NEWS JUICE

Intelligent Compilation from The Hindu, Indian Express & others along with News Background

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1. The status of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine

**Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Issues**

Three months after Russia started the invasion of Ukraine, its troops are making slow but steady advances in the eastern Donbas region. Russia has faced stiff resistance from the Ukrainian troops from day one and the crisis has snowballed into a larger security contest between Moscow and the West, which has pumped money and weapons to Ukraine. With no peace talks on the table and neither side showing any signs of compromise, the war is likely to grind on for many more weeks, if not months.

**What's the current status of the invasion?**

Russia started the war on February 24 on three fronts — its troops moved in from the Belarussian border in the north, from the separatists-controlled parts of Donbas in the east and from the Russian-controlled Crimean peninsula in the south. While announcing his “special military operation”, President Vladimir Putin said “demilitarisation and de-Nazification” of Ukraine were his goals. It's anybody’s guess whether Russia wanted to capture Kyiv and bring in a regime change. But clearly, at least as part of their war strategy, the Russians sought to envelope Kyiv, while its troops attacked cities in the east and south. While its forces made gains in the east and south, they faced stiff resistance from the Ukrainian forces in the north and northeast. As its advances slowed down, Russia pulled back troops from around Kyiv, ending its efforts to envelope the city, and retreated from Kharkiv, Ukraine's second largest city which lies about 40 km from the Russian border, and focussed its resources on the east.

The southern city of Kherson had fallen into Russian hands in the initial days of the war. From the south, Russian troops have moved towards the outskirts of Zaporizhzhia, taking over the eponymous nuclear plant, the largest in Europe. In the eastern Donbas region, the Russians have taken almost all major cities. They took Mariupol, a Sea of Azov port city known for its steel plants, last month after a prolonged siege. They took Lyman in Luhansk last week while advancing towards Severodonetsk, the easternmost city in Ukrainian hands.

As of Monday, pro-Russia media have claimed, quoting Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, that the Russians have seized Severodonetsk. The Ukrainian authorities have contested this claim, but independent reports confirm that the Russians have entered the city. Faced with the likelihood of being encircled in the east, Ukrainians troops hinted last week that they might make a tactical retreat to bolster their defences elsewhere.

**What does Russia want?**

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said on Monday that the “liberation” of Donbas was Russia’s “unconditional priority”. Donbas, the traditional industrial region that has historical ties with Russia, encompasses Ukraine’s Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts (now, self-declared Luhansk and Donetsk People’s Republics, which were recognised by Mr. Putin as sovereign states before ordering the invasion). Russia has already taken almost all of Luhansk.

Severodonetsk (it was the capital of the Ukrainian-controlled parts of Luhansk), is the only major city where there is still Ukrainian presence in the oblast (province) and all reports indicate that the city would be in complete Russian control within days, if it hasn’t already fallen.

Russia and the separatists it backs have also taken a sizeable part of Donetsk, including Mariupol, which allowed Moscow to establish a land bridge from the Russian mainland to Crimea along the coast of the Sea of Azov. Mariupol was also the headquarters of the Azov Battalion, the neo-Nazi group that had been integrated into the Ukrainian armed forces. The capture of the city serves the Russian claims of “de-Nazifying” Ukraine.

If Mr. Lavrov should be trusted, Russia is likely to shift its focus to the Ukraine-controlled parts of Donetsk once Severodonetsk is fully in its control. But there’s no clarity on whether Russia would stop the war even if
it captures the whole of Donbas. There are conflicting signals from Russian leadership. According to Mr. Putin, “demilitarisation and deNazification” are the goals, which are open for interpretation. As per Mr. Lavrov, “liberation of Donbas” is the priority.

In April, Maj Gen Rustam Minnekayev, a senior Russian commander, said Russia wanted the whole of Ukraine’s east and south. If Mr. Minnekayev is right, Russia wants to take, besides Donbas, Kharkiv in the northeast and Mykolaiv, Zaporizhzhya and Odesa in the south, which would turn Ukraine into a landlocked country. Ukraine has already asked for more weapons, including artillery and long-range rockets, from the West, apparently to prepare for the coming battles. The U.S. is sending them the Multiple Launch Rocket Systems (MLRS) and the High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) — both light, flexible, long-range rocket launchers. All these suggest that there is no immediate plan from any side to end the war.

**Haven’t the sanctions hit the Russian economy?**

They have. Russia’s economy is expected to contract this year. But the sanctions and their impact on the economy are unlikely to influence the Kremlin’s strategic thinking for a number of reasons.

First, the war and the western response to it appear to have bolstered Mr. Putin’s standing in Russia. According to the Levada Centre, an independent research firm, as of April, 82% Russians approve of his presidency. He doesn’t face any immediate threat to his grip on power in Russia. Second, despite the sanctions, the Russian economy doesn’t face any imminent collapse. The rouble, which U.S. President Joe Biden threatened to run into “rubble”, is one of the best performing currencies this year. The sanctions also jacked up commodity prices, especially that of oil and gas, which is helping Russia, a major oil and gas exporter. Europe remains dependent on Russian gas — close to 40% of its gas requirements are met through imports from Russia. Its attempts to diversify its gas imports by buying LNG from countries such as Qatar and Libya have so far been not successful.

Also, the Russian blockade of Ukraine’s sea ports is threatening to send food prices soaring which could impact global food supplies and food security. This has prompted several European countries to reach out to Mr. Putin, seeking a solution. Moreover, countries outside the Western alliances have not joined the sanctions, which means Russia is not as isolated internationally as the West claims it is. So Mr. Putin appears to be ready to fight a war of attrition, which could hurt the global economy further.

**Is there a peace process?**

Both Russia and Ukraine have held multiple rounds of talks, in Minsk as well as in Istanbul, since the war began, but there has been no breakthrough. In the last round of the Istanbul talks, Ukraine had apparently made a peace proposal.

According to media reports, Ukraine proposed a 15-year consultation period for Crimea (during this period Kyiv won’t contest Russia’s control of the peninsula) and direct talks between Presidents Volodymyr Zelensky and Mr. Putin on the status of Donbas. As a “goodwill gesture”, the Russians quickly announced that they were withdrawing troops from the outskirts of Kyiv. But soon after the Istanbul talks were concluded, video footage surfaced showing bodies in Bucha, the northern city that the Russians vacated. U.S. President Joe Biden accused Russia of committing “genocide” in Ukraine. The peace process collapsed.

Now, Mr. Zelensky has once again urged direct talks with Mr. Putin, but Russia, which stated in April that the talks were “at a dead end”, says “Ukraine is not serious about ending the conflict”. In between, the war continues and Ukraine keeps losing territories.

**Source: The Hindu**

2. **India’s changing goal posts over coal**

**Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics**

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In April, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said India’s transition away from coal as a fuel for power would be hampered by the Russia-Ukraine war. “One calculation which I think we had in our mind was that the transition [away from coal] ... will be enabled by natural gas,” she said, adding that “lowering dependence on coal, and the speed with which we want to get out of it, will now be challenged.”

**Why is the ‘move away from coal’ so important?**
The threat of global warming looms over the planet, promising to bring about unprecedented natural calamities.

An effective way to keep the danger at bay is to cut the use of fossil fuels — coal, natural gas and oil. About 80% of the world’s energy requirements are met by these three fuels. They have likely brought on the climate crisis we now face, as they trigger the emission of carbon dioxide. However, the worst culprit of them all is coal, which emits nearly twice as much carbon dioxide as natural gas and about 60% more than oil, on a kilogram-to-kilogram comparison. Combusting coal also leaves behind partially-burnt carbon particles that feed pollution and trigger respiratory disorders. The consequence of these chemical reactions gains great significance because, the power sector in India accounts for 49% of total carbon dioxide emissions, compared with the global average of 41%.

**What is the extent of India’s dependence on coal?**
As of February 2022, the installed capacity for coal-based power generation across the country was 2.04 lakh megawatt (MW). This accounts for about 51.5% of power from all sources. This compares with about 25,000 MW of capacity based on natural gas as fuel, or a mere 6.3% of all installed capacity. Renewable power accounted for 1.06 lakh MW or 27%.

Coal-based power stations are retired periodically which happens all the time. But is not fast enough nor are new additions being halted. And with good reason — coal is still inexpensive compared with other sources of energy.

For FY20, for example, India added 6,765 MW power capacity based on coal as fuel. But only 2,335 MW was retired. According to the IEA’s Coal Report 2021, India’s coal consumption will increase at an average annual rate of 3.9% to 1.18 billion tonnes in 2024.

So, it is not easy to shift away from coal overnight. As the World Coal Association CEO Melissa Manook put it while on her India visit recently, “Coal will still be a significant contributor in the energy sector even in 2040!”

**How has war made India’s move away from coal difficult?**
Natural gas has been dubbed as the transition fuel in India’s plans to move away from coal. The international cost of natural gas has zoomed in the recent past from a level that was considered already too high to be financially viable. On May 17, 2022, the price per MMBTU of gas was ₹1,425, compared with ₹500 in April, 2021.

Even back in November last, well before the war made things difficult, the government put in place a committee to ensure that natural gas prices remained stable. Of the 25,000 MW of gas-based power plants, about 14,000 MW remains stranded, or idle, because they are financially unviable.

While renewable energy sources are cheaper than coal, their ability to generate power consistently is subject to the whims of nature — the wind and the Sun. Coal can give you power on demand. Storage technologies are still not mature enough to help renewable energy sources become reliable generators of power.

**Is there a coal availability crisis that is exacerbating our problems?**
It appears that the pent-up demand returning in the economy which was in a pandemic-induced stupor for a while has caught policymakers off guard. From having asked States only recently to stop importing coal, the
power Ministry urged States earlier this month to step up coal imports as the private sector would take till about 2025 to produce significant amounts of coal.

As per a letter by the Ministry, Coal India, the country’s largest supplier of the dry fuel is set to import coal for the first time since 2015. The aim of the exercise is to avoid a repeat of the power outage crisis that India faced in April — the worst in more than six years. Following the issue of the letter dated May 28 to all state utilities, officials at the States and the Centre, including to the Coal Secretary, the central government has asked States to place import tenders on hold with a view to cut procurement costs using government-to-government channels.

An internal power Ministry presentation is said to point to a 42.5 million tonne (MT) coal shortage in the quarter ending September on the back of high demand for power supply. The shortage is 15% higher than earlier anticipated. Domestic supply of coal is expected to be 154.7 MT, compared with the projected requirement of 197.3 MT. The previously anticipated shortage was 37 MT. The projections for requirements for the year ending March are 3.3% higher than earlier anticipated at 784.6 MT. Without imports, utilities are likely to run out of coal supplies by July.

Source: The Hindu

3. After-effects of anti-corruption laws

Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Polity & Governance

Strict anti-corruption laws are seen as the panacea to many of society’s problems. But like many other laws that are created with good intentions, there can be unintended consequences to anti-corruption laws as well. These consequences are initially unforeseen by the supporters of these laws.

“Bribe-switching”
“Bribe-switching” by American researchers Jamie Bologna Pavlik and Desiree Désert looks into the unintended consequences of the strict implementation of the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA). It should be noted that the FCPA was enacted to prohibit firms and people in the United States from bribing public officials in foreign countries. Most famously, the FCPA was used to prosecute Goldman Sachs for its involvement in Malaysia’s 1MDB scam.

So, what have been the benefits of the FCPA?
Many assume that strict anti-corruption laws like the FCPA when enforced properly by government officials would lead to a fall in corruption and an improvement in the economy. The FCPA, which imposes heavy fines and other penalties on American firms engaging in corrupt practices, is in fact considered to be a law that is implemented well. The researchers, however, found that when the U.S. government went after certain U.S. firms that operated in other countries on charges of bribery, other interesting results followed. These results failed to satisfy the initial expectations of the legislators who framed the FCPA.

Growth of illegal markets
First of all, there was no real decrease in the level of corruption among foreign officials after the enactment of the FCPA. The researchers propose what they call the “bribe-switching hypothesis” to explain the failure of corruption to fall in foreign countries despite the enforcement of FCPA regulations.

They argue that public officials do not depend on only formal markets to earn bribes but may also depend on other illegal markets to earn bribes. Whether public officials receive bribes through legal markets or through illegal markets depends among other things on the relative cost of receiving bribes through each route. When the cost of extracting bribes in the legal market increases due to laws like the FCPA, this can cause public officials to resort to obtaining bribes from the illegal market instead. If so be the case, public officials may compensate for the loss of bribe revenues from legal markets with bribe revenues from the black or illegal
economy. For example, after the enactment of the FCPA, certain formal investment projects that would have earlier received approvals from officials after the payment of a bribe may no longer receive official approval. Instead, officials may focus their efforts on approving projects in the illegal market that bring them bribe revenue at a lower risk of getting caught red-handed.

In countries where American firms could no longer offer bribes due to FCPA regulations, the size of the black economy increased by as much as 0.25 percentage points, the researchers found in their study. Other proxy markers of illegal activity such as homicide rates, tree loss, and trade misinvoicing also showed that the FCPA was leading to an increase in illegal activity in the black economies of these countries. This, the authors argue, happens because public officials resort to obtaining their bribe revenue from the illegal rather than the legal market. This will make them more likely to allow illegal activities to flourish in order to maximise their bribe revenues. So, for example, a powerful bureaucrat might allow the illegal sale of liquor in the black market to flourish in exchange for bribes when he can no longer easily obtain bribes for investment projects from established U.S. liquor firms due to the FCPA.

Illegal economies, an alternative?
More importantly, the authors note that while there was no increase in a country's GDP per capita after the FCPA moved against attempts to bribe their public officials, there was a significant increase in the size of their black economies. The authors argue that the growth of the black economy is a significant negative development for these countries. Others, however, may argue that the black economy in these countries could be serving as a useful alternative to the highly restricted legal economy. In this view, bribes may actually be greasing the wheels of commerce in many economies where existing laws that govern the formal economy are not conducive to legitimate business activities.

Source: The Hindu

4. What is liquid nano urea, produced by IFFCO, which can potentially revolutionise the use of nitrogen fertilisers in India?

Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Environment

During his visit to Gujarat this week, Prime Minister Narendra Modi officially inaugurated the country's first liquid nano urea plant at Kalol. This patented product is expected to not only substitute imported urea, but to also produce better results in farms.

In what respects is the indigenous liquid nano urea a better bet than imported urea?
The liquid nano urea produced by Indian Farmers Fertiliser Cooperative (IFFCO) Limited comes in a half-litre bottle priced at Rs 240, and carries no burden of subsidy currently. By contrast, a farmer pays around Rs 300 for a 50-kg bag of heavily subsidised urea.

“The international market price of a bag of urea is between Rs 3,500 and Rs 4,000, and significant quantities of it is imported,” said Alok Jaiswal, senior manager (process), and operations head of IFFCO’s liquid nano urea plant.

According to IFFCO, a bottle of the nano urea can effectively replace at least one bag of urea.

The Prime Minister spoke about the high fertiliser subsidy bill of the government, as India is dependent on imports.

of the widely used fertiliser. The government’s fertiliser subsidy payout this financial year will be Rs 2 lakh crore, up 25 per cent from the Rs 1.6 lakh crore it paid last year.

But what exactly is liquid nano urea, and how does it work?
It is essentially urea in the form of a nanoparticle. Urea is a chemical nitrogen fertiliser, white in colour, which artificially provides nitrogen, a major nutrient required by plants.

The product has been developed at IFFCO's Nano Biotechnology Research Centre (NBRC) at Kalol. Apart from reducing the country's subsidy bill, it is aimed at reducing the unbalanced and indiscriminate use of conventional urea, increase crop productivity, and reduce soil, water, and air pollution.

While conventional urea has an efficiency of about 25 per cent, the efficiency of liquid nano urea can be as high as 85-90 per cent. Conventional urea fails to have the desired impact on crops as it is often applied incorrectly, and the nitrogen in it is vaporised or lost as gas. A lot of nitrogen is also washed away during irrigation.

Liquid nano urea is sprayed directly on the leaves and gets absorbed by the plant. Fertilisers in nano form provide a targeted supply of nutrients to crops, as they are absorbed by the stomata, pores found on the epidermis of leaves, officials said. IFFCO advises that 2-4 ml of nano urea should be mixed a litre of water and sprayed on crop leaves at active growth stages.

Liquid nano urea has a shelf life of a year, and farmers need not be worried about "caking" when it comes in contact with moisture.

According to IFFCO, liquid nano urea contains 4 per cent total nitrogen (w/v) evenly dispersed in water. The size of a nano nitrogen particle varies from 20-50 nm. (A nanometre is equal to a billionth of a metre.)

IFFCO says the product has been tested on more than 90 crops across 11,000 locations in collaboration with Krishi Vigyan Kendras of the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR-KVKs), research institutes, state agriculture universities, and progressive farmers. "The trials began in November 2019 and was meant to test the product on the farm under different climatic and soil conditions," Jaiswal said.

How much chemical fertilisers does Gujarat use?
Gujarat is expected to see a 19 per cent growth in the use of chemical fertilisers during the upcoming kharif season, 2022. The Gujarat government will provide a subsidy of Rs 5,278 crore to farmers for an estimated 19.95 lakh tonne of fertilisers that are expected to be used this kharif season. Along with the spend during the rabi season, the state's fertiliser subsidy bill is more than Rs 10,000 crore.

Gujarat government officials said "natural" farming is still at a nascent stage, and it will be a few years before it can have an impact on the use of chemical fertilisers. However, the government has already begun cutting down on chemical fertilisers.

For instance, under the Krishi Vaividhyakaran Yojana or the Agriculture Diversification Project implemented for tribal farmers in 14 districts, the government has started substituting chemical fertilisers with organic fertilisers in the kits it hands out. In Dangs, which has been declared a 100 per cent natural farming district, no chemical fertilisers are being given under this scheme this year.

Officials said that apart from helping cut the use of conventional fertilisers, liquid nano urea is also comparatively safe for the environment.

What is planned for the future with regard to liquid nano urea production?
IFFCO commissioned the Kalol liquid nano urea plant, the country's first, in August 2021. Over 3.6 crore bottles of this urea have been produced, of which 2.5 crore have been sold.

IFFCO is setting up additional facilities for production of nano fertilisers at Aonla, Phulpur, Bengaluru, Paradeep, Kandla, Deoghar and Guwahati, besides expanding the Kalol plant, for the production of nano urea, nano DAP and nano micronutrients. These units will have a production capacity of 2 lakh bottles per day.
Source: The Indian Express

5. How India, Bangladesh are rebooting their rail link

Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Issues

Two years after they were stopped due to the onset of the pandemic on March 28, 2020, passenger train services between India and Bangladesh resumed Sunday with the Bandhan Express setting off from Kolkata for Khulna and the Maitree Express starting its run from Dhaka for Kolkata. A third train, the Mitali Express, will be flagged later this week by Railways ministers of the two countries.

The trains
The Bandhan Express was resumed by rebooting a long-forgotten rail link between Kolkata and the industrial hub of Khulna, the third-largest city of Bangladesh. In 1965, this route was served by the Barisal Express, which was stopped due to the India-Pakistan war. The Narendra Modi government along with the Sheikh Hasina regime restarted that with Bandhan in 2017.

The Bandhan Express was the second train to be flagged off after the introduction of Maitree Express between Kolkata and Dhaka Cantonment in April, 2008. It covers the distance between Kolkata and Khulna via Petrapole and Benapole border route to cater to the demands of the people from both the countries.

The Maitree Express has been a success since its launch. The tri-weekly service between Kolkata and Dhaka used to run with 90 per cent occupancy. The train has a capacity to carry 456 passengers, the same as Bandhan Express.

The Bandhan Express has AC Chair Car and AC First Class coaches. On Sunday, only 19 passengers were on board the Bandhan, but officials said the numbers would increase.

The Mitali Express will connect New Jalpaiguri in North Bengal with Dhaka. This train was announced by PM Modi during his visit to Dhaka in March, 2021.

Beyond passenger travel
The governments of both the countries have been working towards strengthening the rail link between them, and not just through passenger trains.

In August 2021, the two sides started regular movement of freight trains between the newly-restored link between Haldibari in India and Chilahati in Bangladesh.

The Haldibari-Chilahati rail link between India and the then East Pakistan was also operational till 1965 and stopped due to the war. This was part of the broad gauge main route from Kolkata to Siliguri at the time of Partition. The two sides envisage at least 20 freight trains to cross the border per month on this link.
Once part of a single, seamless railway network under British rule, trains continued to pass between the two countries even after the Partition. The infrastructure to connect the two sides through railways was, therefore, largely present.

Policymakers on both sides viewed this as an opportunity to deepen diplomatic ties using cross-border movements of goods and passengers.

Five rail links have so far been rebooted between India and Bangladesh.

They include Petrapole (India)-Benapole (Bangladesh), Gede (India)-Darshana (Bangladesh), Singhabad (India)-Rohanpur (Bangladesh), Radhikapur (India)-Biroil (Bangladesh) and the Haldibari-Chilahati link.

Ordinarily, stone chips, ballasts, rice etc. have been carried to Bangladesh. Railway PSU CONCOR has also started container cargo with such Fast Moving Consumer Goods of private clients. Typically the idea is to establish faster and cheaper freight link by weaning them away from the sea route.

Last year, the Eastern Railway facilitated the import of de-oiled soya cakes from Bangladesh.

**Source: The Indian Express**

6. **Astra Mk-1 air-to-air missile — features, strategic significance**

**Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Science & Technology**
The Ministry of Defence said on Tuesday (May 31) that it has signed a contract with the Hyderabad-based public-sector Bharat Dynamics Ltd (BDL) for supply of the Astra Mark-1, at a cost of Rs 2,971 crore, for deployment on fighter jets of the Indian Air Force and Indian Navy. The Astra Mk-1 is a beyond visual range (BVR), air-to-air missile (AAM).

**Astra and its variants**
The missile has been designed and developed by the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) for deployment on fighter jets like Sukhoi-30 MKI and Tejas of the IAF and the Mig-29K of the Navy.

BVM missiles are capable of engaging beyond the range of 20 nautical miles or 37 kilometers. AAMs are fired from an airborne asset to destroy an airborne target. DRDO officials told The Indian Express that the Astra project was officially launched in the early 2000s with defined parameters and proposed future variants. Around 2017, the development phase of Mk-1 version was complete.

Several successful tests have been conducted since 2017 from Sukhoi-30 MKIs. While the range for Astra Mk-1 is around 110 km, the Mk-2 with a range over 150 km is under development and Mk-3 version with a longer range is being envisaged. One more version of Astra, with a range smaller than Mk-1 is also under development.

**The contract**
The purchase will be under the Buy (Indian-IDDMM) category of defence acquisition — procurement of products from an Indian vendor that have been "indigenously designed, developed and manufactured" with a minimum of 50 per cent indigenous content calculated on the basis of cost of the total contract value.

The Ministry has said that until now, the technology to manufacture missiles of this class indigenously was not available. The transfer of technology from DRDO to BDL for production of Astra Mk-1 missile and all associated systems has been completed and the production at BDL has already started. The Ministry said the project will create opportunities for several MSMEs in aerospace technology for at least 25 years. “The project essentially embodies the spirit of 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' and will help facilitate realising our country's journey towards self-reliance in Air to Air Missiles,” the MoD said.

More than 50 private and public industries, including the IAF and Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL), have contributed in building the Astra systems.

**Strategic significance**
The missile has been designed based on requirements specified by the IAF for BVR as well as close-combat engagement, reducing the dependency on foreign sources. AAMs with BVR capability provides large stand-off ranges to own fighter aircraft which can neutralise adversary airborne assets without exposing themselves to adversary air defence measures. Stand-off range means the missile is launched at a distance sufficient to allow the attacking side to evade defensive fire from the target.

The MoD has said that Astra is technologically and economically superior to many such imported missile systems. The missile can travel at speeds more than four times that of sound and can reach a maximum altitude of 20 km, making it extremely flexible for air combat.

The missile is fully integrated on the Sukhoi 30 MKI and will be integrated with other fighter aircraft in a phased manner, including the Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) Tejas. The Indian Navy will integrate the missile on the MiG-29K fighter aircraft which are deployed on the Navy’s aircraft carriers, thus adding to the lethality of India's Aircraft carriers.

**Source: The Indian Express**

7. The Salem Witch Trials, in focus over pardoning of the last convicted ‘witch’
Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Issues

More than three centuries after the notorious Salem Witch Trials took place in colonial Massachusetts, the last of the alleged ‘witches’ was formally exonerated last week.

Massachusetts lawmakers Thursday decided to pardon Elizabeth Johnson Jr, who was convicted of witchcraft and sentenced to death in 1693. She was never executed, but neither was her name officially cleared despite every other surviving victim of the trial being pardoned over the years.

“For 300 years, Elizabeth Johnson Jr was without a voice, her story lost to the passages of time,” state senator Joan Lovely of Salem, told the Associated Press.

What were the Salem Witch Trials?
The trials took place in colonial Massachusetts between 1692 and 1693, when over 200 people were wrongly convicted of practicing witchcraft and 20 were executed.

Years later, the colony admitted that the trials were unjust and the families of the victims were compensated. However, it was only in 1957 that the state formally apologised for the events.

What led up to the trials?
Between the 1300s and 1600s, a similar wave of trials and executions were being carried out across Europe. Tens of thousands of alleged witches, most of whom were women, were executed.

The beginning of the Salem Witch Trials came at a time when the ‘witchcraft craze’ in Europe was starting to wane. Historians believe that local circumstances explain the onset of the dark period in Salem’s history.

In the late 17th century, there were two Salems – one was a town located in Massachusetts Bay known as Salem town, which is present-day Salem, and the other was a small village with a population of about 500 people, known as Salem village.

In 1689, after the English launched a war against France in the American colonies — ravaging vast swathes of Quebec, upstate New York and Nova Scotia — refugees began to flood Salem village. With an increased strain on resources, there was a growing intolerance towards the displaced people entering Salem.

In Salem village at the time, there was also a great deal of enmity between the two biggest families — the wealthy Porters, who had close links to the merchants in Salem town, and the Putnams, who wanted greater autonomy for the village.

Trouble began when the Putnam’s brought in a new pastor, Samuel Parris, from Boston. Soon after his arrival, several young girls, including his daughter and niece, began exhibiting strange behaviour — they were reported to be having fits, screaming, throwing things and complaining of being pinched by invisible forces.

Unable to identify the cause for the fits, a local doctor declared that they had been bewitched. The afflicted girls then blamed three women for their illness — Tituba, Parris’ Caribbean slave, a destitute woman named Sarah Good and Sarah Osbourne, an elderly impoverished woman.

The three women were put on trial, where Tituba pleaded guilty, and confessed that the “devil came to me and bid me to serve him”, according to the Smithsonian Magazine. The other two women insisted that they were innocent. All three women were arrested.

Over the next few months, several members of the community were accused of witchcraft. By May, the then Governor William Phipps ordered that a separate court and judge be set up for the counties of Essex, Middlesex and Suffolk.
The accused, a majority of whom were women, were made to defend themselves without counsel. Several of their accusers cited "spectral evidence", claiming that they had seen or been attacked by ghosts and spirits.

On June 2, Bridget Bishop became the first person to be hanged on what later came to be known as Gallows Hill. She was found innocent 12 years later. Hundreds were accused and twenty hanged in the following months.

That was until October, when Governor Phipps halted the trials after his own wife was accused of witchcraft. While the trial resumed a few months later, the special court was replaced by a Superior Court of Judicature, which was instructed not to accept spectral evidence. By May 1963, the trial officially came to an end.

**What was the aftermath of the trials?**

In the years that followed, many of the people involved in the trials and executions, including Judge Samuel Sewall, expressed regret. In 1702, the trials were declared unlawful. About a decade later, the colony passed a bill restoring the rights of those accused, clearing their names and compensating their kin for the injustice committed.

**Why has Elizabeth Johnson Jr been pardoned now?**

It took over three centuries for the last Salem "witch", Elizabeth Johnson Jr, to be pardoned. Massachusetts lawmakers decided to open her case again last year, after a group of eighth grade students from a local middle school took an interest in the trials and looked into the legislative steps needed to clear Johnson Jr’s name, the Associated Press reported.

The students contacted Senator Diana DiZoglio, a Democrat from Methuen, who took up the issue in the state Senate. “We will never be able to change what happened to victims like Elizabeth but at the very least can set the record straight,” DiZoglio said. The legislation was attached to a budget bill and approved.

Johnson was 22 years old when she was first accused of witchcraft and sentenced to hang in 1693. But she was never executed as Phipps threw out her punishment towards the end of the trials.

In the centuries that followed, charges against several of the people convicted, including Johnson's own mother, were dropped. But Johnson's name was not cleared.

In 1712, she submitted an exoneration petition before a Massachusetts court but her request was never heard, as per an AP report. She was excluded from a legislative resolution in 1957, that exonerated one more person and referred to “certain other persons”.

**Source: The Indian Express**
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