

1. Government of India to Facilitate Return of Indian Nationals Stranded Abroad

Why in News?

- The Government of India will be facilitating the return of Indian nationals stranded abroad on compelling grounds in a phased manner.

Highlights:

- The travel would be Arranged by Aircraft and Naval Ships.
- Indian Embassies and High Commissions are preparing a list of distressed Indian citizens.
- This facility would be made available on Payment-Basis. Non-scheduled commercial flights would be arranged for air travel.
- The travel would begin in a phased manner from May 7.
- Medical screening of passengers would be done before taking the flight.
- Only asymptomatic passengers would be allowed to travel.
- During the journey, all these passengers would have to follow the protocols, such as the Health Protocols, issued by the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Civil Aviation.

On Reaching the Destination:

- The passengers would have to register on the Aarogya Setu app.
- They would be medically screened. After scrutiny, they would be quarantined for 14 days, either in a hospital or in an institutional quarantine on payment-basis, by the concerned State government. COVID test would be done after 14 days and further action would be taken according to Health Protocols. State Governments are being advised to make arrangements, including for testing, Quarantine and Onward Movement of the Returning Indians in their respective States.

2. Contribution of Excise Tax to Economy

Why in News?

- Following the easing of restrictions in the third phase of the nationwide lockdown, some of the cities showed long queues outside liquor stores around the country.
- Manufacture and sale of liquor is one of the major sources of state revenue, and the reopening comes at a time when the states have been struggling to fill their coffers amid the disruption on account of the lockdown.

Highlights:

- Liquor contributes a considerable amount to the exchequers of all states and Union Territories except Gujarat and Bihar, both of which have enforced prohibition. Generally, states levy excise duty on manufacture and sale of liquor.
- Some states, for example Tamil Nadu, also impose VAT (value added tax). States also charge special fees on imported foreign liquor; transport fee; and label & brand registration charges.
- A few states, such as Uttar Pradesh, have imposed a “special duty on liquor” to collect funds for special purposes, such as maintenance of stray cattle.
- Reports show that a state excise duty on liquor is the second or third largest contributor to the category State’s Own Tax revenue; sales tax (now GST) is the largest.
- This is the reason states have always wanted liquor kept out of the purview of GST. The states collected about Rs 12,500 crore per month from excise on liquor in 2018-19, which rose to about Rs 15,000 crore per month in 2019-20, and which was further expected to cross Rs 15,000 crore per month in the current financial year.
- During that financial year, the five states that collected the highest revenue from excise duty on liquor were Uttar Pradesh (Rs 25,100 crore), Karnataka (Rs 19,750 crore), Maharashtra (Rs 15,343.08 crore), West Bengal (Rs 10,554.36 crore) and Telangana (Rs 10,313.68 crore). With Bihar and Gujarat having prohibited liquor, Bihar had ‘nil’ revenue from liquor in 2018-19 and 2019-20, while Gujarat’s liquor revenue was negligible.
- Andhra Pradesh too announced prohibition last year; however, sale of the liquor has been allowed with “prohibition tax”. The states’ revenues comprise broadly two categories — Tax Revenue and Non-Tax Revenue.
- Tax revenue is divided into two further categories: State’s Own Tax Revenue, and Share in Central Taxes.
- Again, Own Tax Revenue comprises three principal sources: Taxes on Income (agricultural income tax and taxes on professions, trades, callings and employment); Taxes on Property and Capital Transactions (land revenue, stamps and registration fees, urban immovable property tax); and Taxes on Commodities and Services (sales tax, state sales tax/VAT, central sales tax, surcharge on sales tax, receipts of turnover tax etc).

- According to the RBI report, in 2019-20, state GST had the highest share, 43.5%, in states' Own Tax Revenue, followed by Sale Tax at 23.5% (mainly on petroleum products which are out of GST), state excise at 12.5%, and taxes on property and capital transactions at 11.3%

3. Changes in US Visa Guidelines

Why in News?

- On May 1, the US government announced a grace period of 60 days for H-1B visa holders and Green Card applicants who have been served notices for submission of various documents, in view of the novel coronavirus outbreak.
- Earlier, on March 30, the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) had first given a flexibility of 60 days for responding to requests or notices having issuance dates between March 1 and May 1, 2020.

Highlights:

- As per the fresh notification from the agency, the grace period will become applicable to the documents if the issuance date listed on the request, notice or decision is between March 1 and July 1, 2020.
- The new USCIS notification said the extension of flexibilities could be availed for responding to Requests for Evidence; Continuations to Request Evidence (N-14); Notices of Intent to Deny; Notices of Intent to Revoke; Notices of Intent to Rescind and Notices of Intent to Terminate regional investment centres; and Filing date requirements for Form I-290B, Notice of Appeal or Motion.
- The US Department of Homeland Security said it would allow non-immigrant visa holders, such as those on H-1B visa, to apply for an extension of their stay in the country. The decision came as a timely respite for thousands of Indian workers, students, and tourists who remain stranded in the US due to the novel coronavirus.
- The notification also had extended flexibility for late applications and had said the government could excuse the failure to file on time if caused due to extraordinary circumstances beyond control, such as those that may be caused by Covid-19.
- The USCIS can issue a maximum of 65,000 H-1B work visas every year to highly skilled foreign workers. It can issue an additional 20,000 H-1B visas to those highly skilled foreign workers who have obtained masters or higher degrees from an American educational institution.

4. UV Blaster

Why in News?

- The Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) has recently developed an Ultra Violet (UV) Disinfection Tower for rapid and chemical free disinfection of high infection prone areas.

About UV Blaster:

- It is designed and developed by Laser Science & Technology Centre (LASTEC) with the help of M/s New Age Instruments and Materials Private Limited, Gurugram. LASTEC is the Delhi based premier laboratory of DRDO.
- It is a UV based area sanitiser useful for high tech surfaces like electronic equipment, computers and other gadgets in laboratories and offices that are not suitable for disinfection with chemical methods.
- It is also effective for areas with large flow of people such as airports, shopping malls, metros, hotels, factories, offices, etc.
- It can be used by remote operation through laptop/mobile phone using wifi link. The Sanitiser switches off on accidental opening of room or human intervention. It is also being considered as the key to arm operation.

5. Year of Awareness on Science and Health (YASH)

Why in News?

- Recently, the National Council for Science & Technology Communication (NCSTC), Department of Science & Technology (DST) has launched a Programme on health and risk communication 'Year of Awareness on Science & Health (YASH)' with focus on Covid-19.

About YASH:

- It is a comprehensive and effective science and health Communication Effort for Promoting Grass-Root Level appreciation and response on health.
- It is aimed at minimizing risks at all levels with the help of Public Communication and Outreach Activities.
- By promoting public understanding of common minimum science for community care and health safety measures like personal sanitation and hygiene, physical distancing, maintaining desired collective behaviour and so on.

- Its aim is to reduce the fear of risks and build confidence with necessary understanding for adopting sustainable healthy lifestyles and nurturing scientific culture among masses and societies.

6. Indian Photojournalists Won Pulitzer Prize

Why in News?

- Five Indian photojournalists from India has won the Pulitzer Prize for feature photography for the year 2020.
- The pictures that won them the coveted prize were about the life in the lockdown after undoing of the special status to Jammu & Kashmir.

About Pulitzer Prize:

- The Pulitzer Prizes, the most prestigious awards in American journalism, have been handed out since 1917, when newspaper publisher Joseph Pulitzer established them in his will.
- It is administered by Columbia University and Pulitzer Prize Board.
- Each winner receives a certificate and a US\$15,000 cash award. The winner in the public Service Category is Awarded a Gold Medal.