

1. Government removes ceiling of ₹ 4500 on COVID 19 Test and gives discretion to states and union territories in deciding the price.
2. Kerala reports three community cases.

During the past few weeks, major locust attacks have been observed in several countries in western and southern Asia and in eastern Africa.

Which countries are affected?

The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations has currently identified three hotspots of threatening locust activity, where the situation has been called “extremely alarming” — the Horn of Africa, the Red Sea area, and southwest Asia.

The Horn of Africa has been called the worst-affected area, where the FAO has said there is “an unprecedented threat to food security and livelihoods”.

Locust swarms from Ethiopia and Somalia have travelled south to Kenya and 14 other countries in the continent.

In the Red Sea area, locusts have struck in Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Yemen.

In southwest Asia, locusts swarms have caused damage in Iran, India, and Pakistan.

Pakistan and Somalia have recently declared locust emergencies.

What are locusts?

Locusts are a group of short-horned grasshoppers that multiply in numbers as they migrate long distances in destructive swarms (up to 150km in one day).

Four species of locusts are found in India: Desert locust (*Schistocerca gregaria*), Migratory locust (*Locusta migratoria*), Bombay Locust (*Nomadacris succincta*) and Tree locust (*Anacridium* sp.).

How do they inflict damage?

The swarms devour leaves, flowers, fruits, seeds, bark and growing points, and also destroy plants by their sheer weight as they descend on them in massive numbers.

The desert locust is regarded as the most destructive pest in India as well as internationally, with a small swarm covering one square kilometre being able to consume the same amount of food in one day as 35,000 people.

Locust Warning Organisation (LWO), Directorate of Plant Protection Quarantine and Storage, Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare, is responsible for monitoring, survey and control of Desert Locust in Scheduled Desert Areas mainly in the States of Rajasthan and Gujarat.



The Covid-19 pandemic and the imposition of lockdown in order to curb it has brought the perils of migrant workers into the light.

Challenges

Most of the migrant workers are not routed through licensed contractors so a huge number is excluded from getting any benefit out of the Inter-State Migrant Workmen (ISMW) Act, 1979.

According to ISMW Act, an inter-State migrant worker is any person who is recruited by or through a licensed contractor.

The ISMW Act was drawn up after repealing the Orissa Dadan Labour Act, 1975.

The Act is only applicable to any establishment which has five or more inter-State migrant workers as employees which again leaves a significant number of workers.

In reality, a small proportion of migrant workmen are placed under such establishments.

Migrants from establishments with less than five migrant employees also cease to be migrants, legally.

The ISMW Act is also not legally enforceable.

Coronavirus crisis has exposed the inadequacy of the ISMW Act highlighting needs for legal safeguards and welfare measures for migrants.

Suggestions

Repealing of the ISMW Act, 1979 and replacing it with a new Act, or by enlarging the scope of Unorganised Workers' Social Security (UWSS) Act, 2008 to include legal entitlements, to define the migrant workman as a subset, to provide for contingencies of livelihood loss and to make the Act legally enforceable.

Universalisation of registration and issuance of Aadhaar-based Unique Worker's Identification Number (UWIN).

Schemes like MGNREGA, Public Distribution Scheme (PDS) and Ujjwala need to be made portable and extensive.

Geofencing of different benefits enabling a migrant worker to choose location-wise benefits.

Preparing a comprehensive database of the migrant workers' source and destination, demography, employment patterns and skill sets.

It will help in skill development, providing social security benefits, planning for mass transit of migrant labour and preparing for any contingency plan in emergency situations.

Empowering the Inter-State Council, set up under Article 263 of the Constitution to effectively and comprehensively deal with larger issues related to migrant workers.

Migrant worker issues have complex Centre-State and inter-State dimensions.

Steps Taken by Government

The UWSS Act, 2008: It provides for social security and welfare of unorganised workers.

The UWSS Act defines unorganised workers as home-based worker, self-employed worker or wage worker in the unorganised sector.

It has two features:

Registration of unorganised workers.

Portable smart I-card with a UWIN.

Pradhan Mantri Shram Yogi Maan-dhan Yojana: To ensure old age protection for unorganised workers.

Atal Pension Yojana: It is a social security scheme launched under the National Pension System (NPS) and aims at providing a steady stream of income after the age of 60 to all citizens of India including the migrants and labourers.

Pradhan Mantri Jeevan Jyoti Bima Yojana and Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojana (under the Gram Swaraj Abhiyan): Both of the schemes provide for life insurance and accident insurance respectively to the migrants and labourers.

Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (Ayushman Bharat): It aims at providing health cover to protect the migrants among others against the financial risk arising out of catastrophic health episodes.

China has pushed for an "improvement" in the Basic Law, which is the mini-constitution that defines ties between Hong Kong and Beijing.

What does this push mean?

This push for improvement signals a fundamental change in the way the highly autonomous city-state is being ran.

The remarks came a day before the opening of the Chinese parliament.

In the Chinese parliament, a controversial national security law for Hong Kong is being mooted.

The new law is being described as the most sweeping step at curbing dissent so far.

This law seeks to ban "treason, secession, sedition and subversion".

This law could be passed without consulting the Hong Kong legislature.

What is Hong Kong's 'Basic Law'?

A former British colony, Hong Kong was handed over to mainland China in 1997, becoming one of its Special Administrative Regions.

It is governed by a mini-constitution called the Basic Law, which affirms the principle of "one country, two systems".

The constitutional document is a product of the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration.

Under this Declaration, China promised to honour Hong Kong's liberal policies, system of governance, independent judiciary, and individual freedoms for a period of 50 years from 1997.

Since the handover, Hong Kong residents have repeatedly protested to protect their Basic Law freedoms, with the first major pro-democracy protest taking place in 2003.

In 2014, over one lakh city residents took part in the 'Umbrella Revolution' to protest against China's denial of democratic reforms.

What is the impact of the 2019 protests?

The largest protests since the 1997 handover took place in 2019.

Several Hong Kongers agitated against a proposed extradition law.

They continued with pro-democracy marches even after the legislation was withdrawn.

The large-scale protests were seen as an insult by mainland China.

Therefore, China has increasingly adopted a more hard line approach to foreign policy and internal security issues in recent years.

The Hong Kong unrest has left its mark on Taiwan, another prickly issue for Beijing, which considers the island state as its own.

In presidential election 2020, Taiwanese voters brought to power the Democratic Progressive Party, which openly opposes joining China.

What is the proposed national security law?

Article 23 - Under Article 23 of the Basic Law, Hong Kong has to enact a national security law, which should

Prohibit any act of treason, secession, sedition, subversion against the Central People's Government, or theft of state secrets,

Prohibit foreign political organizations or bodies from conducting political activities in the Region, and

Prohibit political organizations or bodies of the Region from establishing ties with foreign political organizations or bodies.

When the Hong Kong government first tried to enact the law in 2003, the issue became a rallying point for the citywide protests that occurred that year.

Since then, the government has steered clear of introducing the legislation again.

Annex III - Beijing could make the law applicable to Hong Kong by inserting the legislation in Annex III of the Basic Law.

Under Article 18, national laws can be applied in Hong Kong if they are placed in Annex III.

These laws must be confined to those relating to defence and foreign affairs, and other matters outside the limits of the Region's autonomy.

Once listed in Annex III, national laws can be enforced in the city by way of promulgation- meaning automatically being put into effect- or by legislating locally in the Special Administrative Region.

Towards the end of May 2020, the Chinese parliament may vote on a resolution that will make way for the new law.

This law could be promulgated in Hong Kong by end of June, 2020.

What could happen if such a law takes effect?

The new law would ban seditious activities that target mainland Chinese rule, as well as punish external interference in Hong Kong affairs.

Many expect a revival of the protests that rocked the city last year.

A major blow to Hong Kong's freedoms, the law could effectively bring the city under full control of mainland China.

The move could also undermine Hong Kong's position as an East Asian trading hub, and invite global disapproval for China.

Recently, the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare has launched three new features of the National Agriculture Market (e-NAM) Platform.

The new features will strengthen agriculture marketing by reducing farmers' need to physically go to wholesale mandis for selling their harvested produce.

It is an important move at a time when there is a critical need to decongest mandis to effectively fight against Covid-19.

Key Points

Integration of Negotiable Warehouse Receipt System (e-NWRs) Module with e-NAM

Under it, a warehouse trading module with payment feature is launched.

It will enable small and marginal farmers to directly trade their stored produce from selected Warehousing Development and Regulatory Authority (WDRA) registered warehouses which are declared deemed market by the State.

Farmers will be able to place their produce in WDRA accredited warehouses.

Telangana (14 warehouses) and Andhra Pradesh (23 warehouses) have already declared designated warehouses as deemed markets.

Benefits:

Depositor can save the logistics expenses and will have better income.

Farmers can sell the produce across the Nation at better price without the hassle of going to mandi.

Farmers with their produce in WDRA accredited warehouses can avail the benefit of pledge loan, if required.

Price stabilization by matching supply and demand through time and place utility.

FPO trading Module

It will enable Farmer Producers' Organisations (FPOs) to upload the picture of their produce and quality parameters from their premise/collection centres for bidding.

Distant bidders can visualise the produce before bidding by seeing the pictures and quality.

After successful bidding, FPOs can deliver the produce from their premises or by bringing it to mandi.

Benefits:

This will decongest mandis and also reduce the hassle.

This will help FPOs by reducing logistics costs and enhance their bargaining power.

Facilitates FPOs to avail online payment facility with ease of doing business.

Launch of Logistic Module

A provision has been made for linking large logistic aggregator platforms providing choices to users.

Presently, e-NAM provides a database of individual transporters to the traders.

Traders will be able to use the link to navigate to the logistics provider's website and select appropriate services.

With these additions, more than 3,75,000 number of trucks from large logistic providers would be added for logistic purpose.

Benefits:

This will help in seamless transportation of agri-produce.

This will promote inter-state trade by providing online transport facilities for distant buyers.

e-NAM

It was launched on 14th April 2016 as a pan-India electronic trade portal linking Agricultural Produce Market Committees (APMCs) across the States.

It provides for contactless remote bidding and mobile-based anytime payment for which traders do not need to either visit mandis or banks for the same.

Already 585 mandis in 16 States and 2 Union Territories have been integrated on e-NAM portal and will be soon expanded to cover additional 415 mandis, which will take the total number of e-NAM mandis to 1,000.

Negotiable Warehouse Receipt System

It was launched in 2011 by the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food & Public Distribution.

Farmers can seek loans from banks against the warehouse receipts issued to them against their storage.

These receipts issued by the warehouses registered with the WDRRA would become a fully negotiable instrument backed by a Central legislation.

The Electronic Negotiable Warehouse Receipt (e-NWR) System was launched in 2017.

Warehousing Development and Regulatory Authority

It was constituted on 26th October 2010 under the Warehousing (Development and Regulation) Act, 2007.

It is a statutory authority under the Department of Food and Public Distribution, Government of India.

It is headquartered in New Delhi.

The Act provides for the establishment of the WDRRA to exercise the powers conferred on it and to perform the functions assigned to it under the Act, Rules and Regulations for the development and regulation of warehouses, negotiability of warehouse receipts and promote orderly growth of the warehousing business in the country.

