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Africa- India Field Training Exercise-2019

Why in news?

As part of the inaugural Africa-India Field Training Exercise , AFINDEX-19 which commenced on 18 March 2019 at Pune, a number of activities in planning and conduct of Humanitarian Mine Assistance has been undertaken by all 18 participating nations.

Highlights:

- The activities includes demonstrations and training on establishing & functioning of Mine Action Center, identification and survey of contaminated areas, mechanical and manual demining, disposal of improvised explosives devices and air causality disposal.
- The exercise is focusing on exchange of best practices amongst the participating nations, team building and tactical level operations in conduct of Humanitarian Mine Assistance and Peace Keeping operations based on the guidelines issued by the United Nations.
- 17 African nations i.e. Benin, Botswana, Egypt, Ghana, Kenya, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe, three observers African nations i.e. Rwanda, Congo and Madagascar alongwith India are participating in the inaugural Africa-India Field Training Exercise.
- AFINDEX-19 will go a long way in further cementing relationship amongst the nations and will act as a catalyst in bringing synergy and cooperation while undertaking such operations under the United

Nations mandate.

Swachhata Platform

- The Swachhata application is a fourth generation complaint redressal mobile and web platform. It is a quantum leap in how complaints and grievances are being redressed by Municipal Corporations in India. This solution is for all the 4041 towns and cities of India.
- The Swachhata application fuses together a time-tested complaint redressal platform with the opportunity for citizens to work together on civic issues with community centric features for citizens to vote up on complaints, share them with other concerned citizens and comment on the work being done.
- Swachhata app aims to foster large scale citizen participation.
- The Swachhata city rating system works on the number of complaints resolved by the corporation - with adherence to Service Level Agreements and to the satisfaction of the complainant.
- Action on the complaints may vary depending on the categories. Action for most complaints will be initiated from 6 hours of registration. There is a detailed escalation process built in the mobile application so that complaints that are not resolved at the lower level are moved to higher levels for action and resolution.

Benefits to Citizens

1. A transparent and accountable system of grievance redressal.
2. Locate the complaint with ease - The app can pinpoint the location of the complaint with accuracy using the geo-location of the picture, which will lead to faster resolution of the complaint.

Future-proofing cities

Background:

- The stark statistics jump out at anyone trying to understand why resilient infrastructure is so important in a world that is urbanising at an unprecedented pace, not least here in India.
- Already around 34% of India's population lives in cities and this demographic cohort is expected to grow in the years ahead.
- This growing rate of urbanisation and the subsequent increase in population density is bringing massive new investments in infrastructure.
- Bridges, roads, dams, power stations and electrical grids are just some of the services and facilities that need to be built to serve burgeoning urban populations.
- Half of the infrastructure needed in Asia by 2050 is yet to be built. It is estimated that, globally, $6 trillion needs to be invested in infrastructure every year until 2030 to meet current demands.

Importance of Resilient Infrastructure:

- This level of investment provides a window of opportunity to ensure that all new infrastructure is made resilient to withstand future shocks, including those brought by a changing climate.
- Disasters in heavily populated urban areas can lead to high numbers of human casualties. It is sobering to note that unsafe infrastructure which collapses in an earthquake or tsunami kills more people than any other type of natural hazard, such as a tornado or a storm.
- Economic losses from disasters that damage infrastructure can reach huge proportions. The World Bank estimates that annual disaster losses are already close to $520 billion and that disasters push up to 24 million people a year into poverty.
- Ensuring that all new investments in infrastructure are made in a risk-sensitive way can play a significant role in reducing economic losses from disasters.
- There is no excuse for infrastructure to continue to be damaged or destroyed by recurrent hazards when we know that a small investment — often just a small percentage of the total cost of investment — can make the infrastructure resistant to many shocks.
- The dividend is that money saved from relief and rebuilding costs can be invested in development objectives, such as education, health care or improved transportation, helping countries achieve the Sustainable

Development Goals.

- One of the objectives of the Second International Workshop on Disaster Resilient Infrastructure, being hosted on March 19-20 under the initiative of the Indian government and with support from the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, is to pursue the creation of a global coalition for resilient infrastructure.
- The coalition will also ensure that new risks are not created, as enshrined in the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030, the global plan for reducing disaster losses.
- Such international cooperation and shared commitment are needed to "future-proof" our cities and lock-in resilience for generations to come.

Tribal artists arrival on online platform

Why in news?

The paintings of tribal artists from the remote Agency areas of Telangana have literally arrived on a global platform, thanks to Amazon, the largest e-commerce market place.

To the Online Platform:

- Until a few months ago, the humble artists from tribal areas, did not even foresee a demand for their traditional paintings, reflecting the ethos of different tribal communities.
- But things have begun to change for them after the **Telangana Tribal Welfare Department,** sensing potential patronage for their art, commissioned a few paintings.
- The work of the tribal artists, all simple, with unique patterns and inspired by nature, make an immediate connect.
- The first batch of paintings, 17 of them, done by the artists from **Gond, Koya and Naikpod** communities, when put up for sale through the Amazon online platform a few months ago, were all sold

out.

- The artists, now working in the residential campus of the Tribal Welfare Department in Hyderabad, have completed another 35 paintings. They will be put up for sale online by Amazon soon.
- The idea to provide a wider platform to the paintings came when the Tribal Welfare Department and the Tribal Museum Curator D. Satyanarayana, working closely with the tribal communities, recognised the appeal of their traditional painting practices.
- B.M.D. Ekka, Principal Secretary, Tribal Welfare, says they are in the process of forming tribal artists' society and the department would initially pilot it.
- Once the system is in place, the society can run by itself. At present, the sale proceeds of the paintings go to the individual artists in the society, while the department takes a small amount towards the cost of material like canvas, painting brushes, acrylic paints etc.
- The department has also accommodated about 12 artists from tribal areas on its campus in Hyderabad.

Bright colours:

- The Gond paintings stand out for use of **bright colours and intricate lines**.
- The Gond art mostly represents a tree emerging out of birds (peacocks) and animals (ox, horse, deer, elephant and tiger).
- The Koya artists draw on the surface motifs of their **sacred 'Hariveni'** posts, sacred flags and big bottle gourds.
- The paintings of Naikpod tribals are reflections of face masks of **their kings, Pandavas** like Bheema, and traditional village temple deities.

A law to empower forest staff

Why in news?

A proposed legislation accords significant powers to India's forest officers including the power issue search warrants, enter and investigate lands within their jurisdictions, and to provide indemnity to forest

officers using arms to prevent forest-related offences.

The Indian Forest Act, 2019:

- The Indian Forest Act, 2019 is envisaged as an amendment to the **Indian Forest Act, 1927** and is an attempt to address contemporary challenges to India's forests.
- The draft law has been sent to key forest officers in the States for soliciting comments and objections until June 7, says an accompanying note by the Union Environment Ministry.
- Amendment proposed to **provide indemnity to Forest-officer using arms** etc, to prevent the forest offence.
- Forest-officer not below the rank of a Ranger shall have power to hold an inquiry into forest offences and shall have the powers to search or issue a search warrant under the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973.
- Any Forest-officer not below the rank of a Forester may, at any time enter and inspect any land within his area of jurisdiction.

Pro-people:

- Officials at the Union Environment Ministry said that the draft was "preliminary," "extremely pro-people" and explicitly provided for traditional forest dwellers to jointly manage forests with officers.
- Several of these provisions exist in the State Forest Acts, however, we need a strong law to increase our forest cover from **about 24% now to 33%** as a stated directive of government policy.
- **Village forests,** according to the proposed Act, may be forestland or wasteland, which is the property of the government and would be jointly managed by the community through the Joint Forest Management Committee or Gram Sabha.

Forest development cess

- The legislation also proposes a forest development cess of up to 10% of the assessed value of mining products removed from forests, and water used for irrigation or in industries.
- This amount would be deposited in a special fund and used

"exclusively for reforestation; forest protection and other ancillary purposes connected with tree planting, forest development and conservation.

Issues:

- Independent experts said that the proposed law would lead to conflicts during implementation, particularly when seen in the context of the Forest Rights Act, 2006.
- In effect, the aim is to strengthen the forest bureaucracy in terms of deciding on how to decide on title claims over forest land, what parts to declare off-limitsfor conservation, checking encroachments, etc.
- However, things have dramatically changed since 1927with new laws, greater rights accorded to forest dwellers by the Constitution. So how will the provisions of the new Act be implemented?
- On February 28, the Supreme Court stayed its own controversial order of Feb 13, directing State governments to evict nearly a million forest dwellers who couldn't prove their title claims to forest land.
- This was after it emerged that several States had high rejection rates and due process in checking claims wasn't always followed.

Report on VVPAT

Why in news?

The Indian Statistical Institute (ISI) submitted the recommendations of an expert committee on the Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) slip verification to the Election Commission.

About the Report:

- The report titled "Random Sampling For Testing of EVMs via VVPAT Slip Verification" was handed over to Chief Election Commissioner Sunil Arora and Election Commissioners Ashok Lavasa and Sushil Chandra.

- The Commission will examine the report to determine the course of action.
- In view of demands from various political parties to increase the percentage of the VVPAT slip counted during elections, the Commission had engaged the ISI to analyse and scientifically examine the issue of matching the slips with the Electronic Voting Machine (EVM) results.
- Before finalising its report, the expert committee had wide-ranging consultations with other experts in the field of statistics and examined suggestions received from other groups.
- The report comes ahead of the **March 25 hearing in the Supreme Court** on a joint petition filed by 23 Opposition parties demanding the random verification of at least 50% EVM results through VVPAT slips in every Assembly segment or constituency.
- In the last hearing, the court had issued a notice to the Election Commission seeking its response to the petition.
- VVPAT slips are currently matched with EVM results at one randomly selected polling booth in each Assembly constituency.

VVPAT:

- Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) machines are used during election process to **verify that the vote polled by a voter goes to the correct candidate**.
- VVPATs are a second line of verification and are particularly useful in the time when allegations around Electronic Voting Machines' tampering crop up.
- Parties have been making regular demands for VVPATs to be used during elections after alleging EVMs may not be completely secure and tamper proof.
- VVPAT system gives **instant feedback** to the voter showing that the vote polled has in fact been allotted against the candidate chosen.

Working procedure of VVPAT:

- After a voter presses the button on the EVM against the chosen candidate, the **VVPAT prints a slip** containing name of the candidate

and the election symbol and drops it automatically into a sealed box.

- The machines give the chance for the voter to verify their vote.
- The machine is placed in a glass case in a way that **only the voter can see it**.
- The slip is displayed to the voter for **seven seconds** after which the VVPAT machine cuts it and drops in into the storage box with a beep.
- The machines can be accessed, though, by the polling officials and not by the voter.
- The Election Commission of India has not conceded to any allegation that the EVMs used for polling can be tampered with.
- However, VVPATs have been used in some elections in a bid to counter all allegation of tampering.
- The Supreme Court of India, meanwhile, has for long held a supportive and extra cautious stand when it comes to voting.
- It had directed the **EC in 2013 to introduce VVPAT in Lok Sabha Elections 2014** to improve voter confidence and ensuring transparency of voting.
- It was used in some phases but not in the entire polling process.

Syria vows to take back Golan Heights from Israel

Why in news?

The Syrian government vowed to take back the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights as its allies and enemies alike condemned U.S. President Donald Trump for moving to recognise Israeli sovereignty over the territory seized in war.

US Recognition of Israeli Occupation:

- Mr. Trump's statement marked a dramatic shift in U.S. policy over the status of a disputed area that **Israel captured from Syria in the 1967 conflict and annexed in 1981** a move not recognised internationally.

- Against this backdrop of hostility towards the U.S. move, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo landed in Beirut after visiting Israel. He is expected to raise pressure on the government to curb the influence of the **Iran-backed Hezbollah.**
- Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu thanked Trump for his gesture "at a time when Iran seeks to use Syria as a platform to destroy Israel".
- It could help Netanyahu in the midst of a tough re-election battle, analysts said.

Opposition:

- Russia, an ally of President Bashar al-Assad with forces in Syria, said Mr. Trump's comments risked seriously destabilising the region, and it voiced hope the statement was just declaratory.
- Iran, Mr. Assad's main regional ally and which also has forces in Syria, condemned the statement as illegal and unacceptable. "The personal decisions of Trump will lead to crisis in the region," Iran's foreign ministry spokesman said.
- Turkey, a U.S. ally and an adversary of Damascus, also said the move had brought the Middle East to the edge of a new crisis and the legitimisation of the occupation of the Golan Heights could not be allowed.
- The Syrian government said the Golan was an "indivisible" part of Syrian territory and recovering it via all means guaranteed by international law is still a priority.
- It said United States with its "stupidity and arrogance" had no right to decide the fate of the area and any move to recognise Israeli sovereignty over it was "an illegal action with no impact".

UN armistice:

- After remaining calm for decades since a 1974 armistice monitored by U.N. peacekeepers, Golan re-emerged as a flashpoint for regional tensions during the Syrian war.
- Last May, Israel accused Iran's Revolutionary Guards of launching a rocket salvo into its territory from the Syrian side of the truce line.
- Israel, which has mounted numerous air strikes against what it has called Iran-backed targets in Syria, has demanded Russia keep forces allied to Tehran away from the boundary.

- The Syrian side was held by rebel forces for years until pro-government forces recovered it in July.

Western Reaction:

- Jason Greenblatt, a senior White House adviser, said "under any conceivable circumstance, Israel could not give up the Golan". "To do so would endanger Israel's very existence.
- The **European Union said its position on the status of the Golan Heights** was unchanged and it did not recognise Israeli sovereignty over the area.
- Germany said any change in borders should be "done through peaceful means between all those involved", while France said it did not recognise the Israeli annexation of the Golan Heights and any recognition was contrary to international law.

Opposition from Arab World:

- The Arab League, which suspended Syria in 2011 after the start of its civil war, said Trump had paved "the way for official American recognition" of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan and called this "completely beyond international law".
- Egypt, which made peace with Israel in 1979, said it still considers the Golan as occupied Syrian territory.
- Israel says Syria's civil war has reaffirmed the need to keep the **plateau coveted for its water resources and fertile soil** as a buffer zone between Israeli towns and the instability of its neighbour.

Issues in Lebanon:

- In Lebanon, Pompeo is expected to flag U.S. concerns about **Shi'ite Muslim Hezbollah's** growing role in government: the group has three cabinet ministers and together with its allies' controls more than 70 of parliament's 128 seats.
- The United States is a major donor to the Lebanese army but its allies, including the Sunni Muslim Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri, have been weakened as Iran's role has deepened through Lebanon, Iraq and Syria and Saudi influence has receded.
- Washington has reintroduced sanctions on Iran and imposed new financial sanctions on Hezbollah which Lebanon's Hezbollah-aligned president, Michel Aoun, said on Thursday were hurting all Lebanese.

States' overall deficit set to decline in FY20

Why in news?

Economists at the State Bank of India (SBI) said States had managed to contain the fiscal deficit at the aggregate level for FY20, but expressed concerns over compression in capital expenditure.

'Missing muddle:

- States have to resort to reducing capital expenditure, especially mid-way through the year, because of heavy burdens undertaken during the middle of the year like loan waivers, they said.
- Terming this the problem of 'missing muddle', the economists said this is causing problems for the markets in understanding of the fiscal math.
- The States could be advised to address this peculiar problem of missing muddle as it provides an inadequate and incorrect signalling device to market in terms of overall fiscal consolidation
- The note cited the case of Bihar in FY18, where the State incurred a huge burden midway through the year, leading to the fiscal deficit being expanded by Rs. 350 billion in the revised estimates. However, the final number came below the budgeted figure as well.
- At an aggregate level, State budgets reveal an intention to reduce the fiscal deficit to **2.86%** of the aggregate gross state domestic product (GSDP) in FY20 as against the **3.28%** to be achieved as per the revised estimates for FY19.

GSDP growth:

- Apart from curtailing the capital expenditure, other factors helping States reduce the fiscal gap also include a **healthy growth in the GSDPs**.

- The other factor aiding in the sharp improvement in this parameter is the increase in **GST collections** being budgeted for by the States and also a reduction in revenue expenditure.
- In FY20, only Odisha, Assam and Uttarakhand have budgeted for an increase in the fiscal deficit target as compared to the previous fiscal year, the note said, adding that the gap is still within the 3% level in all the three States.

Government earns Rs. 85,000 crores from disinvestment

Why in news:

The government has overshot its disinvestment target for the second consecutive year, according to the Ministry of Finance.

Successful Targets:

- As against a target of Rs. 80,000 crores for disinvestment for the current year, the divestment receipts have touched Rs. 85,000 crores today.
- The disinvestment proceeds this FY crossed Rs. 85,000 cr. against Revised Estimate of Rs. 80,000 cr.
- For the second year in a row, DIPAM has exceeded the Revised Estimates. During the current FY, DIPAM has realised the proceeds through 28 transactions.
- In 2017-18, the government had earned a little more than Rs. 1 lakh crore from disinvestments against a target of Rs. 72,500 crores.
- Earlier this month, The Hindu had reported that the government was confident about meeting its disinvestment target for this year despite having achieved only 70% with just 15 days to go.
- The official quoted then had pegged this on the completion of the Power Finance Corporation's acquisition of Rural Electrification Corporation.
- The government has also earned large amounts from the sale of ETFs,

with the latest edition, so far, having earned it Rs. 10,000 crores.

- However, the official database of the Department of Investment and Public Asset Management (DIPAM) does not reflect the updated figures or sales yet.