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1. Israel's plans to invade Rafah, and why US, others have criticised it

Why in news?

The Israeli government has announced its plans to increase the spread of its military actions in the south of Gaza, amid the ongoing conflict with the Palestinian militant organisation Hamas.

On October 7, 2023, Hamas launched an attack on Israel in which 1,200 people died and 250 were taken hostage. Israel's counteroffensive since then has led to nearly 28,000 deaths in Gaza, the majority being women and children. It has claimed it aims to completely "eliminate" Hamas and that some of its contentious actions – such as sending forces inside Gaza's hospitals – have been against hidden Hamas targets.

Why does Israel want to invade Rafah?

On February 9, a translation of a message from the office of Israeli Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said: "It is impossible to achieve the war objective of eliminating Hamas and leaving four Hamas battalions in Rafah. On the other hand, it is clear that a massive operation in Rafah requires the evacuation of the civilian population from the combat zones. That is why the Prime Minister directed the IDF and the defense establishment to bring to the cabinet a dual plan for both the evacuation of the population and the disbanding of the battalions."

Essentially, Netanyahu has said that this military action will end only when Hamas is "eliminated". He also said that telling Israel not to enter Rafah is like telling them to lose the war against Hamas.

What is the significance of Rafah?

According to the United Nations, more than 1.4 million people are currently in Rafah, which was once a city of 300,000 people. This is because Israeli forces attacked all other areas of the narrow Gaza Strip. Barely a week after the Hamas attacks, on October 13, its military told 1.1 million people living in the north of Gaza to evacuate within 24 hours as its offensive began.

Rafah is also located close to Egypt and has a border crossing which helps supply food and fuel to Gaza. Since Gaza borders the Mediterranean Sea to its west and Israel to its east, its population has no other functioning checkpoints to exit the region at the moment. In November 2023, a partial opening of the Rafah crossing was allowed, allowing critically injured people and foreign nationals to go to Egypt.

As is the case with this conflict, there are roots to this issue in history. Back in 1967, Israel fought a war with Egypt (which had controlled Gaza since 1957) and Jordan (which occupied the remaining Palestinian region of the West Bank since 1950).

Israel took control of these regions after the war but let go of some control in the 1990s after the Oslo Accords were signed with Palestinian leaders. However, Israelis continued living there (referred to as "settlers"). Its government withdrew settlements in 2005, claiming threats to safety. The purpose of the plan was to improve Israel's security and international status in the absence of peace negotiations with the Palestinians.



Why Palestinians are worried

With the bombardment of the Strip in recent months, there are not many viable options for safety and shelter for Palestinians. Already, access to basic amenities such as food, water and electricity is limited.

Further, some also believe that this military movement could lead to more Israeli settlements in the Gaza Strip. In March 2023, Israel's Parliament "repealed a 2005 Act that saw four Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank dismantled at the same time as Israeli forces withdrew from the Gaza Strip".

But, it's not just the Palestinians who are critical.

Israel's strongest ally, the United States, has also spoken about the ongoing attacks. President Joe Biden said on February 9 that Israel's response is "over the top."

Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry said any Israeli ground offensive on Rafah would have "disastrous consequences". Qatar and Saudi Arabia also warned of repercussions. Egypt has threatened to suspend its peace treaty with Israel.

This is also significant because Egypt has refused to take in refugees from Gaza. The reluctance is perhaps explained by the fact that it does not want to become involved in a conflict which seems to have no definite end at the moment.

Egypt has been concerned about the activities of Hamas in the past and helped destroy many of the underground tunnels in the region, used for Hamas members' movement.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Issues

Source: The Hindu

2. Pakistan polls: With Imran's team of independents in the lead, what happens now?

Why in News?

Uncertainty continues in Pakistan over who will form the next government, three days after its elections. While the polls seemed pretty much set to favour Nawaz Sharif-led Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N), which had the backing of the military, voting threw up a surprise, and the final tally — released after much delay amid accusations of rigging — saw independent candidates secure the maximum of 101 seats. Most of these independents are backed by Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), as they were barred from contesting on the party's symbol by the Election Commission.

The PML-N came second with 75 seats, and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) led by Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari stood third with 54 seats.

No bloc is in the position to form a government and the high number of independents has created an unprecedented situation.

How do National Assembly numbers stack up?

Pakistan's National Assembly consists of 336 seats. As many as 266 members are elected through direct voting, while 70 seats are reserved — 60 for women and 10 for non-

Muslims. PML-N and PPP have run a coalition government before this, but even if they join hands this time, they won't reach the halfway mark.

The reserved seats present an added complication, as they are filled on the basis of each party's numerical strength in the Assembly, but this time, the highest number is that of independents.

What are the rules for independents?

Under Rule 92(6) of Pakistan's election regulations, once their win is announced, independent candidates have three days to join a political party. The independent candidate has to apply to the head of the political party, who then informs the Election Commission.

The independents can also choose to band together under a name.



So what are the PTI-backed independents likely to do?

There's no clarity. PTI as of now is staging protests, alleging its actual tally is higher and the poll results have been rigged. It has also filed a number of petitions in court, alleging election malpractices.

There's a possibility that some of the 101 winners will join hands with parties opposed to the PTI and be part of the government.

Is there any precedent to such a high number of independents?

There is and there isn't. In the 1985 elections, no political party was permitted to participate, and thus every candidate, though with party allegiance and backing, had

contested in his or her individual name. It was only the elected representatives who were allowed to form political parties, after the elections.

This time, while the PTI candidates fought as independents, others contested under the name and symbol of their parties.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: The Hindu

3. Parliament also passes the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order (Amendment) Bill, 2024 and the Constitution (Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes) Orders (Amendment) Bill, 2024

Jammu and Kashmir

The Constitution (Jammu and Kashmir) Scheduled Tribes Order (Amendment) Bill, 2024 was passed by the Parliament, to include 'Pahari Ethnic Group, Paddari Tribe, Koli and Gadda Brahmin' communities in the list of STs of UT of Jammu and Kashmir.

The Rajya Sabha passed the bill on 9th February 2024 to amend the Constitution (Jammu & Kashmir) Scheduled Tribes Order, 1989 with respect to the UT of J&K. Earlier, the Bill had been passed by the Lok Sabha on 6th February 2024.

Andhra Pradesh and Odisha

Earlier, the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order (Amendment) Bill, 2024 in respect of Andhra Pradesh and the Constitution (Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes) Orders (Amendment) Bill, 2024 in respect of Odisha were passed by the Lok Sabha on 8th February 2024, in order to effect inclusions in their respective lists of Scheduled Tribes. The bill was earlier passed by the Rajya Sabha on 6th February 2024.

The Minister said that the Government is committed to the welfare of tribal communities of the country. She said that with this Bill, the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal groups will get justice.

Andhra Pradesh

The Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order (Amendment) Bill, 2024 is intended to amend the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order, 1950 to modify the list of Scheduled Tribes regarding Andhra Pradesh. The following inclusions will be made in list of Scheduled Tribes of Andhra Pradesh: -

- a. Inclusion of 'Bondo Porja' and 'Khond Porja', that are Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), at entry 25 in the ST list of Andhra Pradesh.
- b. Inclusion of 'Konda Savaras', that are Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), at entry 28 in the ST list of Andhra Pradesh.

Odisha

The Constitution (Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes) Orders (Amendment) Bill, 2024 proposed to amend the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950 and the Constitution

(Scheduled Tribes) Order, 1950 to modify the list of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in relation to Odisha. The following changes/inclusions will be made in list of Scheduled Tribes of Odisha: -

I. Four Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), which are proposed to be included in their own names in the list of STs:

- i. Pauri Bhuyan, Paudi Bhuyan as synonyms of Bhuiya, Bhuyan
- ii. Chuktia Bhunjia as synonym of Bhunjia
- iii. Bondo as sub-entry under STs "Bondo Poraja, Bonda Paroja. Banda Paroja"; and,
- iv. Mankidia as synonym of ST "Mankirdia".

II. Inclusion of communities through New Entry:

- i. Muka Dora, Mooka Dora, Nuka Dora, Nooka Dora with area restriction (in undivided Koraput District i.e., Koraput, Nowrangapur, Rayagada & Malkangiri districts).
- ii. Konda Reddy, Konda Reddi.

After the Bills become an Act, member of the communities newly listed in the revised list of Scheduled Tribes of J&K, Andhra Pradesh and Odisha will also be able to derive benefits meant for STs under the existing schemes of the Government.

Some of the major schemes run by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs include Pre- and Post-Matric Scholarship, National Overseas Scholarship, National Fellowship and Scholarship Schemes, along with concessional loans from National Scheduled Tribes Finance and Development Corporation, Hostels for ST boys and girls etc. In addition to above, they will also be entitled to benefits of reservation in services and admission to educational institutions as per Government policy.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: The Hindu