

MHA sets up panel for delimitation of municipal wards in Delhi

(GS Paper 2, Governance)

Why in news?

- The Union Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) has set up a **three-member commission** for carrying out a fresh delimitation exercise of the municipal wards in Delhi.
- The exercise will pave the way for the civic polls in Delhi, which would be the first since the recent reunification of the city's three corporations.



Delimitation Commission:

- Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, by exercising its powers **under sections 3, 3A and 5 of the DMC Act, 1957**, has constituted a delimitation commission to assist central government in delimitation of wards and carrying out other functions related to it.
- The commission will present its report within four months of its formation.

Reunified MCD:

- The reunified Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) formally came into existence on May 22 with IAS officers Ashwani Kumar and Gyanesh Bharti assuming charge as its special officer and commissioner respectively.
- The erstwhile MCD, **established in 1958**, was **trifurcated in 2012** during Sheila Dikshit's tenure as the chief minister. It was recently reunified by merging the three civic bodies -- North, South and East Delhi municipal corporations or NDMC, SDMC and EDMC.
- Parliament passed the Delhi Municipal Corporation (Amendment) Bill, 2022 on April 5 to unify the three civic bodies in the national capital, with the Rajya Sabha giving its nod through a voice vote after negating all the amendments sought by the opposition.

Why delimitation commission has been constituted?

- Delhi presently has 70 Assembly segments. The three erstwhile corporations comprised 272 wards -- 104 each in the North and South corporations and 64 in the East Corporation.

- Since the bill talks about capping the number of wards at 250, the Centre formed a delimitation commission after it is passed by both houses of Parliament.
- The delimitation commission will then start the exercise to reorganise the municipal wards in accordance with the population of the respective Assembly segments.

Way Forward:

- The unification of the municipal corporations will ensure synergised and strategic planning and optimal utilisation of resources.

Sri Lanka's Economic Crisis (GS Paper 2, International Relation)

Context:

- Recently, both Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, who took office in May and President Gotabaya Rajapaksa agreed to resign amid mounting pressure from protesters.
- Sri Lanka's debt-laden economy had “collapsed” as it runs out of money to pay for food and fuel.
- Short of cash to pay for imports of such necessities and already defaulting on its debt, it is seeking help from neighbouring India and China and from the International Monetary Fund.



How serious is this crisis?

- The **government owes USD 51 billion** and is unable to make interest payments on its loans, let alone put a dent in the amount borrowed.
- Tourism, an important engine of economic growth, has sputtered because of the pandemic and concerns about safety after terror attacks in 2019.
- And its **currency has collapsed by 80%**, making imports more expensive and worsening inflation that is already out of control, with **food costs rising 57%**.
- The result is a country hurtling towards bankruptcy, with hardly any money to import gasoline, milk, cooking gas and toilet paper.
- Political corruption is also a problem; not only did it play a role in the country squandering its wealth, but it also complicates any financial rescue for Sri Lanka.

How is it affecting real people?

- Tropical Sri Lanka normally is not lacking for food, but people are going hungry. The UN World Food Program says nearly **nine of 10 families are skipping meals** or otherwise skimping to stretch out their food, while 3 million are receiving emergency humanitarian aid.
- Doctors have resorted to social media to try to get critical supplies of equipment and medicine. Growing numbers of Sri Lankans are seeking passports to go overseas in search of work.
- Government workers have been given an extra day off for three months to allow them time to grow their own food.

Why is the economy in such dire straits?

- Economists say the crisis stems from domestic factors such as **years of mismanagement and corruption**.
- Much of the public's ire has focused on President Rajapaksa and his brother, former Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa. The latter resigned in May after weeks of anti-government protests that eventually turned violent.
- Conditions have been deteriorating for the past several years. In 2019, Easter suicide bombings at churches and hotels killed more than 260 people. That **devastated tourism**, a key source of foreign exchange.
- The government needed to boost its revenues as foreign debt for big infrastructure projects soared, but instead **Rajapaksa pushed through the largest tax cuts in Sri Lankan history**. The tax cuts were recently reversed, but only after creditors downgraded Sri Lanka's ratings, blocking it from borrowing more money as its foreign reserves sank. Then tourism flatlined again during the pandemic.
- In April 2021, Rajapaksa suddenly **banned imports of chemical fertilizers**. The push for organic farming caught farmers by surprise and decimated staple rice crops, driving prices higher.
- To save on foreign exchange, imports of other items deemed to be luxuries also were banned. Meanwhile, the **Ukraine war has pushed prices of food and oil higher**. Inflation was near 40% and food prices were up nearly 60% in May.

Why did the Prime Minister say the economy has collapsed?

- The stark declaration in June by Ranil Wickremesinghe, who is in his sixth term as prime minister, threatened to undermine any confidence in the state of the economy and didn't reflect any specific new development.
- Sri Lanka had only USD 25 million in usable foreign reserves. That has left it without the wherewithal to pay for imports, let alone repay billions in debt.
- Meanwhile, the Sri Lankan rupee has weakened in value to about 360 to the US dollar. That makes costs of imports even more prohibitive.
- Sri Lanka has suspended repayment of about \$7 billion in foreign loans due this year out of USD 25 billion to be repaid by 2026.

What is the government doing about the crisis?

- So far Sri Lanka has been muddling through, mainly supported by USD 4 billion in credit lines from India. An Indian delegation visited in June for talks on more assistance, but Wickremesinghe warned against expecting India to keep Sri Lanka afloat for long.
- Sri Lanka has also sought more help from China. Other governments like the US, Japan and Australia have provided a few hundred million dollars in support.
- Earlier in June, the United Nations launched a worldwide public appeal for assistance. So far, projected funding barely scratches the surface of the \$6 billion the country needs to stay afloat over the next six months.

Green technology & marine biodiversity

(GS Paper 3, Environment)

Why in news?

- A new study has flagged emerging threats that could have a major impact on marine biodiversity over the next 5-10 years.
- The study also speaks about the negative impacts of green technology adoption that must not be ignored. A technique called 'horizon scanning' was used to arrive at conclusions.

Green technology impact:

- With increased public pressure against marine plastic pollution, there has been an attempt to **replace fossil fuel-based plastic with biodegradable polymers**, such the 'biodegradable plastic bags' made of plant starches.
- However, the researchers claim that these materials do not biodegrade under natural conditions in the ocean and their widespread adoption can cause marine litter as well.
- Since their long term impact on the environment remains unknown, they can lead to a fresh set of problems.



Demand for Lithium:

- The researchers argue that the growing demand for renewable energy technology, such as lithium batteries for electric cars, also pose a potential threat to marine ecology.
- **Deep sea 'brine pools' of more saline water**, contain higher concentrations of lithium and could become future sites for extraction.
- The study finds that these ecosystems support diverse species, many of which are largely undiscovered. A rising demand for lithium-powered electric vehicles could put these environments at risk.

Other challenges:

- **Overfishing** has already been recognised as an immediate problem, with the WTO calling for the prohibition of subsidies towards those engaging in fishing of overfished stocks.
- The authors project a greater amount of fishing in deeper sea water, in order to address growing concerns of global food security.
- There are around 10 billion tonnes of small lanternfishes in the **mesopelagic zone** (a depth of 200m – 1,000m), which are not fit for human consumption but can be sold as food to fish farms, or be used as fertiliser.
- However, the large-scale harvesting of mesopelagic fish would cause immense environmental damage, because these species act as an ocean pump and remove carbon from the atmosphere.

Horizon scanning:

- It is a technique which seeks to identify novel but poorly known issues that are likely to become important consequences over the next decade.
- This methodology is meant to “primarily act as signposts, putting focus on particular issues and providing support for researchers and practitioners to seek investment in these areas” before they have a major impact.
- It is also an effective way of assembling experts from diverse subject areas to examine common issues and formulate more comprehensive solutions.

Microplastics:

- The horizon scan method has been previously used to identify issues that are now known to have universal environmental impact.
- A scan from 2009 gave an early warning about the danger that microplastics (tiny plastic debris smaller than 5 mm) pose to marine environments. Since then, countries such as the US and UK have banned cosmetics from containing microbeads.

Twitter's petition on Section 69A of the IT Act (GS Paper 2, Science and Tech)

Why in news?

- Recently, microblogging platform Twitter moved the Karnataka High Court seeking to set aside multiple blocking orders of the Central government as well as to alter their directions to identify specific violative content than imposing a blanket ban on individual accounts.
- According to Twitter, the blocking orders were “procedurally and substantially” non-compliant with Section 69A of the Information Technology Act (IT Act).



What has happened so far?

- Twitter had been speaking to the Ministry of Electronics & Information Technology since May about a reconsideration of some of the blocking orders. However, in June the Ministry gave it a last opportunity to comply with the orders, setting out serious consequence for non-compliance.
- It was owing to the seriousness of these warnings that Twitter filed the current writ petition challenging several of the blocking orders.
- While all foreign intermediaries have the right to judicial review, they also have the unambiguous obligation to comply with Indian laws.

What is the legality behind blocking content?

- **Section 69A of the IT Act** empowers the government to restrict access to any content in the interest of sovereignty and integrity of the country, security of the state, friendly relations with foreign states or for public order.

- All directions to restrict information or content in circulation must be recorded in writing. Social media intermediaries failing to comply with the regulations are liable to be monetarily penalised along with an imprisonment term which may extend up to seven years.
- The procedures for executing the provisions of the act are enlisted in the Information Technology (Procedure and Safeguards for Blocking for Access of Information by Public) Rules, 2009.

Procedure of execution:

- It entails that a government-designated officer along with an examination committee assess the content in question within 48 hours of receiving the takedown request. It must enable an opportunity to the author or originator of the content to provide clarifications.
- The recommendations are then sent to the Secretary of the Dept of Information Technology for approval to forward a request to the social media intermediary for restricting access.
- Emergency provisions stipulate that the clarification be sought after the content has been blocked for specified reasons, but within 48 hours. They can be revoked after due examination.
- Internet advocacy groups have been particularly critical of Rule 16 that suggests strict confidentiality be maintained on all requests and actions taken thereof — often attributed to be the cause for lack of transparency.
- The mentioned legislations are to be read under the purview of Article 19 of the Indian Constitution guaranteeing freedom of speech and expression. However, **Clause 2 of the article permits the state to impose ‘reasonable restrictions’** for the same reasons as those for Section 69A.

What is Twitter’s claim?

- It states that it respects user expression while also taking into consideration applicable local laws. The disparity in assessment of what constitutes ‘free expression’ and harm to public order among the two entities is the premise of the entire contestation.
- Twitter restricts access to an allegedly violative content only based on a “valid and properly scoped request” from an authorised entity. However, the curtailment is limited to the jurisdiction that has issued the legal demand. Its policies stipulate that the author of the content must be informed if such a request is received or acted upon.
- As per its transparency report for January to June 2021, **India accounted for 11% of the overall legal requests received globally** by the micro-blogging platform for moderating access to certain content.
- Its petition points to two structural problems, firstly, the **absence of a case-specific rationale for blocking content and accounts**, and secondly, **not according the originators of the content the mandatory hearing.**

What procedural issues has Twitter described?

- Twitter holds that the government has been merely reproducing the words of Section 69A as reasons for blocking URLs and accounts. The government has allegedly not shown why the restrictions were necessary in the interest of public order or for any other reason.
- The Supreme Court’s ruling in **The Superintendent, Central Prison, Fatehgarh vs Ram Manohar Lohia (1960)** had held restrictions made in public interest must possess reasonable connection to the objective being achieved.
- They need to be set aside should the co-relation be “far-fetched, hypothetical or too remote”, in other words, bearing no proximity to public order.

Individual Content:

- The concerns are further aggravated when the directions are aimed at **blocking individual accounts** (in other words, temporary or permanent revocation of an individual’s presence on the platform) and not the specific content.
- Therefore, the contestation now extends to interrogating if the scope of the legislation is restricted to already-existing content or content that could be potentially generated in the future (by the censored individual).
- One of the prime reasons why the **Supreme Court had upheld the constitutionality of Section 69A** in **Shreya Singhal vs Union of India (2012)** was its adherence to accord a hearing to the author of the content as well as the intermediary.
- It is guaranteed under Rule 8 of the procedural norms but Twitter stated that the government has neither provided any notice nor any hearing.

What kind of content has fallen under the purview of Section 69A?

- Between February 2, 2021 and February 28 this year, Twitter received directions to block 1,474 accounts and 175 tweets in India. Of these, it is challenging 39 URLs with its latest petition. Several of these URLs had journalistic or political content.
- Previous judgments of the Supreme Court have suggested the content must be viewed from the standards of a “strong-minded, firm and courageous” person. The assessment must not be from the standpoint of a “weak” and “vacillating” individual who may sense danger in every hostile point of view.
- It is in this light that Twitter has argued the blocked content does not meet the “threshold” for restricting access. Twitter has also argued that the vast majority of people who consume the content under scrutiny are necessarily literate and can reasonably perceive the full context of the content.