Initiatives to Fight Coronavirus – Part-2

Part of: GS Prelims and GS-III- Health

India is all set to join the World Health Organisation’s (WHO) Solidarity Trial which aims at rapid global search for drugs to treat COVID-19.

Key Points

- India has **stayed away from the multi-country trial** till now due to its small sample size.
- It will express its interest to participate in the trial for the Indian population when it feels that the time is right.
- Vaccine development wasn’t a priority for **Indian Council of Medical Research** (ICMR) currently because there are around 30 vaccine groups already in operation worldwide.
- Keeping in view the **rising number of cases and challenges faced by India**, the government has decided to participate in the solidarity trial.

**Solidarity Trial (PT SHOT)**

- It will test different drugs or combinations like:
  - Remdesivir.
  - Combination of lopinavir and ritonavir (anti-HIV drugs).
  - Interferon beta with the combination of lopinavir and ritonavir.
  - Chloroquine.
- It will compare their effectiveness to the **standard of care**, the regular support used by the hospitals treating COVID-19 patients.

**Challenges**

- **Shortage of Medical Devices and Equipment**: The **Medical Technology Association of India** (MTAI), which represents research-based medical technology companies, has highlighted the shortage of medical devices and equipment.
  - The Centre has exempted manufacturing, warehousing and distribution of the medical devices and equipment from the lockdown but these are being clamped down by the state governments and local level administrators.
  - Transport trucks carrying these vital preparatory materials are stuck at city and state borders.
- **Delays in Import**: India is importing probes and rapid testing kits from China, Germany and WHO. However, some delays have been reported but it is made sure that the delays do not affect the testings.
- **Time Constraints**: ICMR is currently looking at repurposed drug molecules to find treatment for COVID-19 due to time constraints.

**Solutions**

- India needs to prioritise what it needs right now to deal with the situation.
- Indian scientists have formed a group called **Indian Scientists’ Response to COVID-19 (ISRC)** to tackle the pandemic.
- While governmental bodies make their decisions and professional scientific academies take principled stands, there is a need for individuals in the scientific community to also help individually and collectively.
Indian Scientists’ Response to COVID-19

- **Indian Scientists’ Response to COVID-19 (ISRC)** is a voluntary group of scientists to address the concerns raised by the COVID-19 outbreak and to discuss the rapidly evolving situation with its dire need for science communication.

- The group **consists of nearly 200 scientists** from institutions such as the National Centre for Biological Sciences (NCBS), the Indian Institute of Science (IISc), the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR), the Indian Institute of Technologies (IITs), etc.

- It **aims** to study existing and available data to bring out analysis that will support the Central, State and local governments in carrying out their tasks.

- There are several working groups within it:
  - One of them works on **hoax busting** to address disinformation spreading with respect to the coronavirus.
  - One works on **science popularisation** to develop material that explains concepts such as home quarantine.
  - Other groups work on **resources in Indian languages**, mathematical models and apps etc.
    - It is **suggested that an app should be developed that** can map spaces being used as shelters and share that data with the State governments.

- A **platform has also been developed to connect people in need with those who can provide help.**
  - It works through two channels, phone and WhatsApp.
  - It can connect patients or people with symptoms to doctors.
  - It may also connect elderly people with volunteers from NGOs to assist in chores such as grocery shopping.

**NOTE:** World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations’ specialized agency for Health was founded in 1948.

- **Its headquarters** are situated in **Geneva, Switzerland.**
- There are 194 Member States, 150 country offices, six regional offices.
- It is an inter-governmental organization and works in collaboration with its member states usually through the Ministries of Health.
- The WHO provides leadership on global health matters, shaping the health research agenda, setting norms and standards, articulating evidence-based policy options, providing technical support to countries and monitoring and assessing health trends.

It began functioning on **April 7, 1948** – a date now being celebrated every year as **World Health Day**.

**Objectives**

- To act as the **directing and coordinating authority on international health work.**
- To establish and maintain effective collaboration with the United Nations, specialized agencies, governmental health administrations, professional groups and such other organizations as may be deemed appropriate.
- To **provide assistance** to the Governments, upon request, **in strengthening health services.**
- To promote cooperation among scientific and professional groups which contribute
to the advancement of health.

II. Recently, India has decided to set up an electronic platform to help member countries of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) fight the COVID-19 pandemic.

- The decision has been conveyed during a virtual conference of health professionals of eight countries in the region.

Key Points

- The virtual conferencing of the health workers of the SAARC Nation was part of the two proposals made by Indian Prime Minister during the recently held virtual meeting of SAARC.
  - The other proposal was to set up SAARC COVID-19 Emergency Fund.
- The e-Platform will enable the SAARC nations to share and exchange information, knowledge, expertise and best practices for jointly combating the Coronavirus epidemic.
  - Objectives of the e-Platform
    - Training of emergency personnel
    - Disease surveillance
    - Joint research
  - During the conference all the countries highlighted their specific vulnerabilities, capacities, the best practices, gaps in resources and logistics, private sector participation as well as levels of preparedness.
- Community engagement and participation was identified as an important element in any anti-Covid19 strategy.
- Fight Corona IDEAthon
  - Recently, a 2-day online IDEAthon has been organized to search for accessible and affordable technological solutions that can contain the rapid spread of infection, ease the mounting pressure and ensure a quick return to normalcy.
  - The initiative was jointly organised by MHRD Innovation Cell, AICTE, MeitY Startup Hub, InnovatioCuris and other institutions of global and national prominence.
  - The focus area of the IDEAthon was
    - designing reusable/washable masks
    - system to disinfect currency notes/coins
    - a non-invasive diagnostic kit
    - Storage Kits to collect test samples from homes

India in SAARC Region- Neighbour first policy

- India launched the GSAT-9, also dubbed the South Asia Satellite, aiming to provide space-enabled services to other South Asian countries.
- India has offered member countries of the South Asian Association for Regional
Cooperation (SAARC) to join its advanced navigational satellite programme—GPS-Aided Geo Augmented Navigation (GAGAN).

- Indian Regional Navigation Satellite System (IRNSS) has potential to be useful for the SAARC countries which are dependent on foreign systems.

III. The Indian Army has code-named its anti-COVID-19 campaign as Operation Namaste to help the government in its fight against the pandemic.

Key Points

- **Soldiers are advised to follow the lockdown**, wherever they do not have any operational role, and stay fit. They are assured that their families will be well taken care of.
  - Leave extension of those on leave as well as curtailment of leave to bare minimum have been imposed.
  - Segregation facilities have been set up to observe troops already back from leave from various states.
- So far six quarantine facilities at Manesar, Jaisalmer, Jodhpur, Chennai, Hindan and Mumbai have been established where 1,463 people evacuated from coronavirus-affected countries have been accommodated.
  - The forces are setting up more such facilities at Kolkata, Visakhapatnam, Kochi, Dungidal, Bengaluru, Kanpur, Jaisalmer, Jorhat and Gorakhpur which can be ready within 72 hours, if needed.
- 28 Armed Forces hospitals have been earmarked as COVID hospitals
  - These hospitals will include armed forces patients as well as civilian patients transferred from state health authorities.
  - Five hospitals from the Army, Navy and the Air Force are conducting coronavirus tests using the RT-PCR methodology and more hospitals will be equipped soon with the resources.
  - 62 Cantonment Boards have been instructed to identify beds in hospitals and health centres and guesthouses for any eventuality.

Contributions by Other Forces

- Recently, Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) also came forward to help by developing ventilators and providing other medical equipment.
- Indian Navy also contributed by delivering 60,000 face masks ordered by Indian Medical Association, Goa which were stuck in Delhi due to the lockdown.
  - Ilyushin 38 SD (FROM RUSSIA) departed INS Hansa for Palam Airport, New Delhi and returned on the same day with the masks.

IV. In view of the COVID-19 pandemic, Indian Railways has decided that the period from 22.03.2020 to 14.04.2020 shall be treated under “Force Majeure”.

Key Points

- A Force Majeure (FM) means extraordinary events or circumstances beyond human control such as an event described as an Act of God (like a natural calamity).
- During this period no demurrage, wharfage, stacking, stabling, detention and ground
usage charge shall be leviable.
- Zonal Railways have been advised to coordinate with State Government authorities to ensure logistics support in order to keep up the essential goods transportation.

Force Majeure

- Force majeure refers to a **clause that is included in contracts** to remove liability for natural and unavoidable catastrophes that interrupt the expected course of events and restrict participants from fulfilling obligations.
- Force majeure clauses **excuse companies (or other parties to a contract) from meeting certain obligations** when events beyond their control interfere with their ability to hold up their end of the bargain.
- If invoked, the clauses can relieve companies from commitments, temporarily or permanently, without being in breach of their agreement.

V. In view of the hardships faced by the parents and the students due to the COVID-19 epidemic, the **National Testing Agency** has postponed the ensuing NEET (UG) May 2020 examination scheduled to the last week of May 2020. The National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test (NEET) is the examination for admission to undergraduate medical degree programmes.

**National Testing Agency**

- **National Testing Agency** (NTA) was established as a Society registered under the Indian Societies Registration Act, 1860.
- It is an autonomous and self-sustained testing organization to conduct entrance examinations for admission/fellowship in higher educational institutions.
- **Objective**: To conduct efficient, transparent and international standards tests in order to assess the competency of candidates for admission and recruitment purposes.

VI. The **Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (DEPwD)** under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment has issued “**Comprehensive Disability Inclusive Guidelines**” to States and Union territories. This is for the protection and safety of **Persons with Disabilities (Divyangjan)** in light of Pandemic COVID19.

**Highlights from the Guidelines**

- **Training**: All persons responsible for handling emergency response services should be trained on
  - the rights of persons with disabilities.
  - the risks associated with additional problems for persons having specific impairments.
- **Ensuring Essentials to PwDs**: All states and UTs should ensure services like caregiver support, supplies and medical aid at the doorstep of PwDs.
  - It is sought that caregivers should be allowed to reach PwDs by exempting them from restrictions during lockdown or providing passes in a simplified manner on priority.
- **Helpline Number**: States should set-up 24x7 helplines for persons with disabilities.
- **Information:** All video-graphic awareness material related to COVID 19 should be with subtitles and there should be sign language interpretation for persons with hearing impairment.

- **For Resolving Disability Specific Issues:** The states should make the State Commissioner for PwDs the nodal officer to resolve disability specific issues during the crisis period.

**Note:** Section 8 of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 guarantees equal protection and safety for persons with disabilities in human emergencies and natural disasters.

- The Government of India has declared the **situation arising out of COVID 19 as a National Disaster.**
- In September 2019, **National Disaster Management Authority**, Union Ministry of Home Affairs issued National Disaster Management Guidelines on **Disability Inclusive Disaster Risk Reduction (DiDRR).**

**VII.** Privacy concerns over the government’s measures to tackle the spread of Coronavirus.

**Details:**

- The governments have taken many steps to monitor the people who are advised quarantine to contain the spread of COVID-19.
  - **Databases of passengers who returned from high risk “coronavirus affected countries”** have been shared with relevant departments to monitor these high risk suspected cases. In Delhi, the list contains details of 722 passengers who arrived in Delhi and are **mandated 14 days of quarantine.**
  - The government has newly launched pilot or beta version of a mobile phone application called **“Corona Kavach”** which uses the data of confirmed COVID-19 patients to alert subscribers when they are in close proximity.
    - The app is designed to **track the location of COVID-19 infected people and alert subscribers when they come near their location.**
    - The app will require all the COVID-19 patients to download the app to track their whereabouts.

Government’s efforts to monitor people advised quarantine for COVID-19 has run into **privacy issues.**

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