NEWS JUICE

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NEWS HEADLINES

1. Why South Korea and Italy have produced vastly differing results

2. Back to SAARC: On Modi's video conference with leaders

3. In U-turn, govt. moots 20-year window to clear telco dues

What is News Juice?

BY PREPMATE

1. Analysis ..

1. Why South Korea and Italy have produced vastly differing results

Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Science & Technology

A month ago, on February 15, Italy had three cases of coronavirus infection; South Korea had 28. Today, Italy is the world's worst-hit after China, with nearly 28,000 infections, over 2,150 deaths, and millions under a countrywide lockdown. On Monday, South Korea had 8,200 infections, some 29,000 quarantined, and no lockdowns. Only 75 have died so far.

US Surgeon General Dr Jerome Adams said on Monday: "We are at a critical inflection point in this country. We are where Italy was two weeks ago in terms of our numbers and we have a choice to make as a nation: Do we want to go the direction of South Korea and really be aggressive and lower our mortality rates, or do we want to go the direction of Italy?"

Case of South Korea…
South Korea had started to prepare even before January 12, when China shared the genetic code of the novel coronavirus with the World Health Organisation (WHO). At the time, China had reported only 41 cases. But South Korea knew it was vulnerable — and it was clear on the path ahead.

By the end of January, even though there were only seven confirmed cases in the country of 52 million, testing kits had been distributed across government laboratories, based on China's information on the virus. Testing was not to be restricted to those with a travel history — everyone with a cold, cough, and pneumonia was tested. Over 2.2 lakh have been screened so far.

The Ministry of the Interior and Safety developed a mobile phone app, "Self quarantine safety precaution", to keep tabs on "super spreaders" of the infection. The app monitors the GPS coordinates of those under home quarantine, and alerts the government if they step out. Once a hospital bed becomes available, an ambulance is sent to the patient's location. The government is also scanning credit card transactions, immigration entry forms, phone and car GPS, and CCTV footage to track suspected cases.

Deputy Health Minister Kim Kang Lip has been quoted as saying that "traditional responses such as locking down affected areas and isolating patients can be only modestly effective, and may cause problems in open societies". The government has in some cases made details of infected people public, so that every close contact of the patient can come forward for testing.

…Compared with Italy
Italy's 60 million population is about 15% more than South Korea's, but it has tested only 73,000 samples — about a third the numbers tested by South Korea. On March 1, Italy had 1,701 cases — less than half South Korea's 3,736. It now has three times South Korea's numbers, and almost 29 times the number of deaths.

Italy delayed large-scale screening, which allowed the virus to circulate unnoticed within northern Italy and beyond. The first lockdowns came on February 23, by which time it was too late.

The situation in India

Given the powerful concerns over privacy, measures such as GPS tracking and making the names of infected persons public would appear very difficult, if not impossible, in India. As of now, India is largely following the protocol of screening symptomatic cases with a history of travel abroad. There is no lockdown, but several states have shut schools, malls, theatres, and gyms, and prohibited public gatherings and advised companies to encourage employees to work from home.

The concern is India's density of population — 464 per sq km on average and over 32,000 in a city like Mumbai, compared with just 206 in Italy — and the vulnerabilities of its healthcare infrastructure. India's median age though, is 28.4 years compared to Italy's 47.3, and its weather is overall very different.

India has started testing pneumonia cases randomly, with no travel history, for coronavirus. The number of testing laboratories was on Monday increased to 63, with another nine set to become functional shortly. An expansion of testing capacity is important because many of the samples that have tested positive — where the tested individuals either had travel history or were close contacts — were asymptomatic.

Epidemiologist Dr Pradeep Awate said India was basing its screening policy on the country's "population" and "available resources". Dr Tanu Singhal, an infectious disease expert, said: "We have to try a cocktail of methods. We need to widen screening for severe pneumonia cases with no history to ensure diagnosis of possible cases, but we also need to prioritise based on our diagnostic capacity."

Source: The Indian Express

2. Back to SAARC: On Modi's video conference with leaders

Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; IOBR

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's decision to convene a video conference of leaders of the eight-member SAARC on Sunday represents a much-needed "out-of-the-box" thinking as the world faces the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic.

To that end, the hour-long discussion with the leaders of Afghanistan, the Maldives, Bangladesh, Bhutan Nepal, Sri Lanka, and the Special Assistant on Health to the Pakistan PM, came up with shared and unique perspectives in dealing with the virus.

COVID-19 emergency fund

The meeting saw Mr. Modi's proposal for a COVID-19 emergency fund — India will contribute $10-million — as well as a decision on technical task forces.

Threats to South Asian Countries

Afghanistan and Pakistan have specific challenges as they share long borders with Iran, which has emerged, after China and Italy, as a major hub of the virus. Bhutan, the Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka worry about the impact on tourism, which is a mainstay of their economies. Another concern is of an escalation in the virus's spread in the subcontinent.

With close to 300 positive cases, South Asia has seen a much lower incidence globally, but given its much higher population density, it is clear that any outbreak will lead to far more casualties.

Other concerns are about under-reporting, as fewer people are being tested in much of South Asia, and whether public health services can cope. It remains to be seen how closely the SAARC countries will cooperate to deal with the virus.

Blessings for SAARC future as well

In fact, the virtual summit is the first high-level SAARC meet since 2014, and comes after India's pulling out of the 2016 summit following the Uri attack; it was to have been hosted in Islamabad. Pakistan too has made its concerns over Jammu and Kashmir a sticking point in re-engagement, and PM Imran Khan's absence on Sunday, and his nominee's attempt to raise the issue of restrictions in Kashmir indicate that this attitude persists. Clearly, reviving the SAARC initiative, which countries in the region including Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bhutan have advised, will not be easy, given poor ties between SAARC's two largest members, India and Pakistan. But it is significant that New Delhi seems to be willing to try to put politics aside when dealing with the pandemic that confronts all.

Source: The Hindu

3. In U-turn, govt. moots 20-year window to clear telco dues

Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics

Nearly five months after winning its legal battle in the Supreme Court against telecom majors including Vodafone and Bharti Airtel for payment of Adjusted Gross Revenue (AGR) dues worth several lakhs of crores of rupees, the Centre did a virtual U-turn by urging the court to give the companies a 20-year window to pay the money back.

In an application mentioned for urgent hearing in the apex court, the government said it has, after "detailed and long-drawn deliberations", devised a "formula" to soften the blow of the October 24, 2019 judgment directing the companies to cough up the AGR in three months.

Details of proposed instalments

"All the licensees impacted by the judgment be allowed to pay the unpaid or remaining amount of past DoT assessed/calculated dues in annual instalments over 20 years (or less if they so opt), duly protecting the net present value of the said dues using a discount rate of 8% (based on one year marginal cost of lending rate of SBI which is currently 7.75%)," the application said.

A document annexed to the application shows that the total demand of the Department of Telecommunications (DoT) as in October 2019 was Rs. 1,69,048.65 crore from 16 major telecom service providers (TSPs). The payment received till March 6, 2020, from these companies was Rs. 25,901.56 crore. Dues to the tune of Rs. 1,43,271.74 crore remain outstanding.

The application said the formula was crafted taking into consideration the "larger interest, economic consequences on the nation and with a view to ensure that the Supreme Court order is complied with in letter and spirit." It said deliberations were held at various levels of the government in the administrative hierarchy, including the Cabinet.

The application said vital issues related to the financial health and viability of the telecom sector and need for maintaining competition and level playing field in the interest of consumers were considered.

It said the closure of one or more TSPs would adversely impact the digital connectivity of the country driving e-governance projects in commerce, banking and health. It would also dent the spread of digitisation in rural India.

Source: The Hindu

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