

1. Gaza is known as the world's biggest 'open air prison'

Introduction

This article explores the reasons why Gaza is often referred to as the world's largest 'open-air prison.' It delves into the historical and geopolitical factors that have led to the dire conditions in Gaza and their impact on its residents.



The Gaza Strip's Isolation

Gaza, a narrow strip of land surrounded by the Mediterranean Sea, Israel, and Egypt, has faced a prolonged air, land, and sea blockade since 2007 when Hamas, a militant organisation, won elections and came to power.

Physical Barriers and Border Crossings

Gaza is physically isolated by walls, fences, and the Mediterranean Sea, controlled by Israel on three sides and Egypt on the south.

Densely Populated and Impoverished

The Gaza Strip is 41 km long and 12 km wide at its widest point. More than 20 lakh residents live in a total area of just around 365 sq km, making it one of the most densely populated areas in the world.

This has led to around 61% of Gaza's population requiring food aid, 31% of households having difficulty in "meeting essential education needs such as tuition fees and books, due to lack of financial resources", and an unemployment rate of more than 46%, the report said. It also highlighted the shortage of electricity, leading to power cuts at an average of around 11 hours per day.

The beginning of the Gaza blockade

In the Six-Day War of 1967, Israel captured Gaza from Egypt, and began its military occupation of the territory. Between 1967 and 2005, Israel built 21 settlements in Gaza and urged Palestinian residents, through coercive measures as well as by giving financial and other incentives, to leave the territory. However, that period saw rising Palestinian resistance, both violent and non-violent, against the Israeli occupation.

In 2005, Israel withdrew its settlements from Gaza. Between then and 2007, it imposed temporary blockades on the movement of people and goods into and out of Gaza on multiple occasions.

Under the 1993 Oslo Agreement, the Palestinian Authority got administrative control over Gaza after Israel pulled out, and an election was held in 2006. The voting took place at a time when an Israeli blockade was in force, and the militant group Hamas won a majority of seats. Following the election, deadly violence broke out between Hamas and Fatah, another Palestinian political faction, leading to the death of hundreds of Palestinians.

In 2007, after Hamas assumed power in Gaza, Israel made the blockade permanent. Egypt, which also has a border crossing with Gaza, participated in the blockade. This effectively meant that most people could not go into or out of Gaza and that the movement of goods and aid was highly restricted. Israel justifies the blockade as being necessary for its security.

International Concern and 'Open Air Prison'

The term "open air prison" is widely used to describe the conditions in Gaza, a description supported by UN rapporteurs, activists, academics, and even heads of state, such as former British Prime Minister David Cameron.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Relations

Source: The Indian Express

2. New royalty rates for three strategically significant minerals: lithium, niobium, and rare earth elements (REEs)

Introduction

This article discusses the recent amendment to a key law in India that specifies competitive royalty rates for the mining of three strategically significant minerals: lithium, niobium, and rare earth elements (REEs). These changes are aimed at reducing imports of these critical minerals, which are crucial in various supply chains, including electric vehicle batteries, energy storage devices, and high-end motors.

The Removal of Minerals from the List

The government's decision to remove six minerals by amending the Second Schedule of the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act, 1957, including lithium and niobium, from the list of 'specified' atomic minerals has paved the way for private sector participation through the auctioning for these minerals at concessional royalty rates.

Significance of the Move

The specification of new royalty rates aligns India's rates with global benchmarks and promotes commercial exploitation through auctions. Competitive royalty rates attract bidders to future auctions.

This move is significant in India's commitment to energy transition and achieving net-zero emissions by 2070.

New Royalty Rates

Following the Cabinet's decision, the royalty rates for these minerals have been set as follows: 3% for lithium based on the London Metal Exchange price, 3% for niobium based on the average sale price, and 1% for REEs based on the Rare Earth Oxide's average sale price.

Item No. 55 of The Second Schedule of the MMDR Act, 1957, currently specifies a royalty rate of 12% of the average sale price (ASP) for minerals that are not specifically listed in that Schedule. This rate is much higher than global benchmarks.

Focus on Lithium

India's exploration efforts extend to extracting lithium from various sources, including Jammu & Kashmir, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Odisha, and Chhattisgarh. In February, 'inferred' lithium resources of 5.9 million tonnes were established in Jammu & Kashmir. Lithium is a vital ingredient of rechargeable lithium-ion batteries that power electric vehicles, laptops, and mobile phones.

This push for domestic lithium production is also part of India's strategy to reduce reliance on lithium imports, particularly from China.

Rare Earth Elements in EVs

Rare earth elements play a crucial role in the electric vehicle (EV) supply chain, particularly in the motors. These elements, including neodymium, terbium, and dysprosium, are used in permanent magnet motors. However, global production and processing of rare earths are heavily concentrated in China.

Moreover, rare earths are typically mined by digging vast open pits, which can contaminate the environment and disrupt ecosystems. When poorly regulated, mining can produce waste-water ponds filled with acids, heavy metals, and radioactive material that might seep into groundwater.

Niobium's Applications

Niobium is a silvery metal with a layer of oxide on its surface, which makes it resistant to corrosion. It is used in alloys, including stainless steel, to improve their strength, particularly at low temperatures.

Alloys containing niobium are used in jet engines, beams and girders for buildings, and oil and gas pipelines. Given its superconducting properties, it is also used in magnets for particle accelerators and MRI scanners.

The main source of this element is the mineral columbite, which is found in countries such as Canada, Brazil, Australia, and Nigeria.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics

Source: The Indian Express

3. NTPC Recognized in Forbes "World's Best Employers 2023" List

NTPC: The Only Indian PSU on Forbes' Prestigious List

India's largest integrated energy conglomerate, National Thermal Power Corporation Limited, has achieved recognition as one of the "World's Best Employers 2023" in Forbes' World's Best Employers list for 2023. This distinction places NTPC at the 261st position among the top 700 companies worldwide. It's worth noting that NTPC is the sole Indian public sector undertaking (PSU) to make the list.

Forbes' World's Best Employers List 2023

Forbes annually publishes the World's Best Employers List, conducting independent market research to identify the top 700 companies globally that provide an exciting working environment with a positive atmosphere, training and career advancement opportunities, employee benefits, a focus on employee well-being, and workplace diversity.

Relevance: GS Prelims

Source: PIB

4. Important terms in relation to the Israel-Palestine conflict

Why in news?

Since Hamas launched an unprecedented attack on Israel on October 7, conflict in the region has escalated to tragic proportions. This is the latest bloody chapter in the bitter conflict between Israel and Palestine that has been going on since 1948.

Here is an alphabetical list of important terms you might come across while reading about the conflict.

Abbas, Mahmoud

The 87-year old Abbas has been the president of the State of Palestine (West Bank) since 2005. The moderate pro-Palestinian voice and critic of Hamas, Abbas has condemned the killing of civilians during the ongoing violence.

Al Aqsa

Al Aqsa refers to the compound of Islamic religious buildings, including the Dome of Rock and Al Aqsa Mosque, in Jerusalem's Old City. Located adjacent to Christian and Jewish religious sites, it has been a flashpoint in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. 'Operation Al Aqsa Storm' is the name of the recent Hamas operation.

Arab

The Arabs are an ethnic group concentrated in West Asia and North Africa, who according to tradition, are descendents of Abraham, the patriarch of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Today, Arabs are predominantly Sunni Muslims, though Shias, Christians, Jews and polytheists also exist within the population. The Arabic language emerged in the first century CE.

Ashkelon

Named after the ancient port of Ascalon, Ashkelon is a coastal city in southern Israel, just 13 km north of Gaza. It has been constantly targeted by Hamas, who have fired innumerable rockets towards it.

Balfour Declaration

The Declaration was a public statement issued in 1917 by British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour to Lord Rothschild, a leader of the British Jewish community. The statement, for the first time, promised British support for a "Jewish national home" in Palestine, at the time a British Mandate. It went on to be the basis of the creation of Israel, 30 years later.

China

While a major economic partner of Israel, China has also maintained warm relations with Palestine and the rest of the Arab world. China's statement after the recent escalation was notable as it did not, unlike many other nations, condemn Hamas, instead "urged restraint" from "all parties".

Deif, Mohammed

Not much is known about Mohammed Deif, the shadowy leader behind Hamas's latest operation and the head of Hamas's military wing since 2002. He has been at the top of Israel's hit list for a long time and survived multiple attempts on his life, which have left him with one arm, one leg and one eye.

Egypt

Besides Israel, Egypt is the other country to border Gaza, lying to its south. Egyptian forces occupied Gaza between 1949-67, till their defeat to Israel in the third Arab-Israeli War. Egypt has shut the Rafah border crossing with Gaza and refused to allow entry to civilians who might want to flee the besieged territory.

Fatah

Formerly known as the Palestinian National Liberation Movement, Fatah was founded by Yasser Arafat in 1959. Since Arafat's death in 2004, it has been riddled with factionalism and infighting. Currently chaired by Mahmoud Abbas, it heads the Palestinian Authority, which governs about 40 per cent of the West Bank from Ramallah. It lost control of Gaza to Hamas in 2006.

Gaza

Gaza is a strip of land, just 365 sq km in size, wedged between the Mediterranean Sea to the west, Israel to the north and east, and Egypt to the south. It is home to more than 20 lakh Palestinians who have been living in siege-like conditions since 2007. The recent escalation began with Hamas launching missiles into Israel from Gaza.

Hamas

Formed in the 1980s, during the first Intifada (1987-93), Hamas is a militant Sunni Islamist group and one of the two main political parties of Palestine. It came up as a more militant alternative amidst failure of the Palestinian Liberation Movement to make real gains. Currently, it governs the Gaza strip and was responsible for sparking the most recent escalation.

Hezbollah

Hezbollah is a Shiite Islamic militant organisation and political party based in Lebanon. It emerged during the Lebanese Civil War (1975-90) and has historically been at loggerheads with Israel. Amidst the outbreak of violence in Israel, Israeli forces have also intermittently engaged with Hezbollah, who, as per the IDF, fired rockets into Israel from the north.

Holocaust

Derived from the Greek word for 'burnt offering', the Holocaust refers to the genocide of European Jews by the Nazis. From 1941-45, roughly six million Jews across German-occupied Europe were murdered, often in gas chambers in extermination camps. The Holocaust was one of the factors which ultimately led to the creation of Israel, a Jewish national home.

IDF

The Israel Defense Forces are the national military of the State of Israel. The IDF has participated in every armed conflict involving Israel since 1948. Every able-bodied citizen (male or female) must serve in the IDF for a period of at least two years. The

IDF boasts of 170,000 active personnel (1.9% of population) and 465,000 reserve personnel (5.1% of population).

Intifada

Intifada literally means 'to shake off' in Arabic. It was brought to popular movement by the Palestinians in the 1980s, and is used to connote 'righteous rebellion against oppression'. Palestine underwent two Intifadas – from 1987 to 93, and from 2000 to 2005.

Iran

Iran is arguably Israel's biggest and most powerful foe. It has supported the Palestinian cause since the 1979 Revolution brought the ultra-religious Ayatollah Khomeini to power. It funds both Hamas and Hezbollah. Iran, in context of the recent escalation, has said that it will respond to the "war crimes against Palestine and Gaza."

Iron Dome

The Iron Dome is a short-range, ground-to-air, air defence system Israel uses to track and neutralise enemy missiles and rockets. Its success rate is between 80 and 90 per cent and acts as a deterrent to relatively inexpensive missile attacks on Israel soil. The success of the recent Hamas attacks raised questions about its effectiveness.

Israel

The term Israel has historically been used to refer to Jewish people. Its roots lie in the Hebrew word Yisra'el, the name given to Jacob in the Old Testament and meaning "he that striveth with God". Israelites were Jacob's descendents. The myth of the Israelite Exodus is central to Judaism, and was invoked by Zionists while setting up the State of Israel.

Jerusalem

One of the oldest extant cities in the world, Jerusalem is considered holy in all three Abrahamic religions — Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Both Israel and Palestine claim the city though As per the 1947 UN Partition Plan, Jerusalem was to be jointly governed. Today, Israel has effective control over Jerusalem and considers the city its capital.

Jordan

Jordan is an Arab country bordering Israel and the West Bank. It lies to the east of the Jordan river and is perhaps most known for the ancient city of Petra. Jordan and Israel were in a state of war from 1948, when Israel was created, till the 1994 peace treaty. Since then, relations have improved but get strained whenever the Israel-Palestine conflict heats up.

Khan Younis

A city in the southern end of the Gaza strip, Khan Younis has borne a significant brunt of Israel's ongoing bombing campaign. It contains the Khan Younis refugee camp, home to nearly 89,000 Palestinian refugees as per the UN. The city is known for its squalid conditions, made worse by Israel's brutal blockade.

Kibbutz

Kibbutz refers to intentional communities of Jews in Israel, which began by combining utopian ideals of socialism and Zionism. While traditionally established by Jewish settlers in Palestine as agricultural communities, the economy of the Kibbutzim today is highly diversified, and includes industrial and tertiary occupations.

Lebanon

Lying to the north of Israel, Lebanon is a former French territory. Israel had occupied southern Lebanon from 1985-2000, in response to a spate of attacks carried out by Palestinian fighters from the country. Lebanon continues to be home to Hezbollah, which holds 15 seats in the Lebanese parliament.

Levant

The Levant is an approximate historical geographical term, which, in its broader sense, refers to land lying to the east of the Mediterranean — from the island of Cyprus, to Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Syria, Turkey and even Greece.

Mossad

Mossad is the national intelligence agency of Israel, considered to be one of the best intelligence agencies in the world. It is currently under fire for its failure to predict last Saturday's Hamas attacks.

Nakba

Nakba, literally meaning "catastrophe" in Arabic, refers to the forced displacement of Palestinians due to the creation of Israel, resulting in thousands of Palestinians losing their homes. Each year, May 15 is solemnly observed by Palestinians as Nakba Day.

Netanyahu, Benjamin

Netanyahu is the longest tenured prime minister in Israel's history, in power from 1996-99, 2009-21 and currently, since 2022. He is the leader of the Likud party, a centre-right party in the country. Some have blamed the recent escalation on Netanyahu's mismanagement of the conflict.

Occupied territory

Occupied territories refer to land areas under the control of a foreign military force. The UN describes the West Bank and East Jerusalem as occupied territories as they remain under Israel's military control since the 1967 Six-Day War.

Palestine

Formerly a British mandate after the fall of the Ottomans in World War I, united Palestine was partitioned into two by the UN in 1947. Today, the state of Palestine, claims the West Bank and Gaza Strip as its territory, though in reality, the government only controls about 40 per cent of territory on the West Bank.

PLO

The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was created in 1964, and sought to establish an Arab state in the former British mandate of Palestine. A coalition of many parties and organisations, today it is officially recognised as the government of the State of Palestine.

Qatar

Qatar is a peninsular Arab country which has historically supported the Palestinian cause. Many top leaders of Palestinian militant organisations are said to have bases in the country. Some of the most vocal pro-Palestine reportage of the current conflict has come from Al Jazeera, owned and run by the Qatari state.

Ramallah

Ramallah is a major city on the West Bank and serves as the administrative and de facto capital of the Palestinian authority. It lies 10 km to the north of Jerusalem.

Russia

The Soviet Union allied with Palestine and Arab states in the Israel-Palestine conflict during the Cold War. The modern Russian state has by and large maintained that stance. Russian President Vladimir Putin has cautioned Israel against using tactics in Gaza like the Nazi siege of Leningrad (present day St Petersburg) during World War II.

Saudi Arabia

While Saudi Arabia remains, in principle, a staunch ally of Palestine, in practice it has grown closer to Israel in recent years. The recently inked Saudi-Israel deal, which planned to normalise ties between the two nations, has been cited by some experts as the reason for Hamas's attacks last week.

Settlers

In this context, settlers refer to Jews who have settled in the occupied territories of East Jerusalem, Gaza and the West Bank. Over the years, Israel has encouraged Jews from around the world to settle in these occupied territories.

Al Shifa Hospital

The Shifa Hospital is the largest medical complex in Gaza. Currently overwhelmed with casualties from Israel's bombing of the crowded area, supplies in the hospital are dwindling, causing concerns for an impending humanitarian catastrophe.

Syria

Lying to the northeast of Israel, Syria has traditionally been a supporter of the Palestinian cause. In the aftermath of the latest escalation in Israel, Israeli fighter jets bombed airports in the cities of Damascus and Aleppo, potentially to prevent the country from assisting anti-Israel fighters.

Tel Aviv

Tel Aviv grew to become one of the region's largest cities in the 1930s, with Zionists from around the world flocking to it. It was designed to be a city of the future — in stark contrast to unsanitary Arab towns around it. Today, it is Israel's most populous city, and an economic and cultural hub of Israel.

Tunnels

Due to fencing and extremely stringent border security, it is not easy to enter Israel. Thus, Palestinian militants have often used tunnels to circumvent border restrictions and launch attacks on Israel.

United States

The US, home to a large population of Jews itself, has been Israel's strongest and most steadfast ally over the years, providing it with extensive military and economic support. In the aftermath of the current escalation, the US sent its most advanced aircraft carrier, USS Gerald R Ford, to the eastern Mediterranean.

Unity Government

After Hamas's attack last week, Israel Premier Benjamin Netanyahu formed an emergency unity government to lead the war effort. Israel's politics is extremely divided with Netanyahu himself a polarising figure. Thus, a unity government, with support from two major opposition parties was formed in Israel to present a united front during the war.

Victory

Both Hamas and the IDF continue to fight with ferocity, it is unclear what victory would look like for either of them. Israel wants to wipe Hamas off the face of the planet, but historically states have seldom been able to eliminate popular movements with brute force. On the other hand, Hamas's attacks seem to be without a clear end themselves — they did kill Israelis, civilians included, but strategically Hamas is no better off today than prior to the attack.

The West Bank

The West Bank refers to the territory allotted to the State of Palestine according to the UN's 1947 Partition Plan, lying to the west of the Jordan river. It has been under the

military occupation of Israel since 1967. Currently, only about 40 per cent of the region is controlled by the Palestinian Authority.

White phosphorus

International NGO Human Rights Watch has claimed that Israel has used white phosphorus munitions in military operations in Gaza and Lebanon. These are incendiary munitions which, if in contact with humans, cause excruciating burns and long-term injuries. While not fully banned, their use in populated areas is unlawful.

X-Factor

How the conflict pans out will depend on how far Israel will go with its retaliation. IDF is far stronger militarily than Hamas, Hezbollah or any other Palestinian militia. However, if Israel continues its reprisals, other Arab states might join the conflict, might lead to a far larger conflict throughout the region that Israel would ideally like to avoid.

Yesh Atid

Yesh Atid is a centrist Israeli political party that has been part of coalition governments in the past. It is led by former TV journalist Yair Lapid and is the principal opposition to Netanyahu's government in the parliament.

Yom Kippur War

Yom Kippur is the holiest day in Judaism, a day of fasting and atonement. The Yom Kippur War was fought from October 6 to 25, 1973 between Israel and a coalition of Arab states led by Egypt and Syria, with the Arabs seeking to regain territory lost in the war of 1967. The war ended with a ceasefire, with Israel holding off the Arab onslaught with US help.

Zionism

Zionism is a political and ideological movement that emerged in the late 19th century, primarily among the Jewish community, with the aim to return the Jewish people to their 'homeland' in Palestine, at the time under Ottoman control. The movement gained traction amidst terrible anti-semitism in Europe as a means of establishing a safe haven for the Jews. It ultimately led to the creation of Israel in 1948, and continues to be the driving force behind Israeli politics.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Relations

Source: The Indian Express