9 percent to USD 62 billion in 2018.
- ◆ Remittances to **Sub-Saharan Africa** grew around 10 percent to USD 46 billion in 2018.
- ◆ Banks were the most expensive remittance channels, charging an average fee of 11 percent in the first quarter of 2019.
- ◆ The overall increase in remittances regionally was driven by a stronger economy and employment situation in the United States and outward flows from few Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and the Russian Federation.

Source: The Hindu, Economic Times

RBI extends coverage of NBFC Ombudsman Scheme to Non Deposit Taking NBFCs

Why in news?

- ☞ The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has extended the coverage of Ombudsman Scheme for Non-Banking Financial Companies (NBFCs), 2018 to eligible Non Deposit Taking Non Banking Financial Companies (NBFC-NDs).

Key Facts

- ◆ The coverage will be extended to Non Deposit Taking Non Banking Financial Companies having asset size of Rs 100 crore or above with customer interface.
- ◆ However, Non Banking Financial Company-Infrastructure Finance Company (NBFC-IFC), Core Investment Company (CIC), Infrastructure Debt Fund-Non-banking Financial Company (IDF-NBFC) and NBFCs under liquidation are excluded from the ambit of the Scheme.

Ombudsman Scheme for Non-Banking Financial Companies (NBFCs), 2018

- ◆ The Ombudsman Scheme for Non-Banking Financial Companies (NBFCs), 2018 was launched on February 23, 2018 for redressal of complaints against NBFCs registered with RBI under Section 45-IA of the RBI Act, 1934.
- ◆ Initially, the scheme covered all deposit accepting NBFCs.
- ◆ It provides a cost-free and expeditious complaint redressal mechanism relating to deficiency in the services by NBFCs covered under the Scheme.
- ◆ The offices of the NBFC Ombudsmen function at four metro centres - Chennai, Kolkata, Mumbai and New Delhi.
- ◆ The NBFC Ombudsmen offices handle complaints of customers in the respective zones.
- ◆ The Scheme also provides for an Appellate Mechanism under which the complainant or the NBFC has option to appeal against the decision of the Ombudsman before the Appellate Authority.

Source: rbi.org, The Hindu

RBI sells entire stake in Nabard

Why in news?

- ☞ The Reserve Bank of India has sold its entire stake in the National Housing Bank (NHB) and the National Bank for Agriculture & Rural Development (Nabard) to the Union Government for Rs 1,450 crore and Rs 20 crore, respectively. The move would now make these organisations fully government-owned.

Highlights

- ◆ The second Narasimham committee report had stated that RBI could not own entities that are regulated by it.
- ◆ Based on the committee's recommendations, the central bank had proposed to transfer its ownership in SBI, NHB and Nabard to the government in October 2001.
- ◆ Accordingly, on June 29, the government had bought out RBI's entire 59.7 percent stake in SBI.
- ◆ The disinvestment of RBI's shareholding in NABARD was done in two phases. The central bank held 72.5 percent equity in Nabard worth Rs 1,450 crore, of which 71.5 percent amounting to Rs 1,430 crore were divested way back in October 2010 and the residual shareholding was divested on February 26, 2019.
- ◆ In case of NHB, the RBI held 100 percent shareholding in the financial institution, which was divested on March 19, 2019.
- ◆ The current change in the capital structure of both these financial institutions was brought in by the government through amendments to the Nabard Act of 1981 and the NHB Act of 1987 which were notified on January 19, 2018 and March 29, 2018, respectively.

Background

- ◆ The National Bank for Agriculture & Rural Development was established on July 12, 1982 by transferring the agricultural credit functions of RBI and refinance functions of the then Agricultural Refinance and Development Corporation.
- ◆ Set up with an initial capital of Rs 100 crore, the finance institution's paid up capital stood at Rs 10,580 crore as of March 2018.
- ◆ On the other hand, the decision to establish the National Housing Bank was announced in the 1987-88 budget, following which, the NHB Bill, providing a legislative framework for the NHB, was passed by parliament in the Winter session of 1987 and it became an Act on December 23, 1987.
- ◆ The National Housing Policy of 1988 envisaged setting up of NHB as the apex level institution for promoting the housing sector.

Significance

- ◆ The move is a part of ending the cross-holding in regulatory institutions. It follows the recommendation of the second Narasimham committee report of October 2001 and the RBI's own discussion paper on the same entitled 'Harmonizing the role and operations of development financial institutions and banks.'

Source: The Hindu, Business Standard

Ministry of Rural Development presented recommendations for fostering Finance Commission

Why in news?

The Ministry of Rural Development has recently made a detailed presentation on the Ministry's plans on fostering higher inclusive growth, equity, efficiency and transparency.

The Ministry made a case for additional resources for Rural India on the account of :-

- ◆ Higher/New State Share – PMGSY, PMAY (G).
- ◆ Extra Budgetary borrowing – PMAY Gramin.
- ◆ Finance Commission transfer.
- ◆ Massive rise in loans to SHGs – Rs 81,077 cr.
- ◆ Increasing incomes through livelihood thrust – farm ponds, wells, animal sheds/resources.
- ◆ Larger effective transfer due to governance reforms – IT/DBT – Decline in leakages.
- ◆ Other specific proposals of Rural Development like maintenance of roads, transfer of certain schemes, and Human Resource Reforms.

The presentation also made a case of Government's Reforms and conversant growth Panchayat Development:-

- ◆ Governance Reform and Convergent Gram Panchayat Development Plans as necessary pre-condition for fund transfers
- ◆ Capacity building of Panchayats (along with women SHGs), use of technology, data driven financial management reforms, and geo-tagging as necessary conditions.
- ◆ Comprehensive HR as part of recommendations.
- ◆ Earmarking for road maintenance.
- ◆ Transferring DRDSs to States.
- ◆ The Commission shall now take into consideration all the issues raised for the purpose of framing its recommendations to the government.

Source: PIB

Environment and Ecology

Cyclone Fani

Why in news?

- As Tropical Cyclone named Fani pounded the Odisha coast recently, its name has been suggested by Bangladesh. The central government has announced a release of Rs 1,000 Crore for assistance to the Fani affected state Odisha. Earlier Rs 341 crores had been provided to Odisha as an advance to its State Disaster Response Fund (SDRF).

How tropical cyclones are formed?

- ♦ Tropical cyclones are like giant engines which utilize warm, moist air as fuel. That is why they are formed only over warm ocean waters.
- ♦ And it is because of this that the months of April-May and October-December periods are favorable for the formation of cyclones.
- ♦ In addition, the low level of air above the waters should have an ‘anticlockwise’ rotation in the northern hemisphere and vice versa.
- ♦ During this time, there lies the Inter-Tropical Convergence Zone (ITCZ) which is a low pressure zone in the Bay of Bengal region, which shifts with seasons.
- ♦ The southern part of this zone experiences winds from west to east and the northern boundary from east to west.
- ♦ The ITCZ and the resultant wind pattern tend to impel the anticlockwise rotation of air.
- ♦ Once formed, cyclones in this area usually move northwest.
- ♦ As the cyclone travels across the sea, it gets more moist air from the warm sea, which in turn makes it stronger.

How Cyclones Are Named?

- ♦ The World Meteorological Organisation/Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific Panel on Tropical Cyclones, in its 27th session which was held in Muscat, Oman, agreed to assign names to the tropical cyclones in the Bay of Bengal and Arabian Sea.
- ♦ The eight nations situated along the Bay of Bengal and Arabian Sea suggests names. The nations suggest names in an alphabetical order — Bangladesh, India, Maldives, Myanmar, Oman, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Thailand.
- ♦ And, the Regional Specialized Meteorological Centre (RSMC) (Delhi) gives tropical cyclone identification from the list. This identification system covers both the Arabian Sea as well as the Bay of Bengal.

Source: The Hindu

Zoologists discovered two new bird species in Indonesia

Why in news?

- ☞ Zoologists from Trinity College with partners from Halu Oleo University (UHO) and Operation Wallacea, have discovered two new bird species in the Wakatobi Archipelago of Sulawesi, Indonesia.

Newly found birds

- ◆ The two new white-eye species found by Trinity and UHO; they are both found on the Wakatobi Islands, just off mainland South-east Sulawesi. However, the two species could not be more different.
- ◆ For sometime Wakatobi white-eye is under debate as researchers are looking for the answer how species changed from the early 20th century to the current day.
- ◆ Another bird, Wangi-wangi white-eye, remained unnoticed until the beginning of the 21st century when Professor Marples' research group visited the island from which it takes its name.
- ◆ These white eyed birds are adaptable and can have wide variety of fruits, flowers and insects.
- ◆ These birds have expertise in making island colonies, which is why so many different white-eye species have evolved so rapidly, as different island populations become isolated and split off from their source populations.
- ◆ The Wakatobi white-eye is found throughout the Wakatobi Islands and split from its mainland relatives in the last 800,000 years.
- ◆ Wangi-wangi white-eye is a much older species found on only one tiny island, with its closest relatives found more than 3,000 km away.

About Sulawesi

- ◆ Sulawesi is a particularly peculiar island known for its weird and wonderful plants and animals. It lies in the middle of Indonesia, which sits at a geographic boundary between Asian and Australian species. Sulawesi has an unusually high number of endemic species (unique species found nowhere else), due to the deep ocean trenches that isolated it from other land masses, even during past ice ages, when ocean levels dropped.

Source: The Hindu

NGT forms panel to check river pollution

Why in news?

- ☞ The National Green Tribunal (NGT) has formed a Central Monitoring Committee to prepare and enforce a national plan to make over 350 river stretches across the country pollution free.
- ☞ The committee would comprise a representative of NITI Aayog, secretaries of Ministry of Water Resources, Ministry of Urban Development and Ministry of Environment, the director general of National Mission for Clean Ganga and the Chairman of the Central Pollution Control Board.
- ☞ The Chairman of CPCB will be the nodal authority for coordination.

Objective :

The committee has been composed to monitor pollution of rivers, as it has caused serious threat to the safety of water and environment.

Key Highlights

- ◆ Besides checking river pollution, the central monitoring committee will coordinate with the River Rejuvenation Committees of the states and oversee the execution of the action plans, taking into account the timelines, budgetary mechanism and other factors.
- ◆ The chief secretaries of the states will act as the nodal agency at the state level.
- ◆ According to NGT bench, the chief secretaries may undertake review of the progress of the river rejuvenation committees by involving the concerned secretaries of the department of urban development, environment, industries, irrigation and public health and health.
- ◆ The green tribunal also directed the Ministry of Environment to consider a policy for giving environmental awards to outstanding persons (natural and juristic) and institutions or states and introducing “dis-incentives” for non-compliant states. The tribunal has given the Ministry time till June 30 to frame such a scheme.
- ◆ As per the tribunal, the Central Monitoring Committee may consider identifying experts, best practices and models for use of treated water, including plan to supply untreated sewage for a price or otherwise so that the concerned needy party can treat and utilise such water.
- ◆ The use of treated water for agriculture or other purposes may save potable surface and groundwater.
- ◆ The first meeting of the Central Monitoring Committee may be held by June 30. The NGT has directed the panel to submit its report by July 31.

Source: The Hindu

Madagascar species under threat

Why in news?

- ☞ International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species said that of the 111 lemur species, 24 are currently listed as Critically Endangered, 49 are Endangered and 20 are Vulnerable.

Key Facts

- ◆ Among the species under threat, the majority belongs to the primate group.
- ◆ The group contains all the species commonly related to lemurs, monkey, apes, and humans. Lemurs are among the unique to Madagascar.
- ◆ Indri, the largest of all lemurs and a species with such symbolic value for Madagascar that it is often compared to the giant panda in China, is among the species of lemurs that would be up-listed from endangered to critically endangered.

Highlights

- ◆ Madagascar's nine million hectares (22.25 million acres) of forests are shrinking each year by between 50,000 and 100,000 ha - a football pitch is roughly one hectare.
- ◆ All species are listed by Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) on Appendix I, which prohibits the trade of specimens or parts, except for scientific purposes.
- ◆ Madame Berthe's mouse lemur, the world's smallest primate, would also be up-listed endangered.
- ◆ Silky Sifaka (*Propithecus candidus*) also known as "angel of the forest"—refers to its white fur. It is one of the rarest mammals on Earth and is listed by IUCN as one of the world's 25 most critically endangered primates.

Lemurs

- ◆ Lemurs, whose name means 'spirits of the night', are a special group of primates, which look something like a cat crossed with a squirrel and a dog.
- ◆ They are found only on Madagascar and the Comoro Islands.
- ◆ The largest ever living type of lemur was the Archaeoindris with its weight ranging between 350 and 440lbs (160 and 200kg). It became extinct when humans first settled in Madagascar about 2,000 years ago
- ◆ The smallest lemur, the pygmy mouse lemur, weighs only 1 oz (28g) but the biggest, the Indri and Diademed Sifaka, can weigh up to 15 lb (6.8kg), which is equivalent to a big cat.
- ◆ Out of the 50 different kinds of lemurs, 10 are critically endangered, 7 are endangered, and 19 are considered vulnerable.

Source: The Hindu

Global Deal for Nature; a way forward to prevent sixth mass extinction on Earth

Why in news?

- ☛ The Global Deal for Nature (GDN) is a time-bound, science-driven plan to save the diversity and abundance of life on Earth. Pairing the GDN and the Paris Climate Agreement would avoid catastrophic climate change, conserve species, and secure essential ecosystem services. GDN's mission is to save the diversity and abundance of life on the earth at the cost of USD 100 billion a year.

Highlights

- ◆ Three objectives of GDN are to protect biodiversity by conserving at least 30% of the Earth's surface by 2030; mitigate climate change by conserving the Earth's natural carbon storehouses; and reduce major threats.
- ◆ Ecologists warn that if the present trends continue, nearly half of all the species on earth might be wiped out within the next 100 years.
- ◆ The Global Deal for Nature concludes that we need to protect at least 30% of the Earth's surface by 2030, and provides a framework for the distribution of this 30% across the most important areas for biodiversity.
- ◆ Climate stabilization areas would cover natural reserves of carbon, such as mangroves, tundra, boreal and tropical forests. In these areas, land conversion needs to be restricted. For example, in critical places such as the Amazon, we have to maintain at least 85% of the forest cover to avoid a shift to a savannah.
- ◆ To achieve 30% protected areas plus 20% climate stabilization areas, the Global Deal for Nature highlights the essential role of indigenous peoples as traditional stewards of their lands and livelihoods.

Priorities of GDN

- ◆ Its objective is to present scientific guidance for three major themes that should be included in a GDN and a short list of key milestones and targets that could underpin these themes, which would be complementary and, in many cases, reinforcing of the Paris Climate Agreement.
- ◆ These themes are (1) protecting biodiversity, (2) mitigating climate change, and (3) reducing threats to ecosystem intactness and persistence of species.
- ◆ It is also proposed that the GDN embrace monitoring progress from the ground, or below the sea surface, to space, using powerful new technologies, much of it publicly available.

Source: The Hindu

One million species under extinction threat: UN Report

Why in news?

- ☞ United Nations (UN) supported panel Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) has recently published a report that highlights that about one million species are facing extinction. Report makes *human activities responsible for this massive extinction*.

Highlights

- ◆ **Plastic pollution:** It has increased 10 times since 1980, 300-400 million tons of heavy metals, solvents, toxic sludge and other wastes from industrial facilities are dumped annually into the world's waters, and fertilizers entering coastal ecosystems have produced more than 400 ocean 'dead zones', totaling more than 245,000 km² (591-595) - a combined area greater than that of the United Kingdom.
- ◆ **Land Damage:** More than a third of the world's land surface and nearly 75% of freshwater resources are now devoted to crop or livestock production.
- ◆ **Environmental loss:** Three-quarters of the land-based environment and about 66% of the marine environment have been significantly altered by human actions. On average these trends have been less severe or avoided in areas held or managed by Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities.
- ◆ **Coming Challenges:** Negative trends in nature will continue to 2050 and beyond in all of the policy scenarios explored in the Report, except those that include transformative change – due to the projected impacts of increasing land-use change, exploitation of organisms and climate change, although with significant differences between regions.

The IPBES has released this report ahead of two high-level summits in 2020. In year 2020 China will host the UN convention on biodiversity to set new 20-year targets. Second, signatories of the 2015 Paris Agreement will meet to keep global warming to less than 2 degrees and to revise their commitments.

Source: The Hindu

Climate Emergency declared in England

Why in news?

- ☞ UK Parliament recently passed a motion of an Environment and Climate Emergency. The UK has become first country to declare such an emergency in the world. The declaration of an emergency was one of the key demands put to the government by environmental activist group Extinction Rebellion, in a series of protests over recent weeks.
- ☞ Before this, Welsh and Scottish governments had both declared a climate emergency. However, government has not cleared what “climate emergency” means, but several cities, including Bristol and London, have already declared their own emergencies.

What is Climate Emergency?

- ◆ There is no clear definition of what constitutes climate emergency but the move has been linked with vital measures that will be taken on climate change and the environment.
- ◆ The UK govt is legally committed to a 80% reduction in carbon emissions by 2050 (about 1990 levels).
- ◆ Country was recently recognized as one of just 18 developed economies that have driven down carbon dioxide emissions over the last decade.
- ◆ Some cities and local councils have set out their climate emergency policies to become carbon zero by 2030 built around renewable energy supplies.

What was Extinction Rebellion protest?

- ◆ Extinction Rebellion is a socio-political movement which uses nonviolent resistance to protest against climate breakdown, biodiversity loss, and the risk of human extinction and ecological collapse.
- ◆ Extinction Rebellion was established in the United Kingdom in May 2018 with about one hundred academics signing a call to action in support in October 2018.
- ◆ They were demanding the government must declare climate emergency and work with other institutions to make changes.
- ◆ The UK must enact legally binding policies to reduce carbon emissions to net zero by 2025.
- ◆ A citizens’ assembly must be formed to look after changes needed to achieve this goal.

Background

- ◆ United Nation’s Paris Agreement was signed by 197 countries in 2016.
- ◆ This agreement has the ambitious global aim of preventing global temperatures from reaching 2°C above pre-industrial levels by 2100, and ideally should be no more than 1.5°C.
- ◆ But planet is experiencing further warming, there is increasing international focus on meeting UN Paris Agreement.
- ◆ A report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has suggested that meeting this target means annual global carbon emissions must effectively halve between now and 2030, and then fall to zero by 2050.

Source: The Hindu

US lists giraffes as threatened species

Why in news?

- ☞ The Trump administration has recently initiated its first move towards extending protection for giraffes under the Endangered Species Act. The decision comes after legal pressure from environmental groups.

Key Facts

- ◆ According to the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, its initial review has determined that there is substantial information that the listing may be warranted for giraffes.
- ◆ The findings, which are to be published in the Federal Register, will begin a more in-depth review and public comment process that could lead to import restrictions on hunting trophies and body parts from giraffes, including hides and bones.

Key Highlights

- ◆ The group, which designates endangered species, added giraffes to its “Red List” in 2016. It determined that the species as a whole is “vulnerable” to extinction and classified two subspecies as “critically endangered.”
- ◆ There are now only about 68,000 mature giraffes left in the wild, with their number falling each year.
- ◆ A coalition of environmental and conservation groups petitioned the Fish and Wildlife Service in early 2017 to protect giraffes under the Endangered Species Act.
- ◆ After the administration took no action for nearly two years, the groups sued in December.
- ◆ According to Anna Frostic, managing wildlife attorney for the Humane Society of the United States and Humane Society International, the United States cannot stand idly by and allow thousands of US imports of giraffe parts every year without any regulation while these animals are on a path to extinction.

What is the concern?

- ◆ Biologists have warned for years that the world’s tallest land mammal is at increasing risk of extinction from habitat loss, poaching and other threats. The wild giraffe population in Africa has declined by nearly 40 percent in just 30 years.
- ◆ Giraffes are often hunted for meat in the nearly two dozen African countries. They increasingly are targeted by wealthy trophy hunters as other big-game animals have become scarcer.

More than 21,400 bone carvings, 3,000 skin pieces and 3,700 hunting trophies were imported into the United States over the past decade.

Source: Economic Times

Government constitutes committee to implement National Clean Air Programme

Why in news?

- ☞ **Recently, the Government has** constituted a new committee to implement the National Clean Air Programme (NCAP), which aims to cut pollution in the 102 worst affected cities by 20-30 percent by 2024.
- ☞ The National Clean Air Programme (NCAP), launched by the Union Environment Minister in January 2019 is a time-bound national level strategy for pan India implementation to tackle the increasing air pollution problem across the country in a comprehensive manner.

Objective

- ◆ The main objective of the programme is comprehensive mitigation actions for prevention, control and abatement of air pollution besides augmenting the air quality monitoring network across the country and strengthening the awareness and capacity building activities.

Key Highlights

- ◆ The National Clean Air Program (NCAP) aims to cut pollution in the 102 worst affected cities by 20-30 percent by 2024, taking 2017 as the base year for the comparison of PM concentration.
- ◆ The programme will be a mid-term, five-year action plan with 2019 as the first year.
- ◆ The international experiences and national studies though indicate that significant outcome in terms of air pollution initiatives are visible only in the long-term and hence the programme may be further extended to a longer time horizon after a mid-term review of the outcomes.
- ◆ The approach for NCAP includes collaborative, multi-scale and cross-sectoral coordination between the relevant central ministries, state governments and local bodies with focus on all sources of pollution.
- ◆ The interlocking of the existing policies and programmes including the National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC) and other initiatives of the Government of India in reference to climate change will be done while execution of NCAP.

What is the significance of NCAP?

- ◆ Air pollution is one of the biggest global environmental challenges of today. India is home to the world's 14 most polluted cities, according to the World Health Organisation. The toxic air claimed 1.24 million lives in the nation in 2017, as per a study in Lancet Planetary Health.
- ◆ Currently, the cities occupy just 3 per cent of the land, but contribute to 82 per cent of GDP and are responsible for 78 per cent of carbon dioxide emissions.
- ◆ Cities though are engines of growth and equity but they have to be sustainable and it is in this context that NCAP being a very inclusive program holds special relevance.

Source: The Hindu

Nepal collected 3000 kg waste from Everest

Why in news?

- ☞ Nepal has collected about 3,000 kilograms of solid waste from Mt. Everest since when Nepal launched an ambitious Everest Cleaning Campaign.

Key facts

- ◆ This 45-day Everest Cleaning Campaign was launched on April 14, on Nepali New Year, and seeks to clean up ‘world’s highest garbage dump.’
- ◆ As per the Nepal government, 2,000 kg of garbage had been sent to Okhaldhunga while the remaining 1,000 kg were brought to Kathmandu using Nepali Army helicopters for disposal.

Highlights

- ◆ Every year, hundreds of climbers, Sherpas and high altitude porters make their way to Everest, leaving behind tonnes of both biodegradable and non-biodegradable waste.
- ◆ The campaign will conclude on May 29, the day marked every year to commemorate the first summit of Everest by Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay in 1953.
- ◆ The collected waste will then be “showcased” in Namche town, before being ferried down to Kathmandu, where it will once again be showcased on World Environment Day on June 5.
- ◆ Under this campaign Nepal is trying to collect around 5,000-kg of garbage from Base Camp area, while 2,000-kg of garbage will be collected from the South Col region and around 3,000-kg will be collected from Camp II and Camp III area.

Background

- ◆ There have been attempts in the past to clean up Everest, including a 2014 government-mandated provision making it mandatory for every climber to come down the peak with at least 8 kilograms of garbage, the amount of trash estimated to be produced by one climber.

Source: The Hindu

State of Global Air-2019 Report

Why in news?

- ☞ Two US based institutes Health Effects Institute (HEI) and Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) recently released a detailed report on quality of the global air with title, “State of Global Air-2019”. Report highlights that India and China are collectively accounted for more than fifty percent of global 5 million deaths due to air pollution.

Findings in the Indian Context

- ◆ A recent analysis by HEI found that major PM2.5 sources in India include household burning of solid fuels; dust from construction, roads, and other activities; industrial and power plant burning of coal; brick production; transportation; and diesel-powered equipment.
- ◆ The relative importance of various sources of PM2.5 in China was quite different, with a separate study identifying the major sources as industrial and power plant burning of coal and other fuels; transportation; household burning of biomass; open burning of agricultural fields; and household burning of coal for cooking and heating.
- ◆ An estimated 846 million people in India (60% of the population) and 452 million people in China (32% of the population) were exposed to household air pollution in 2017.
- ◆ Pollution Sources (GBD MAPS) project found that in India, household burning of biomass was responsible for about 24% of the total population-weighted PM2.5 concentrations in 2015.

Findings in the Global Context

- ◆ Study shows a strong inverse relationship between a country’s level of social and economic development and the PM2.5 exposures experienced by its population; that is, less developed countries suffer PM2.5 exposures that are four to five times those of more-developed countries.
- ◆ In 2017, annual PM2.5 exposures were highest in South Asia, where Nepal, India, Bangladesh and Pakistan had the highest exposures.
- ◆ Bhutan’s exposure level was the lowest in the region but was still above WHO’s first interim target.
- ◆ The 10 countries with the lowest national PM2.5 exposure levels were the Maldives, United States, Norway, Estonia, Iceland, Canada, Sweden, New Zealand, Brunei, and Finland.
- ◆ Ozone pollution is a continuing challenge in more developed countries and is increasing in less developed areas, posing new air quality concerns.
- ◆ Air pollution collectively reduced life expectancy by 1 year and 8 months on average worldwide, a global impact rivaling that of smoking. This means a child born today will die 20 months sooner, on average, than would be expected in the absence of air pollution.

Diabetes and Air Pollution

- ◆ According to the report by Health Effects Institute (HEI) and Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation Globally, such exposure contributed to about 2.76 lakh deaths and 15.2 million life years lost to disability in 2017.
- ◆ This burden was highest in India, where it accounted for 55,000 deaths and 2.7 million life years lost.
- ◆ The economic costs of diabetes are substantial — estimated as 1.8% of worldwide gross domestic product in 2015 and pose a growing challenge to health care systems in countries at all levels of development.
- ◆ Type 2 Diabetes represents a substantial, growing, and costly health burden. In 2017, the disease accounted for more than 1 million deaths globally and burdens have increased by 175% and 141%, respectively, since 1990.

Source: The Hindu

Plastic Waste included in Basel Convention

Why in news?

- ☞ Around 180 member countries, except the United States, amended the 1989 Basel Convention to include plastic waste, a decision that aims to protect environment and human health from the damaging effects of harmful chemicals and waste.
- ☞ The decision was taken during the 14th Meeting of the Conference of Parties to the Basel, Rotterdam & Stockholm Conventions under the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) in Geneva, Switzerland. Around 1,400 representatives deliberated on this pressing environmental issue for 12 days before reaching to the conclusion.
- ☞ The meeting was held under the theme of “*Clean Planet, Healthy People: Sound Management of Chemicals and Waste*”.

Impact of inclusion of Plastic Waste

- ◆ With this move, the global trade of plastic waste will become more transparent and will be better regulated. It will ensure that the management of plastic waste becomes safer for environment and human health altogether.

Partnership on Plastic Waste

- ◆ On the same occasion, the member countries established the ‘Partnership on Plastic Waste’ to organise resources of businesses, governments, and civil society. The partnership will mobilise interests and expertise for assistance in implementing new measures to provide practical support.

What is Basel Convention?

- ◆ Adopted on March 22, 1989 by the Conference of Plenipotentiaries in Basel, Switzerland, the “Basel Convention on the Control of Trans-boundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal”, generally known as the Basel Convention, came into force in 1992.
- ◆ It is an international treaty that aims to reduce the movement of hazardous waste between the countries.
- ◆ It particularly focuses on preventing transfer of hazardous waste from developed to less developed countries.
- ◆ The Convention came as a response to a public outcry in the 1980s after Africa and other developing countries discovered deposits of toxic wastes.
- ◆ It provides for cooperation between parties, including exchange of information on issues relevant to the implementation of the Convention.

Plastic Pollution

- ◆ Plastic is a huge environmental and health issue. Plastic Pollution has lately become a major environmental problem of global concern.
- ◆ Plastic makes up 10 percent of all of the waste generated in the world.
- ◆ Every year, 500 billion plastic bags are used worldwide.
- ◆ Over 100 million tonnes of plastic is now found in the oceans, of which, 80 to 90 percent comes from land-based sources.
- ◆ At least 8 million tonnes of plastic end up in the oceans every minute.
- ◆ 50 percent of the plastic used by humans is single-use or disposable plastic.
- ◆ More than 1 million plastic bottles are purchased every minute.
- ◆ The Great Pacific Garbage Patch in the North Pacific Ocean alone accounts for 79000 tons of plastic marine debris in the form of 1.8 trillion pieces. This plastic litter is troubling the marine life.

Elimination of Dicofol and Perfluorooctanoic Acid from Stockholm Convention

- ◆ During the meeting, two toxic chemical groups, namely Dicofol and Perfluorooctanoic Acid, were eliminated from the Annex A of the Stockholm Convention. The Perfluorooctanoic Acid is in use till now in various industrial and domestic applications including non-stick cookware and food processing equipment.

Stockholm Convention

- ◆ Signed in 2001, the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants is an international environmental treaty that became effective in May 2004. The treaty focuses on eliminating or restricting the production and use of persistent organic pollutants.

Phorate and Hexabromocyclododecane added to Annex III of Rotterdam

Convention

- ◆ The member countries agreed to the addition of pesticide Phorate and the industrial chemical Hexabromocyclododecane to Annex III of the Rotterdam Convention.

Rotterdam Convention

- ◆ Rotterdam Convention is a multilateral treaty that provides a legally-binding framework for exchange of information and informed decision-making during trade of certain hazardous pesticides and industrial chemicals.

Source: The Hindu

April 22: Global Earth Day

Why in news?

- ☞ Several events and campaigns held worldwide on the occasion of Earth Day 2019 to support and protect environment of the earth.

This year's theme is – Protect Our Species. This theme emphasizes on protecting planet and preserve its environment.

Key Facts

- ◆ As per the Earth Day network (EDN), nature's gifts to our planet are the millions of species that we know and love, and many more that remain to be discovered.
- ◆ Unfortunately, human beings have irrevocably upset the balance of nature and, as a result, the world is facing the greatest rate of extinction since we lost the dinosaurs more than 60 million years ago.
- ◆ But unlike the fate of the dinosaurs, the rapid extinction of species in our world today is the result of human activity.

About Earth Day

- ◆ Earth Day was first celebrated in the US in the 1970s, and went global by the 1990s — it is now celebrated in at least 192 countries.
- ◆ The idea of commemorating such a day was propounded by Gaylord Nelson, a US senator from Wisconsin.
- ◆ Nelson, who had been a witness to the devastation caused by an enormous oil spill in Santa Barbara, California in 1969, felt the urgency of the matter.

Source: The Hindu



Science and Technology, Defense, Health

ISRO planning to send a probe to study sun in 2020

Why in news?

- ☞ The Indian Space Research Organization is planning to send a probe to study the sun early in 2020.

Key Facts

- ◆ The satellite would be in a halo orbit around the L1 (Lagrangian point 1) of the Sun-Earth system so that it has the advantage of continuously viewing the Sun without any occultation or eclipses. The L1 is 1.5 million kms from the Earth.

Aditya L1 Mission

- ◆ Initially, Aditya-1 mission was conceived as a 400kg class satellite carrying one payload, the Visible Emission Line Coronagraph (VELC). The mission was planned to launch in an 800 km low earth orbit.
- ◆ A satellite placed in the halo orbit around the Lagrangian point 1 (L1) of the Sun-Earth system has the major advantage of continuously viewing the Sun without any occultation or eclipses.
- ◆ The mission's key aim was to observe the solar corona. The outer layers of the Sun, extending to thousands of km above the disc (photosphere) is termed as the corona.
- ◆ It has a temperature of more than a million degree Kelvin which is much higher than the solar disc temperature of around 6000K.
- ◆ However, the mission has now been revised to "Aditya-L1 mission" and will be inserted in a halo orbit around the L1, which is 1.5 million km from the Earth.
- ◆ The satellite carries additional six payloads with enhanced science scope and objectives.
- ◆ Aditya-L1 with additional experiments can now provide observations of Sun's Photosphere (soft and hard X-ray), Chromosphere (UV) and corona (Visible and NIR).
- ◆ In addition, particle payloads will study the particle flux emanating from the Sun and reaching the L1 orbit, and the magnetometer payload will measure the variation in magnetic field strength at the halo orbit around L1.
- ◆ These payloads have to be placed outside the interference from the Earth's magnetic field and could not have been useful in the low earth orbit.

Source: The Hindu

Cancer Preparedness Index 2019

Why in news?

- ☞ The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) has released the worldwide Index of Cancer Preparedness (ICP). Study based on facts collected from 28 countries revealed the wide range of data about cancer preparation of countries.
- ☞ According to the EIU, objective of ICP is to allow benchmarking of national efforts and identify best practice in addressing the cancer challenge.

Specific Findings about India

- ◆ In overall ranking India comes at 19th with a score of 64.9.
- ◆ In Cancer policy and planning, India ranks 17th, however, it scored 80.8 numbers for this rank.
- ◆ According to the ICP ranking India gets first place for research and third for tobacco control in the country.
- ◆ India ranks 23rd for its national cancer control plan.
- ◆ India's healthcare system ranks 25th with a score of 40.3 in the index. It is above only Saudi Arabia, Kenya and Egypt.
- ◆ India's healthcare infrastructure is the second worst among the index countries.
- ◆ In its delivery of cancer care, India ranks 20th with a score of 61.3.
- ◆ India has a high standard of clinical guidelines, a category in which it is ranked first.
- ◆ India falls short on immunization, screening and early detection.

Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU)

- ◆ The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), created in 1946, is the research and analysis division of The Economist Group and the world leader in global business intelligence. EIU service clients across the world from our 24 offices, their staff speak over 25 languages.

Source: The Hindu

Nepal successfully launches its 1st satellite into space

Why in news?

- ☛ Nepal has successfully launched its first satellite NepaliSat-1 into space from NASA's Wallops Flight Facility on Virginia's East Shore in the United States. The satellite was developed by the Nepalese scientists.

Key Highlights

- ◆ The NepaliSat-1 is a low orbit satellite and it will be in the 400-km distance from the Earth's surface. It weighs 1.3 kilograms, making it a small satellite with limited capability.
- ◆ The satellite will be stationed at the International Space Station for a month and then it will be sent to orbit the earth.
- ◆ Its key focus would be to take photographs on a regular basis to gather geographical information of the country.
- ◆ The satellite has a Nepali flag and the NAST logo. It also has the name of the scientists involved in the making of the satellite.

Background

- ◆ The Nepal Academy of Science and Technology initiated the launch of the country's own satellite under the BIRDS project of the Japanese Kyushu Institute of Technology.
- ◆ Two Nepali scientists, Aabhas Maskey and Hariram Shrestha who are currently studying at Japanese Kyushu Institute of Technology, developed the satellite under the BIRDS project. The Nepal Academy of Science and Technology invested nearly Rs 20 million for the satellite.
- ◆ The BIRDS project has been designed in association with the United Nations and aims at helping countries launch their first satellite.

Source: the Hindu

Sri Lanka's first satellite 'Raavana 1' launched

Why in news?

☞ Sri Lanka recently launched its first satellite 'Raavana-1' into space from the Mid-Atlantic Regional Spaceport at NASA's Wallops Flight Facility on Virginia's East Shore.

The satellite, which weighs around 1.05 kg, will have the lifespan of around one and a half years.

Significance

- ◆ The launch marks Sri Lanka's entry into the global space race. The satellite was designed and built at the Kyushu Institute of Technology in Japan by two Sri Lankan research engineers.

Highlights

- ◆ Its camera mission is to take pictures of Sri Lanka and its neighbouring countries.
- ◆ Its Lora Demonstration Mission is to validate the module to be used to data download next satellites.
- ◆ The Attitude Determination and Control Mission of 'Ravaana 1' will involve the team trying to reduce the angular velocity of the satellite using magnetic torquers.
- ◆ Sri Lanka's satellite along with other BIRDS-3 satellites from Japan and Nepal had been taken to International space station (ISS) as cargo and then boarded onto the Antares rocket and launched.

Source: The Hindu

SpaceX launched cargo mission to ISS

Why in news?

☞ SpaceX has recently launched a Dragon cargo capsule to orbit of the International Space Station. This mission was seventeenth routine launch of SpaceX for NASA since 2012. Cargo Dragon spacecraft was carrying 2,500 kilograms (5,500 pounds) of supplies for the astronauts on the ISS as part of the CRS-17 mission.

Highlights

- ◆ The spacecraft will remain at the space station for about four weeks before returning to Earth with more than 1,900 kg of research and return cargo.
- ◆ Space X's Dragon was also carrying some special items in a trunk which is a cylindrical structure that rides attached to the capsule during flight, providing support and power.

- ◆ It is experiments from NASA called OCO-3, which will help the space agency measure the Earth's carbon dioxide levels.
- ◆ When Dragon cargo will reach ISS, robotic arm will place OCO-3 on the outside of the space station, where the instrument will help scientists learn how carbon dioxide fluctuates all over the world.

Falcon-9 Rocket

- ◆ Falcon-9 is a two-stage rocket designed and manufactured by SpaceX for the reliable and safe transport of satellites and the Dragon spacecraft into orbit.
- ◆ Falcon 9 is the first orbital class rocket capable of reflight. SpaceX believes rocket reusability is the key breakthrough needed to reduce the cost of access to space and enable people to live on other planets.
- ◆ It created history in 2012 when it delivered Dragon into the correct orbit for rendezvous with the International Space Station, making SpaceX the first commercial company ever to visit the station.
- ◆ Since then Falcon 9 has made numerous trips to space, delivering satellites to orbit as well as delivering and returning cargo from the space station for NASA.

Dragon Spacecraft

- ◆ Dragon is a free-flying spacecraft designed to deliver both cargo and people to orbiting destinations. It is the only spacecraft currently flying that is capable of returning significant amounts of cargo to Earth. Currently Dragon carries cargo to space, but it was designed from the beginning to carry humans.

Source: The Hindu

Malawi launches world's first malaria vaccine

Why in news?

- ☞ African country Malawi became the first to immunise children against Malaria through the vaccine 'RTS,S' (Mosquirix) under the WHO-coordinated Malaria vaccine pilot programme.
- ☞ Malawi is also the first of three countries in Africa in which the vaccine RTS,S will be made available to children up to 2 years of age; Ghana and Kenya will introduce the vaccine later.
- ☞ The Malaria vaccine pilot programme is a collaborative effort with ministries of health in Ghana, Kenya and Malawi and international partners like PATH and the vaccine developer GSK. The programme aims to reach 360000 children every year across the three countries.

Why launch of Malaria vaccine holds importance?

- ◆ Malaria remains one of the world's leading killers, claiming the life of one child every two minutes.
- ◆ Most of the Malaria-caused deaths occur in Africa, where over 250000 children die from the disease every year. Children under 5 are at the greatest risk. Overall, malaria kills 435000 people a year worldwide, of which, most of them are children.
- ◆ However, till now, there was no vaccine for malaria. With the launch of the RTS,S vaccine, at least 120000 children in Malawi under 2 years of age will be injected for protection against the malaria parasite.

Development of RTS,S vaccine

- ◆ It took thirty years for the scientists to develop the RTS,S vaccine that has demonstrated it can significantly reduce malaria in children.
- ◆ During the clinical trials, the vaccine proved to prevent around 4 in 10 malaria cases, including 3 in 10 cases of life-threatening severe malaria.
- ◆ The vaccine is a complementary malaria control tool that will be added to the package of WHO-recommended measures for malaria prevention, including the routine use of insecticide-treated bed nets, indoor spraying with insecticides, and the timely use of malaria testing and treatment.

Source: The Hindu

INS Ranjit decommissioned

Why in news?

- ☞ INS Ranjit, a Rajput class front-line missile destroyer, was decommissioned at a ceremony at Naval Dockyard at Visakhapatnam in Andhra Pradesh, after having served the Indian Navy for 36 years.

INS Ranjit

- ◆ The Indian Navy Ship (INS) Ranjit was commissioned on September 15, 1983 by Captain Vishnu Bhagwat in erstwhile USSR.
- ◆ The ship is the third of the five Kashin-class destroyers built by erstwhile Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).
- ◆ The ship was constructed as Yard 2203 in the 61 Communards shipyard in Nikolev in present-day Ukraine. The ship was initially given the Russian name 'Lovkly' which means 'Agile'.
- ◆ INS Ranjit has a motto of 'Sada Rane Jayate' or 'Ever Victorious in Battle'. The ship has always been at the forefront in keeping the nation secure.

- ◆ In 2003-04 and 2009-10, the ship was awarded with the ‘Unit Citation’ in recognition of her service.
- ◆ The ship has been helmed by 27 commanding officers. The last commanding officer, Captain Vikram C Mehra has been in command since June 2017.

36 years of INS Ranjit

- In the last 36 years, the ship has served both western and eastern seaboard and has been the flagship of both the western and eastern fleets.
- The ship undertook some of the key operations such as IPKF operations and Operation Talwar during the Kargil conflict.
- In 2003, the ship was deployed off Mozambique to provide security cover to the African Union Summit.
- The ship was actively deployed as part of relief operations post 2004 Tsunami and cyclone Hud-Hud in 2014.

Source: The Hindu

Indian Navy launches submarine ‘INS Vela’

Why in news?

- ☞ The Indian Navy has recently launched the fourth Scorpene class Submarine of Project 75 ‘INS Vela’ at the Kanhoji Angre Wet Basin of Mazagon Dock Limited at Mumbai, Maharashtra.
- ☞ The submarine will now undergo rigorous trials and tests in both harbour and sea phases before induction into the Indian Navy.
- ☞ The submarine was manufactured by Mazagon Dock Limited, with the help of main collaborator Naval Group, France (formerly DCNS).

Significance of submarine name ‘Vela’

- ◆ The submarine has been named ‘Vela’ after an earlier lead submarine of the erstwhile Vela class, which was the second batch of the Foxtrot class submarines acquired from erstwhile Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).

How Scorpene class submarines work?

- ◆ The Scorpene class submarines encompass superior stealth features - advanced acoustic silencing techniques, low radiated noise levels and optimized shape.

- ◆ They have ability to launch a crippling attack on the enemy using weapons. The attacks can be launched through the torpedoes and the anti-ship missiles, be it underwater or on surface.

Scorpene Class Submarines

- ◆ Designed by French naval defence company ‘DCNS’, the submarines are being manufactured by Mazagon Dock Limited in Mumbai.
- ◆ In 2005, India purchased 6 submarines for USD 3 billion under Project 75 that was undertaken due to the decreasing number of submarines in the Indian Navy.
- ◆ These submarines were also acquired as a replacement for older Sindhughosh and Shishumar class submarines.
- ◆ The first of the Scorpene-class submarines, INS Kalvari was commissioned on December 14, 2017 and the second of the 6 Scorpene Class Submarines, INS Khanderi will soon be inducted into the Indian Navy by May 2019.
- ◆ INS Karanj, the third Scorpene-class submarine, was launched by the Indian Navy on January 31, 2018.
- ◆ The fifth and sixth submarines INS Vagir and INS Vagsheer are in advanced stages of manufacturing.

Source: The Hindu

UN, EU sign joint framework on Counter-Terrorism

Why in news?

- ☞ The United Nations and the European Union (EU) recently signed a joint framework aimed at strengthening partnership in counter-terrorism efforts.
- ☞ The framework was enacted on the occasion of the second edition of EU-UN Leader’s Dialogue on Counter-Terrorism that was held in New York. The second edition of Dialogue promoted a new spirit of practical collaboration in countering terrorism and preventing violent extremism.

Highlights of UN-EU Framework on Counter-Terrorism

- ◆ The UN-EU framework will focus on terrorism and violent extremism prevention in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, as well as support victims and promote the reintegration of terrorism offenders
- ◆ The Framework supports development of national and regional Prevent and Counter Violent Extremism (PCVE) action plans promoting youth engagement and gender perspectives.
- ◆ It ensures support to victims of terrorism and the evolving threat of foreign terrorist fighters through the establishment of Advanced Passenger Information/Passenger Name Records (API/PNR) systems.

- ♦ It encourages a joint, effective, and multilateral cooperation to improve the safety of citizens in Europe and around the globe, while strengthening the respect for human rights and the rule of law.

Source: The Hindu, Indian Express

World's first floating nuclear power plant to begin operations

Why in news?

- ☞ **Akademik Lomonosov**, the world's only floating nuclear power unit is ready to start commercial operations in Russia. The plant was launched by Russia in 2018 at the St Petersburg shipyard.

Key Facts

- ♦ The 'Akademik Lomonosov' is to be the first of a fleet of floating nuclear power stations to be stationed in the Russian Arctic.
- ♦ The 144-by-30-metre (472-by-98-foot) power plant holds two reactors with two 35 megawatt nuclear reactors that are similar to those used to power icebreaker ships.
- ♦ The power plant has no propulsion of its own. It will be towed up North to avoid the steep cost of shipping it by land piece by piece to remote areas.
- ♦ The plant is capable of producing enough electricity to power a town of 200,000 residents, far more than the 5,000 living in Pevek.
- ♦ It is expected to operate for 40 years, with the possibility of the operating life being extended to 50 years and the two reactors will be refueled once every three years.

Significance

- ♦ The floating reactor can help save 50,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions per year.
- ♦ The facility is designed to replace the ageing four-unit Bilibino plant, with an aggregate 48 MW capacity and become the key power generation source in Chukotka Autonomous District.
- ♦ The power plant is ready to start generating power after a series of comprehensive and successful tests on its twin KLT-40 reactor system.
- ♦ The power generation at both of the 35-MW KLT-40C reactors achieved 100 percent of capacity on March 31, with subsequent tests confirming that both the main and the auxiliary equipment of the units, as well as the process control systems, were operating normally.

Source: The Hindu, Business Standard

India launches ‘MERA India’ to eliminate malaria by 2030

Why in news?

- ☛ The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) has recently launched the ‘Malaria Elimination Research Alliance (MERA) India’, a gathering of partners working together to plan and scale up research to eliminate Malaria from India by 2030.

Objective

- ◆ The principal motive of the ‘MERA India’ alliance is to prioritize, plan, conduct, and scale up research in a coordinated way to have a solid impact on the population who are at risk of malaria.
- ◆ India has made impressive progress in malaria control in the recent years. The malaria burden in India declined by over 80 percent from 2.03 million cases in 2000 to 0.39 million in 2018.
- ◆ Deaths by malaria have also declined by over 90 percent from 932 deaths in 2000 to 85 in 2018.

Highlights of ‘MERA India’ alliance

- ◆ The National Vector Borne Diseases Control Program (NVBDCP) developed a comprehensive framework to achieve “Malaria free India by 2030”.
- ◆ The NVBDCP’s National Strategic Plan recognises the critical role of research to support and guide malaria elimination efforts.
- ◆ The MERA India does not duplicate the international efforts to eliminate Malaria rather complement the efforts on a national scale.
- ◆ The alliance will facilitate trans-institutional coordination and collaboration around a collaborative research agenda.

Source: PIB

US approves sale of 24 MH 60 helicopters to India

Why in news?

- ☞ The United States has approved the sale of 24 multi-role MH-60 ‘Romeo’ Seahawk helicopters to India at an estimated cost of 2.4 billion US dollars.

Highlights

- ◆ The MH-60 Romeo Seahawk helicopter is considered to be the world’s most advanced maritime helicopter.
- ◆ Built by Lockheed Martin, the helicopters are designed to hunt down submarines, as well as knock out ships and conduct search-and-rescue operations at sea.
- ◆ India has been in need of these formidable anti-submarine hunter helicopters for more than a decade now. The advanced choppers would replenish India’s aging fleet of British-made Sea King helicopters.
- ◆ They will provide the Indian defence forces with the capability to perform anti-surface and anti-submarine warfare missions along with the ability to perform secondary missions including vertical replenishment, search and rescue and communications relay.

Significance for India

- ◆ India will use the enhanced capability as a deterrent to regional threats and strengthen its homeland defense.
- ◆ The helicopters are the need of the hour for India, especially with the aggressive behaviour of China in the Indian Ocean region.

Source: The Hindu

NASA’s InSight lander recorded first ‘Marsquake’

Why in news?

- ☞ NASA’s Mars Lander InSight has recorded its first ‘Marsquake.’ It has recorded a quake of 2 or 2.5 magnitude which is hard to predict on Earth’s surface. The faint seismic signal, detected by the lander’s Seismic Experiment for Interior Structure (SEIS) instrument, was recorded on April 6, which was the lander’s 128th Martian day.
- ☞ This is the first recorded trembling that appears to have come from inside the planet, as opposed to being caused by forces above the surface, such as wind. Scientists still are examining the data to determine the exact cause of the signal.

Key Findings

- ◆ InSight’s seismometer, which the lander placed on the planet’s surface on December 19, 2018, will enable scientists to gather similar data about Mars. By studying the deep interior of Mars, they hope to learn how other rocky worlds, including Earth and the Moon, formed.
- ◆ Three other seismic signals occurred on March 14 (Sol 105), April 10 (Sol 132) and April 11 (Sol 133).
- ◆ Detected by SEIS’ more sensitive Very Broad Band sensors, these signals were even smaller than the Sol 128 event and more ambiguous in origin. The team will continue to study these events to try to determine their cause.
- ◆ Regardless of its cause, the Sol 128 signal is an exciting milestone for the team.

What is Marsquake?

- ◆ Earthquake is a result of shifting of tectonic plates; when these plates shift their position a stress build-up and triggers a jostle to the earth.
- ◆ Unlike Earth, Mars may don’t have tectonic plates. Quakes on Mars (Marsquake) can also appear from the impact of meteors and possibly the movement of magma deep underground.

Source: The Hindu

China to build moon station in ‘about 10 years’

Why in news?

- ☞ China plans to send a manned mission to the moon and to build a research station there within the next decade. The announcement was made by the head of China’s National Space Administration, Zhang Kejian during his speech marking ‘Space Day’.
- ☞ Kejian revealed that the nation plans to build a scientific research station on the moon’s South Pole within the next 10 years.

Significance

- ◆ China aims to achieve space superpower status. The nation took a major step towards that goal when it became the first nation to land a rover on the far side of the moon in January 2019.

China’s Tiangong Programme

- ◆ Tiangong programme also known as ‘Heavenly Palace’ is the space station program of the People’s Republic of China. The key focus is to create a modular space station, comparable to Soviet Union’s Mir.

- ◆ China launched its first space laboratory, Tiangong-1, on September 29, 2011. Following Tiangong-1, a more advanced space laboratory complete with cargo ship, Tiangong-2, was launched on September 15, 2016.
- ◆ The project will culminate with a large orbital station, which will consist of a 20-ton core module, 2 smaller research modules, and cargo transport craft. It is expected to support three astronauts for long-term habitation.
- ◆ The space station is scheduled to go into orbit by 2022. It is set to replace the International Space Station, a collaboration between the United States, Russia, Canada, Europe and Japan, which is due to be retired in 2024.
- ◆ China's Long March-5B rocket will make its maiden flight in the first half of 2020, carrying the core parts of the planned space station.
- ◆ China would also be launching an asteroid exploration mission and has invited collaborators to place their experiments on the probe. The current Chang'e-4 moon lander had carried equipment from Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden.

Background

- ◆ China has confirmed that its fourth lunar probe, the Chang'e-5, will be launched by the end of 2019.
- ◆ The launch of Chang'e-5, which was originally scheduled to collect moon samples in the second half of 2017, was delayed after its planned carrier, the powerful Long March 5 Y2 rocket, failed during a separate launch in July 2017.
- ◆ The nation also plans to launch a Mars probe by 2020.
- ◆ China spends more on its civil and military space programmes than Russia and Japan and is second only to the United States.

Source: The Hindu

INS Kolkata & Shakti reach Qingdao to participate in International Fleet Review (IFR)

Why in news?

☞ The Indian Navy Ships (INS) Kolkata and Shakti reached Qingdao, China on April 21, 2019 to participate in the International Fleet Review (IFR) as part of 70th Anniversary celebrations of People's Liberation Army Navy (PLA Navy).

Key Facts

- ◆ The participation of Indian Navy in IFR for third consecutive time after 2009 and 2014 demonstrates India's commitment to enhance maritime cooperation with Chinese navy and bolster bonds of friendship.
- ◆ The Indian Navy has deployed its finest assets - indigenously built stealth guided missile destroyer INS Kolkata and fleet support ship INS Shakti - for the IFR to strengthen existing cooperation, enhance mutual trust and build greater synergy.
- ◆ The visit of Indian Navy's most potent destroyer and versatile fleet support ship showcases India's proficiency, reach and sustainability in addition to indigenous ship building capability.
- ◆ The harbour stay of these Ships will be marked by interaction between personnel of participating navies, various dignitaries of PLA and Government officials. The Ships will take part in the parade of naval ships which will be reviewed by the Chinese President Xi Jinping.
- ◆ The Indian Ambassador to China, Vikram Misri will host a reception onboard INS Kolkata for dignitaries, officers of PLA (Navy) and delegations participating in the IFR.
- ◆ The PLA personnel and local population will be allowed to visit these ships to witness Indian Navy's prowess and India's ship building capability.

What is International Fleet Review (IFR)?

- ◆ The International Fleet Review is a parade of naval ships, aircraft and submarines. The IFR is organised by nations to promote goodwill, strengthen cooperation and showcase their organisational capabilities.
- ◆ The IFR serves as an ideal platform for world's navies to showcase their expertise and indigenous ship designing and ship building capabilities in the international arena.
- ◆ India conducted the IFR in February 2016 that saw overwhelming participation of 50 navies with nearly 100 warships.

INS Kolkata & INS Shakti

- ◆ INS Kolkata is equipped with state-of-the-art weapons and sensors to address threats in all dimensions of naval warfare, while INS Shakti is one of the largest tankers that can transport over 27000 tonnes and is capable of carrying 15,000 tonnes of liquid cargo and over 500 tonnes of solid cargo.

Source: The Hindu

Indian Navy launches ‘Imphal’

Why in news?

- ☞ The Indian Navy has recently launched guided missile destroyer ‘Imphal’ at Mazagon Dock Shipbuilders in Mumbai.
- ☞ Imphal is the third ship to be launched under Project 15B. The ship successfully slipped into the waters at 12:20 pm.

Key Highlights

- ◆ The Indian Navy has achieved enhanced stealth features in the new destroyer through the shaping of the hull and use of radar transparent deck fittings, which make the ships difficult to detect.
- ◆ The ship, comprising state-of-the-art equipments, is expected to contribute to achieving the Indian Navy’s dream of transforming from a “buyers” to a “builders” Navy.

Project 15B

- ◆ The warships built under the project are propelled by four gas turbines to achieve speed in excess of 30 knots.
- ◆ They have a length of 163 metres and 17.4 metres at the beam and a displacement of 7.300 tonnes.
- ◆ The ships are built to carry and operate two multiple role helicopters.
- ◆ The first ship of Project 15B, a guided missile destroyer christened ‘Visakhapatnam’, was launched in 2015.

Source: The Hindu, PIB

Cabinet approves continuation of GSLV Programme-Phase 4

Why in news?

- ☞ The Union Cabinet, has recently approved the ongoing Phase 4 of the Geosynchronous Satellite Launch Vehicle (GSLV) programme.

Under the GSLV Continuation Programme, five GSLV flights have been planned during the period 2021-2024.

Objective

- ◆ The GSLV Programme - Phase 4 will enable the launch of 2 tonne class of satellites for Geo-imaging, Navigation, Data Relay Communication and Space Sciences into the Geosynchronous Transfer Orbit (GTO).
- ◆ The GSLV Continuation Programme - Phase 4 will meet the launch requirement of satellites for providing critical Satellite Navigation Services and Data Relay Communication for supporting the Indian Human spaceflight programme 'Gaganyaan' and the next interplanetary mission to Mars.

This will also ensure the continuity of production in Indian industry.

Financial implications

- ◆ The total fund requirement for the GSLV Continuation Programme is Rs 2729.13 crores including the cost of five GSLV vehicles, essential facility augmentation, programme management and launch campaign.

Implementation Strategy

- ◆ The GSLV Continuation Programme - Phase 4 will meet the demand for the launch of two satellites per year with maximum participation by the Indian industry. All the operational flights would be completed during the period 2021-24.

Significance

- ◆ The operationalisation of Geosynchronous Satellite Launch Vehicle has made the country self-reliant in the launching capability of 2 tonne class of satellites for communication & meteorological satellites.
- ◆ The GSLV Continuation Programme will help sustain the self-reliance in the launching of similar satellites for national requirements including next generation navigation satellites, data relay communication satellites and interplanetary missions.

Geosynchronous Satellite Launch Vehicle (GSLV)

- ◆ The GSLV is capable of placing 2 tonne class of satellites like the INSAT and GSAT series of communication satellites into Geosynchronous Transfer Orbit (GTO).
- ◆ GSLV is a 49 m tall three stage vehicle with the first stage comprising a S139 solid booster with four liquid strap-on motors, each weighing 40 ton.
- ◆ The second stage is a liquid engine carrying 37.5 ton of liquid propellant and the third stage is the indigenously built Cryogenic Upper Stage (CUS) which uses 15 ton of cryogenic propellants such as Liquid Hydrogen (LH₂) as fuel and Liquid Oxygen (LOX) as Oxidiser.
- ◆ With the recent successful launch of GSLV-F11 on December 19, 2018, GSLV has successfully placed 10 national satellites.
- ◆ GSLV Continuation Programme was initially sanctioned in 2003 and two phases have been completed and the third phase is in progress and expected to be completed by Q4 of 2020-21.

Source: PIB

‘NIRBHAY’ Cruise Missile successfully test fired

Why in news?

- ☞ The Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) recently successfully test fired indigenously designed Long Range Sub-Sonic Cruise Missile “Nirbhay” from the Integrated Test Range (ITR), Chandipur, Odisha.
- ☞ The missile successfully demonstrated its sea-skimming capability to cruise at very low altitudes. The entire flight was fully tracked by a chain of Electro Optical Tracking Systems, Radars and Ground Telemetry Systems deployed all along the sea coast. All the mission objectives were met.
- ☞ It was the sixth development flight trial of the missile with an objective to prove the repeatability of boost phase, and cruise phase by using way point navigation at very low altitudes.

About NIRBHAY cruise missile

- The missile was developed by the DRDO at its aeronautics R&D laboratory ADE (Aeronautical Development Establishment) based in Bengaluru.
- The avionics of the missile was provided by the Research Centre Imarat, Hyderabad. The DRDL also contributed to the development of the missile.
- The missile has the capability to linger and cruise at 0.7 Mach at altitudes as low as 100 m.
- The guidance, control and navigation system of the missile is configured around the indigenously designed Ring Laser Gyroscope (RLG) and MEMS based Inertial Navigation System (INS).
- It can carry conventional and nuclear war heads.
- It is manoeuvrable and can fly at tree-top level, making it difficult to be detected on radar.
- It can strike the targets more than 700 km away carrying nuclear warheads giving India the capability to strike deep into enemy territory.

Source: The Hindu



More News

World Red Cross Day

- ◆ World Red Cross is celebrated on May 08 every year to pay tribute to the people participated in the event as well as remembering their contribution to helping people in need.
- ◆ This is basically an annual celebration of the principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. This day is celebrated on this day because **it marks the birth anniversary of Henry Dunant, founder** of the Red Cross and International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

Justice PR Ramachandra Menon sworn-in as Chief Justice of Chhattisgarh HC

- ◆ Justice PR Ramachandra Menon was recently sworn-in as the Chief Justice of the Chhattisgarh High Court. The office the Chief Justice of Chhattisgarh fell vacant after the resignation of Chief Justice Ajay Kumar Tripathi following his appointment as Judicial Member in the Lokpal.

Apurvi Chandela becomes world number 1 in 10m air rifle,

Anjum claims second position

- ◆ India's Apurvi Chandela recently became world number 1 in women's 10m air rifle event, according to the latest rankings released by the International Shooting Sport Federation.
- ◆ Hailing from Jaipur, the shooting ace is among the five Indian shooters to have already secured 2020 Olympics quotas for the country.

Kumar Sangakkara named as first non-British MCC president

- ◆ Former Sri Lanka captain, Kumar Sangakkara was on May 1, 2019 appointed as the President of the Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC), England. With this, Sangakkara became the first non-British to head the Club.
- ◆ Sangakkara will take up the post on October 1, 2019 and will serve the position for a period of 12 months. His nomination was announced by the current MCC President Anthony Wreford at the MCC Annual General Meeting at Lord's.
- ◆ During his one-year tenure, Sangakkara will witness two England Tests against West Indies and Pakistan, and the launch of The Hundred competition before his term ends on September 30, 2020.

- ◆ Japanese Emperor of 'Heisei' era, Akihito began his abdication rituals on April 30, 2019 at a Shinto shrine, marking the end of his reign with hope for a new era. Akihito announced his retirement before other members of the royal family and top government officials.
- ◆ Japan on April 1, 2019 declared 'Reiwa' as the name of its new imperial era that will begin on May 1, 2019 once the new Crown Prince Naruhito, son of Akihito, ascends the Chrysanthemum Throne.

Former ISRO Chairman awarded France's Highest Civilian Honour

- ◆ Former ISRO chairman A S Kiran Kumar has been conferred with France's highest civilian honour, Chevalier de l'Ordre national de la Legion d'Honneur, for his contribution to India-France space cooperation.
- ◆ Kumar was conferred with the prestigious honour by France's Ambassador to India Alexandre Ziegler on behalf of the French President.
- ◆ Indian selectors on April 15, 2019 announced the Indian team for the ICC Cricket World Cup 2019, which is scheduled to begin in England and Wales from May 30, 2019. The announcement was made by the BCCI Acting Honorary Secretary Amitabh Choudhary in Mumbai, in the presence of the Chairman of Selectors, MSK Prasad.
- ◆ The 15-man squad would be led by Virat Kohli with Rohit Sharma as his deputy. The surprise inclusions in the team include all-rounder Vijay Shankar and veteran wicketkeeper-batsman Dinesh Karthik, who has returned to India's World Cup squad after 12 years.

Asian Athletics Championship 2019: India finishes fourth with 17 medals

- ◆ The 23rd edition of the Asian Athletics Championship concluded in Doha, Qatar on April 24, 2019. India with 17 medals (3 Gold, 7 silver and 7 bronze) finished fourth in the tournament.
- ◆ The four-day event saw participation from 63 nations across the world. Bahrain topped the tally with 11 gold, 7 silver and 4 bronze, followed by China with 10 gold, 13 silver, 7 bronze and then Japan with 5 gold, 4 silver, 9 bronze.

FIFA rankings: Belgium tops, India gets 101st rank

- ◆ FIFA has released world football rankings on April, 04 2019. India rose two points and gets 101st rank while Belgium tops the list. FIFA said in its report, there were 150 games played across the globe during the international period, things remain tight at the top of the FIFA World Ranking as the top three remained unchanged.
- ◆ In current FIFA rankings India gained two spots, but couldn't find a space in top 100. As per latest FIFA rankings India is on 101st position while 18th in the Asia.

Indian peacekeepers awarded UN Medal of Honour for their service in

South Sudan

- ◆ The UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) recently honored 150 Indian peacekeepers, serving the mission, with Medals of Honour for their supreme dedication and sacrifices in Malakal, South Sudan.
- ◆ The award ceremony consisted of parades and performances by a piped band.

World Intellectual Property Day 2019

- ◆ The World Intellectual Property Day was observed across the world on April 26, 2019 to spread awareness about the role that intellectual property rights like patents, trademarks, industrial designs and copyright play in encouraging innovation and creativity.
- ◆ On this day, the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) works together with various government agencies, non-government organizations, community groups and individuals to hold different events and activities to promote the day.

International Day of Multilateralism and Diplomacy for Peace 2019

- ◆ The first ever official ‘International Day of Multilateralism and Diplomacy for Peace’ was observed by the United Nations (UN) on April 24, 2019. The UN General Assembly convened a one-day high-level plenary meeting to commemorate and promote the day.
- ◆ The International Day of Multilateralism and Diplomacy for Peace was officially proclaimed to be observed ever year on 24 April by the UN General Assembly on December 12, 2018 through resolution A/RES/73/127.

UAE honours PM Narendra Modi with Zayed Medal

- ◆ The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has honoured PM Narendra Modi with its highest decoration, Zayed Medal in recognition of his “pivotal role” in strengthening ties between the two nations.
- ◆ The Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Mohammed Bin Zayed Al Nahyan tweeted “We have historical and comprehensive strategic ties with India, reinforced by the pivotal role of my dear friend, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who gave these relations a big boost. In appreciation of his efforts, the UAE President grants him the Zayed Medal.”

First female astronaut candidate of USA Jerrie Cobb dies

- ◆ NASA's first female astronaut candidate, pilot Jerrie Cobb, has recently died. Cobb died in Florida at age 88 last month. News of her death came on April 18, 2019 from journalist Miles O'Brien, serving as a family spokesman.
- ◆ In year 1961, Cobb became the first woman to pass astronaut testing. Altogether, 13 women passed the arduous physical testing and became known as the Mercury 13. But NASA already had its Mercury 7 astronauts, all jet test pilots and all military men. None of the Mercury 13 ever reached space, despite Cobb's testimony in 1962 before a Congressional panel.

2019 Pulitzer Prize winners

- ◆ The Pulitzer Prize winners for 2019 were announced on April 15, 2019 at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism in New York City.
- ◆ This year, a special citation was given to honor the team at the Capital Gazette in Annapolis, Maryland, for their courageous response to the largest killing of journalists in US history. They received an award of \$100K to further their journalism.
- ◆ South Florida Sun Sentinel received the 2019 Pulitzer Prize in the Public Service category for exposing failings by school and law enforcement officials before and after the deadly shooting rampage at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School.
- ◆ In the fiction category, *The Overstory*, by Richard Powers (WW Norton) won the Pulitzer for an ingeniously structured narrative that branches and canopies like the trees at the core of the story whose wonder and connectivity echo those of the humans living amongst them.

Russia confers highest Order on PM Modi

- ◆ Russia has announced that it had honoured Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi with the Order of St Andrew the Apostle, the highest order of the Russian Federation, for promoting partnership and friendly relations between the two countries.
- ◆ PM Modi has been decorated with the order for exceptional services in promoting a special and privileged strategic partnership between Russia and India and friendly relations between the Russian and Indian people. The information was shared by the Russian Embassy in India.

