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1. Restructuring Milestone for Coal Controller Organisation

Why in news?

The recent approval by the Ministry of Finance for the restructuring of the Coal Controller Organisation signifies a noteworthy advancement in adapting the organization to the changing dynamics of the coal sector.

Overview of Coal Controller Organisation

Under the Ministry of Coal, the Coal Controller Organisation is tasked with collecting and managing coal production data from both private and public sector coal mines in India. The organization plays a pivotal role in ensuring fairness in production and commercial transactions within the coal sector. Key responsibilities include regulating commercial mining, boosting domestic coal production, and achieving the ambitious target of 1 billion tonnes with zero imports in 2024. India's total coal production in FY23 was 893.08 million tonnes.

Background

As a subordinate office under the Ministry of Coal, the Coal Controller Organisation fulfills various responsibilities to maintain the integrity of coal production. This involves inspecting collieries to verify coal class, grade, or size accuracy, issuing directives for maintaining coal grades, and serving as an appellate authority in disputes. The organization also oversees coal stock disposal, quality surveillance, and plays a crucial role in assessing and collecting excise duty on raw coal.

Need for Restructuring

In response to the evolving landscape of the coal sector, the Ministry of Coal initiated a comprehensive review in November 2019. A four-member Committee, led by A.N.Sahay, proposed restructuring to enhance the organization's effectiveness. The restructuring, focused on regulating commercial mining and boosting domestic coal production, received approval from the Ministry of Finance on October 20, 2023.

Current Status and Future Plans

The restructuring involves a new sanctioned strength of 130 personnel, distributed across Gazetted and Non-Gazetted groups. The Ministry of Coal and the Coal Controller Organisation are in the process of approving recruitment rules for these sanctioned positions. This represents a crucial step in implementing the restructuring

and enhancing the organization's capabilities to meet the challenges and opportunities presented by the evolving coal sector.

Coal Controller Organisation's Commitment to Safety

Aligned with the Directorate General of Mines Safety (DGMS), the Coal Controller Organisation prioritizes safety and health standards in the mining industry. Safety provisions are incorporated into agreements with private mine allocattees, ensuring compliance with laws and industry practices for the protection of employees' health, safety, welfare, and minimum wages.

Relevance: GS Prelims; Economics

Source: PIB

2. Who are the Shia Houthis, and why are they aligned with the Sunni Palestinian Hamas?

Background

The United States and the United Kingdom launched strikes aimed at Houthi groups in Yemen on January 11, in response to the persistent Houthi attacks on ships passing through the Red Sea, the narrow body of water that separates Asia from Africa, and which is one of the world's busiest and most important maritime trade routes.

Since November 2023, the Houthis have attacked ships in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden to protest the Israeli military's continuing bombardment of Gaza. After Hamas, the Palestinian militant group, launched an attack against Israel on October 7, killing more than 1,200 people, Israel retaliated with a disproportionately heavy hand.

The Israeli military action has claimed around 23,000 lives so far, most of them civilians and including a very large number of children, according to Gaza's Health Ministry.

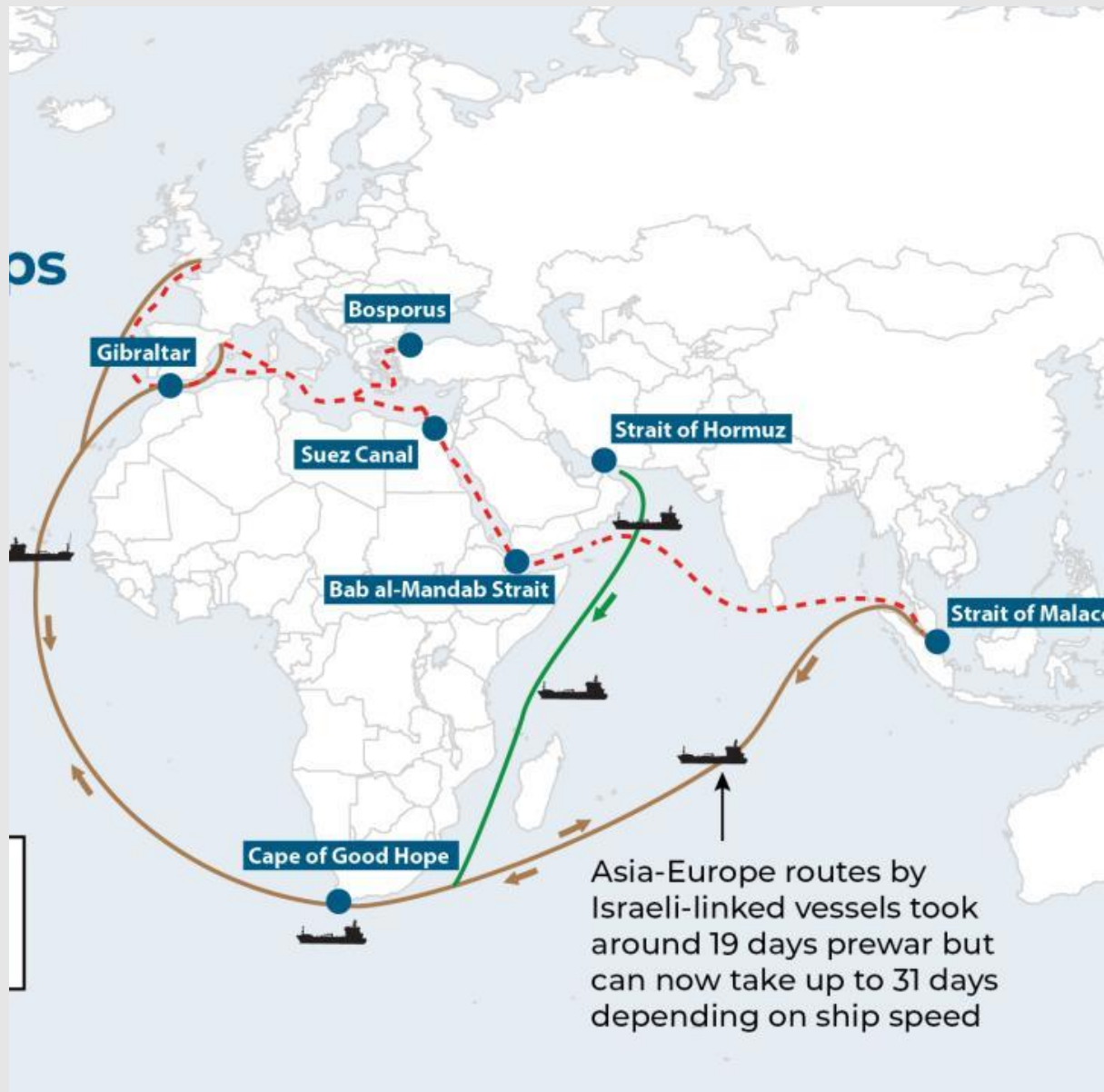
Ever since the Hamas attack, there have been concerns around the conflict drawing in other countries and groups such as the Houthis, given the various alliances and rivalries that have existed for decades in the Middle East. Who are the Houthis, why have they involved themselves in the Israel-Hamas war, and what risks do the latest escalation pose?

First, why have the US and the UK launched strikes on Houthi positions along Yemen's western coast (and deeper inland)?

On January 11, President Joe Biden said in a statement that the strikes were conducted with support from Australia, Bahrain, Canada, and the Netherlands "against a number of targets in Yemen used by Houthi rebels to endanger freedom of navigation in one of the world's most vital waterways".

And why are these attacks such a cause of concern for the West?

Around 12 per cent of the world's trade passes through the Red Sea and the Suez Canal that connects the Arabian Sea to the Mediterranean. After the Houthi attacks began around November 19, several major shipping and oil companies have announced they were pausing movement on this East-West passage.



Concerns over the safety of vessels have meant that some ships have had to sail around the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa. This route around the African continent takes much longer, and leads to higher costs of fuel.

While the Houthis initially said they were targeting Israel-linked ships, they have also attacked vessels registered in other countries, and carrying crews of other nationalities. In December, a Liberia-flagged merchant vessel, MV Chem Pluto, carrying a crew of 22

(of which 21 were Indians), came under a drone attack around 220 nautical miles southwest of Porbandar, Gujarat, while it was on its way to New Mangalore.

Who are the Houthis and why are they getting involved in the Israel-Hamas war?

The Houthis are a militant group that has been fighting the civil war in Yemen for a decade. After they seized power in the capital Sana'a in 2014, a Saudi-UAE alliance attempted to dislodge them. The Houthis now control northern Yemen, including Sana'a, and have a presence in most regions of the country. The earlier government now operates out of the port of Aden.

The Houthis are Shia, and are backed with arms and finances by the Shia regime in Iran. Iran's great regional rival, Sunni-majority Saudi Arabia, along with Western allies like the US, backs the Yemen government.

Though Hamas is a Sunni organisation, it is backed by Iran because of their mutual opposition to the US and Israel. The Houthis' support for Palestine and the Yemen conflict are both, therefore, also a manifestation of existing regional rivalries. The Iranian regime also backs and funds the Shia militant group Hezbollah in Lebanon, which has been taking on the Israeli defence forces in the north of the country.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Relations

Source: The Indian Express & The Hindu

3. What happened in Bhutan's elections — and are the results a win for India?

Why in news?

Tshering Tobgay and the People's Democratic Party (PDP) won Tuesday's (January 9) runoff election in Bhutan, defeating former bureaucrat Pema Chewang and the relatively new Bhutan Tendrel Party (BTP).

The PDP won 30 of 47 seats in the national legislature, with 3.2 lakh Bhutanese voters (out of a registered 5 lakh) casting the ballot. This was after a November 2023 primary election, in which three parties, including Lotay Tshering's ruling centre-left Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa party, were ousted.

Tobgay, 58, is a conservationist and former civil servant with a master's degree in public administration from Harvard University. He founded the liberal PDP in 2007, and previously served as prime minister from 2013 to 2018.

A promising young democracy

Unlike Pakistan and Bangladesh, where the fairness of elections is perennially in question, Bhutan's elections have been relatively straightforward, without any complaints of tampering or uneven playing fields. Even after the incumbent was ousted

in November, there were no crackdowns or violence reported, and no opposition figures have been imprisoned on politically motivated accusations.

This is quite the accomplishment, especially since Bhutan transitioned from a monarchy to a parliamentary democracy as recently as 2008. The nation is still ruled in the name of the monarch, however, the King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuk holds little actual political authority.

Since the first elections were held, 15 years ago, Bhutan's democratic system has significantly evolved. Whereas in the inaugural elections, only two parties were eligible to compete, the recent race saw five candidates. Moreover, compared to past elections, candidates this time had specific promises and positions, giving voters a genuine — and difficult — choice.

That being said, Bhutan's democracy is far from perfect. DC-based political advocacy group Freedom House characterises the country as "partly free," citing media censorship and discrimination against religious and linguistic minorities. Concerns remain about the lack of accountability among the Bhutanese political class.

Economic concerns key

The election this year took place against a dismal economic background in Bhutan. Its tourism industry is still reeling from the lingering effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the country has a youth unemployment rate of 29 per cent — over half of Bhutan's population is under 30 years old and categorised as 'youth'.

Moreover, data show that one in eight people in Bhutan are "struggling to meet their basic needs for food" and other necessities. Over the past five years, Bhutan's GDP has grown at a snail's pace of about 1.7 per cent on average. This is leading to record numbers of young people emigrating from Bhutan to places like Australia in pursuit of better opportunities.

These economic concerns were central to Tobgay's successful campaign. He has pledged to encourage the investment required to strengthen the \$3 billion Bhutan economy, and deal with the unemployment that he says is behind the "mass exodus" from Bhutan.

Where India stands

India remains Bhutan's biggest donor and ally, and will be crucial in helping with its economic recovery. India is funding multiple infrastructure initiatives in the country,

including a newly announced railway project. Bhutan also has untapped hydroelectric potential, with New Delhi likely to be a lucrative client.

But in recent years, Bhutan has also been an arena of hostilities between India and Bhutan's other neighbour China. Doklam, a border region claimed by both China and Bhutan, saw clashes between Indian and Chinese troops break out in 2017. Earlier this week, satellite photos purportedly depicting a Chinese military presence on Bhutan-claimed land were released.

Now Bhutan does not maintain formal diplomatic relations with China. However, the previous prime minister, Lotay Tshering, signed a joint cooperation agreement with Beijing in October 2023, which specified the duties of a joint technical team in delineating the border between the two. He was generally seen as more "pro-China", to the extent that he was willing to negotiate with the country.

Newly-elected Tobgay, on the other hand, is very much considered to be pro-India, and thus hands a major boost to India's strategic concerns in the region.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Bilateral Relations

Source: Indian Express