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Cyclone Fani hits Puri

Why in news?

The extremely severe cyclonic storm Fani barrelled into the Odisha coast on Friday morning, unleashing torrential rain and winds gusting up to 175 kmph, killing at least eight people, bringing rail and air transport to a halt, and swamping towns and villages, officials said.

Disturbing Normalcy:

- The cyclonic system made landfall at 8 a.m. near the coastal pilgrim town of Puri and brought heavy winds and rainfall to the State capital Bhubaneswar and Cuttack.
- While the system weakened to a **'very severe cyclonic storm'**, it is expected to cause significant damage as it moves north-northeast through coastal Odisha and West Bengal towards Bangladesh.
- The system lay centred about 20 km west of Balasore and 200 km west-south west of Kolkata around 8.30 p.m. on Friday, with wind speeds of 110-120 km per hour, gusting at 135 km per hour.
- More than one million people in low-lying areas were evacuated to nearly 4,000 shelters, ahead of the cyclone's landfall.

Serious damage:

- Odisha authorities said Fani caused extensive damage to thatched houses as well as several temporary structures.
- 160 people have been injured and admitted to hospital for treatment.
- The Special Circuit House, Puri, the Office and Residence of the SP and the Collector have been badly damaged along with many other

buildings,” said a note from the State Emergency Operation Centre, Bhubaneswar.

- Electricity was disrupted in several places and many trees were uprooted, leading to damaged roads and communication networks.
 - The roof of the hostel building at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, Bhubaneswar, was blown away.
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Only 10 of 100 sewage projects on Ganga have been completed

Why in news?

The present government has only finished 10 of the 100 sewage infrastructure projects commissioned after 2015 under the Namami Gange mission, according to records.

Far from targets:

- Commissioning of **sewage treatment plants (STP) and laying sewer lines** are at the heart of the mission to clean the Ganga.
- Nearly ₹23,000 crore has been sanctioned of the ₹28,000 crore outlay for sewage management work.
- **River-front development, cleaning ghats and removing trash from the river** the cosmetic side of the mission make up about for ₹1,200 crore of the mission outlay.
- The bulk of the projects completed were those commissioned before the Ganga mission began work in earnest under programmes such as the Ganga Action Plan-1 and Ganga Action Plan-2, which began in 1987 and 1996 respectively.
- For instance, as of March 31, 27 of the 37 completed STP projects and sewer infrastructure were those commissioned before 2015, says a report on the **National Mission for Clean Ganga (NMCG) website**.
- Uttar Pradesh, responsible for about three-fourths of the inadequately treated industrial waste and municipal sewage, had 18 pre-2015 STP and sewage infrastructure projects commissioned.

- Only 12 of these have been completed, and only 1 of the 33 projects commissioned after 2015 at the cost of ₹8,000 crore has been wrapped up, records show.
- Making the Ganga pristine was one of the claims of the Narendra Modi government and this was followed up by sanctioning ₹20,000 crore for the NMCG.

Underutilization of Funds:

- As of March the latest figures available slightly over **₹28,000 crore has been sanctioned** for various projects but only about ₹6,700 crore (about 25%) has been spent.
- Last March, the ratio was about 20%. The incomplete projects are reflected in the river quality.
- None of the towns through which the Ganga courses through has water fit for bathing or drinking, according to water monitoring reports by the State and Central Pollution Control Board.
- \Rajiv Ranjan Mishra, Director-General, NMCG, said it was only after August 2016 that the NMCG got the necessary independence and authority to commission projects quickly, he explained.
- Most of the major projects NMCG has sanctioned have been in 2017 and 2018 and several of them will come online (and translate into improved water quality) by 2019 and early 2020.
- NMCG has also followed a new model of having a single private operator take care of all the infrastructure works of a city (to improve efficiency) and implemented the **Hybrid Annuity Model (HAM)** in awarding tenders to STP and infrastructure developers
- The **HAM**, inspired from the prevalent practice of developing highways in India, has **40% of the capital cost of the project is paid by the government** during the construction phase of the project.
- The remaining capital investment on the project, the cost of operations and maintenance of STP are paid over a period of 15 years as quarterly instalments, subject to achieving performance standards.

SC remark on ‘foreigners’ detention in Assam defies

constitutional obligations

Why in news?

A rights body, comprising a retired Supreme Court judge and a former Assam police chief, has said the apex court's remark on the detention of 'foreigners' in Assam was unfortunate and "flies in the face of India's constitutional and international obligations".

Observations:

- One of the reasons, the **Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative** (CHRI) has pointed out, is that accounts from Assam indicate "arbitrariness and not rule of law" is often used to define those who came post 1971 from Bangladesh of whatever religious denomination and those who are Indian nationals.
- Lakhs are in limbo and now fear that they may become "stateless" because of a process that is mired in a mix of complexity, confusion, lack of precision and prejudice," a statement issued by the CHRI.
- The chairperson of CHRI is Wajahat Habibullah, India's first Chief Information Commissioner. The members include Madan B. Lokur, former Supreme Court judge; A.P. Shah, former Chief Justice of Delhi High Court, Nitin Desai, former Under Secretary in the United Nations, and Jayanto N. Choudhury, former Assam Director General of Police.
- The Supreme Court needs to **reaffirm India's constitutional and international obligations to rights** on complex issues of nationality, detention and deportation and not be unmindful of its own commitment to these duties," the CHRI said.
- As concerned citizens, we look to the Supreme Court to reaffirm India's constitutional and international obligations to rights on sensitive issues. That is why we are disappointed by recent statements by the Chief Justice of India on a complex matter relating to illegal detention and deportation, without heeding India's own constitutional and international obligations," it said.

CJI's admonition of Chief Secretary:

- The statement was in reference to Chief Justice of India Ranjan

Gogoi's admonition of Assam Chief Secretary Alok Kumar for proposing a methodology for the release of a handful of foreign prisoners who had been in detention beyond their term of sentence for illegal entry. The rebuke was while advocating greater detention of suspected 'foreigners'.

- We regard these remarks as unfortunate as the case concerned the wilful violation of the human rights of hundreds of detainees who were languishing in what the court itself accepts are "inhuman conditions", the CHRI said, referring to **Article 21 that says no person in India can be deprived of her/his right to life and liberty without due process.**
- There is no deportation agreement with Bangladesh. International law lays down that such deportations can take place only with the consent of the country of origin.
- Bangladesh has consistently refused to accept that its citizens migrate in large numbers to India. Indeed, Bangladesh regards such unilateral efforts as harmful to a bilateral relationship that is critical for the security and stability of both countries and especially of our eastern region.
- We cannot place ourselves in a situation where we are seen as forcing people out at gunpoint; it would be ethically unjust, wrong in law and draw international condemnation," it said.
- The rights body said its members were sensitive to the concerns in Assam and other parts of the country about the problem of illegal migration from Bangladesh, a long-standing issue that has defied official proclamations and pledges of "push back", "deportation" and "detection".
- Any method used must be undertaken within the rule of law frame, be just and fair and designed to minimise individual hardship and tragedy. We believe there is a need that this is a tragedy of growing intensity which is gathering momentum as a result of the current National Register of Citizens (NRC) exercise in Assam," the CHRI said.
- Many of those at risk of being marked foreigners were from the bottom of the economic pyramid, unable to sustain the complex adjudication process needed to establish their citizenship. Large numbers were already in detention camps, the CHRI pointed out.

Plea to not hurry the process:

- It also urged the Supreme Court to not hurry through the process of verifying the applications of 38 lakh people out the 40.07 lakh left out of the complete draft of the NRC. The court has set July 2019 as the deadline for the final list.
 - The efforts need to be steady and methodical so that the charges of arbitrariness, prejudice and poor record keeping, which have plagued the NRC process, do not stick,” the CHRI said.
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Masood Azhar listing a crucial political decision

Why in news?

France termed the listing of Masood Azhar as a global terrorist a very important “political decision” as for the first time the world has reached a decision on the issue.

Long process:

- It is very good news for the world community and obviously for India as well. It’s been a long process. A process in which we had played a significant role together with other partners. We are an unconditional partner of India to extend this unconditional support,” French envoy in India Alexandre Ziegler said talking to the media.
- Separately, diplomatic sources said the link to Pulwama is that the process started after the terror attack and United Nations Security Council had mentioned the incident.
- Mr Ziegler said the designation was important because it directly hinders the Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) chief’s activities.
- All states are bound to freeze his assets and block his access to the financial system, ban him from entering or transiting through their territory; not provide him any arms or military assistance whatsoever, whether directly or indirectly,” he stated.
- Stating that the fight against terrorism is one of the pillars of India-France strategic partnership, Mr. Ziegler added that **fighting terrorism in cyberspace** will be one of the priorities of their G7 presidency.

- On this note, he stated, “Today, I would like to confirm that India is officially invited to the August summit in France and for the preparatory meetings.”
- Stating that the listing was probably “too long story” as it started 18 years back in 2001, Mr. Ziegler added that “for all of us it seemed very unfair” that a terrorist group was sanctioned but its leader was not.

No Pulwama mention:

- On May 1, the sanctions committee of the UNSC listed Azhar as a global terrorist but did not refer to the Pulwama terror attack which was mentioned in the initial listing.
 - China has said it agreed to the listing only because the U.S., U.K., and France agreed to revise the listing which didn’t mention Pulwama.
 - Responding to this, diplomatic sources said the link to Pulwama was that the process started after the February 14 terror attack.
 - Significance of listing is not the technical details but the result. The result is Masood Azhar is sanctioned; a diplomatic source stated.
 - Talking of how the listing got through this time, sources said it was a factual process and there was not enough evidence earlier.
 - Asked to comment on Pakistan’s response to the listing, the sources said they were “glad that Pakistan is satisfied with it” as the global community had been pushing Pakistan to act against it.
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Indian adults are unaware they are ailing from hypertension

Why in news?

Despite having a heavy burden of a hypertensive population, the proportion of adults with high blood pressure who are aware of their diagnosis, are treated and achieve control, is dismally low, noted the first large-scale, population-based study of hypertension care in the country.

Findings of the study:

- The study, which has been published in PLOS Medicine, was carried out by researchers at the Public Health Foundation of India (PHFI), Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, the Heidelberg Institute of Global Health, the University of Birmingham and the University of Gottingen.
- According to the study, **only 3 out of 4 individuals with hypertension has ever had their blood pressure measured**, only 45% had been diagnosed, and only 8% of those surveyed had their blood pressure under control.
- More than half the number of Indians aged 15-49 years with hypertension were not aware of their hypertension status. Awareness level was lowest in Chhattisgarh (22.1%) and highest in Puducherry (80.5%).
- **Hypertension is a major risk factor for cardiovascular disease**, which is a leading cause of death in India.
- The study is significant as there was no population-based large-scale study from India on the steps for screening to successful control of hypertension at which people are lost from care," noted the study.
- For the study, researchers used the **National Health and Family Survey (NFHS-4, 2015-16)** data of 731,864 individuals aged 15-49 years, which covered each district in 29 States and seven Union Territories
- Detection of hypertension is straightforward, treatments are simple yet effective, and hence hypertension can be easily controlled.
- However, it is an unfortunate paradox that India does not perform well in any of the measures of detection, treatment and control.
- Keeping hypertension under control can have huge benefits in terms of preventing heart attacks and strokes.

Pak. uses terror as a tool against India

Why in news?

Pakistan, obsessed with India as a perceived existential threat, has "created terrorist groups to be a tool" in its struggle against its neighbour, a former top American spymaster has said.

Observations:

- Former CIA acting Director Michael Morell, in a podcast discussion with former Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell and former U.S. Ambassador to India Richard Verma on Thursday, alleged that **Pakistan is one of the most dangerous countries in the world.**
 - What they don't realise is that it's impossible to keep those terrorist groups under control. And that eventually comes back to bite you.
 - I believe that Pakistan maybe the most dangerous country in the world," said Mr. Morell, who played a key role in the raid that killed Osama bin Laden.
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Don't ask us to put down arms, Taliban tells U.S.

Why in news?

The U.S. special envoy for Afghanistan should stop calling on Taliban militants to lay down their arms and tell the U.S. to end the use of force instead, the Taliban said.

Sixth round of talks:

- Zalmay Khalilzad entered a sixth round of talks with the group in Qatar this week.
- In our opening session, I underscored to the Talibs that the Afghan people want this war to end," he tweeted.
- It is time to put down arms, stop the violence, & embrace peace.
- Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid issued a series of sharp tweets in response. Mr. Khalilzad "should forget about the idea of us putting down our arms", he said.
- Instead of such fantasies, he should drive the idea home (to the U.S.) about ending the use of force and incurring further human and financial losses for the decaying Kabul administration
- It would be better if [Khalilzad] musters the courage to call a spade a spade, not a gardening tool & accept the current realities."
- In Kabul, President Ashraf Ghani renewed his appeal to hold direct

talks with the Taliban and called for an agreement on a ceasefire.

- The Afghan government is ready to announce a ceasefire if the Taliban show readiness in this regard," he said at the closing ceremony of a '**loya jirga**' (**grand assembly**).
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Don't terminate GSP benefits to India

Why in news?

The U.S. should not terminate the **GSP programme** with India after the expiry of the 60-day notice period, a group of 25 influential American lawmakers urged the U.S. Trade Representative, warning that companies seeking to expand their exports to India could be hit.

GSP programme:

- The Generalized System of Preference (GSP) is the largest and oldest U.S. **trade preference programme** designed to promote economic development by allowing duty-free entry for thousands of products from designated beneficiary countries.
- On March 4, President Donald Trump announced that the U.S. intended to terminate India's designations as a beneficiary developing country under the GSP programme. The 60-day notice period ended on May 3.
- On the eve of the end of the notice period, the 25 U.S. lawmakers made a last-ditch effort to convince the Trump administration from going ahead with its decision.
- The 25 members of the U.S. House of Representatives, in a passionate letter, urged U.S. Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer to continue negotiating a deal that protects and promotes jobs that rely on trade both imports and exports with India.
- They argued that terminating GSP for India would hurt American companies seeking to expand their exports to India.

Equitable and reasonable access:

- India's termination from GSP follows its failure to provide the United States with assurances that it will provide equitable and reasonable access to its markets in numerous sectors," Mr. Trump had said in a letter to Congress, providing a notice of his intent to terminate the designation of India as a beneficiary developing country under GSP programme.
- In his letter, Mr. Trump said that he was determined that New Delhi had "not assured" the U.S. that it would "provide equitable and reasonable access" to the markets of India.
- I will continue to assess whether the Government of India is providing equitable and reasonable access to its markets, in accordance with the GSP eligibility criteria," he wrote.

None will benefit:

- Expressing concern over such a move, the lawmakers said that no party in the United States or India would benefit from terminating GSP benefits.
- American companies that rely on duty-free treatment for India under the GSP will pay hundreds of millions of dollars annually in new taxes.
- In the past, even temporary lapses in such benefits have caused companies to lay off workers, cut salaries and benefits, and delay or cancel job-creating investments in the United States," the lawmakers said.

