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### **1. Indians can travel to Iran without a visa**

Indians can now travel to Iran without a visa, as long as they meet a few conditions. While the announcement for this had been made in December last year, the conditions have been announced now, and the relaxation has come into effect from February 4.

#### **Who can travel visa-free to Iran?**

Indians holding ordinary passports can go to Iran without a visa, as long as they are visiting the country for tourism purposes. Also, they must enter Iran via air. The relaxation does not apply to those travelling for other purposes, like work or study.

#### **How long can you stay in Iran?**

Those entering Iran without a visa can stay for a maximum of 15 days. They can re-enter the country after six months.

#### **Why has Iran lifted visa requirements?**

In December 2023, Iran had announced the relaxation for India as well as 32 other countries. The move was aimed at boosting tourism and attracting more visitors from across the world.

#### **Which other countries allow visa-free travel for India?**

Malaysia, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam have also recently waived visa requirements for the citizens of India.

In December 2023, Thailand — another neighbouring country whose economy relies heavily on tourism — had announced a visa exemption for Indian citizens, from November 10 that year to May 10, 2024.

In October 2023, Sri Lanka lifted visa requirements for the citizens of seven countries including India, with the exemption to continue till March 31, 2024.

At present, 27 countries provide visa-free entry to the citizens of India. These include Kenya, Indonesia, Barbados, Bhutan, Dominica, Haiti, Maldives, Mauritius, Nepal, Samoa, and Trinidad and Tobago, among others.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Bilateral Relations

Source: Indian Express

### **2. What is the 8.5-acre land case in which Hemant Soren was arrested, what is he accused of**

#### **Why in News?**

Arrested in an alleged land scam case, Former Jharkhand Chief Minister Hemant Soren Monday (February 5) challenged the BJP and the ED that if they could produce any record naming him as the owner of 8.5 acres of land in Ranchi, he would leave politics and the state itself.



Former Jharkhand CM Hemant Soren after his party won the floor test in the state Assembly, in Ranchi

In custody of the Enforcement Directorate (ED), Soren was allowed to vote in the trust motion that the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM)-led alliance won. He was arrested on the evening of January 31, after he submitted his resignation to the Governor.

### **What is the genesis of the allegations against Soren?**

The ED had been investigating various cases in Jharkhand, including illegal mining, a MGNREGA 'scam' of 2009, and the alleged illegal sale and purchase of an Army plot in Ranchi. It was during the Army land investigation that the name of then revenue sub-inspector of Bargain Circle Office, Bhanu Pratap Prasad, popped up. Prasad was eventually linked to Soren.

The ED claimed that Prasad was part of a syndicate involved in acquiring properties illegally, through force as well as by falsifying government records. According to the agency, Prasad was the custodian of several original registers — also known as Panji 2 — in which land records (particularly ownership details) were falsified.

During searches on April 13, 2023, ED said that 11 trunks of property documents along with 17 Panji 2 were seized from him. This information was shared by the ED with the then Chief Secretary of State. This FIR became the genesis of the registration of the ECIR — ED's equivalent of an FIR — in which Soren was arrested.

### **What are the allegations against Soren?**

According to the ED, Soren is among the people Bhanu Pratap “hatched conspiracies with” to take over properties. The agency alleged that details of the illegally acquired/possessed properties have been found on Soren’s mobile phone. While the former CM was in custody, his phone’s data was extracted, and several chats related to cash transactions, illegal benefits to others in acquiring land, etc., were identified, the ED claimed.

The land parcels, totalling an area of 8.5 acres in Bargain area of Ranchi, were physically verified by Prasad on instructions from the CMO, the ED alleged. It said its survey of the area under the PMLA confirmed that Soren had illegal possession of the land.

### **What has been Soren’s response?**

While responding to the ED summons, Hemant Soren in his letter said the 8.5 had been “wrongfully alleged to be owned” by him. In his plea to the Supreme Court against the arrest, Soren said that the ED appeared to be making a “fishing and roving enquiry” for “political gain”.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: Indian Express

## **3. The new process for picking Election Commissioners, what led to it**

### **Why in news?**

Election Commissioner Anup Chandra Pandey is set to retire on February 14, and his successor will be picked through a consultative process being adopted for the first time.

The selection will be made by a committee comprising Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Lok Sabha Leader of Opposition Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury, and a Union minister. A similar committee, comprising the PM, Chowdhury, and Home Minister Amit Shah, met recently to appoint the Lokpal and the Central Vigilance Commissioner.

Before this, members of the Election Commission were appointed solely at the discretion of the government.

### **What prompted the change?**

It was the Supreme Court that forced the government. Four petitions were filed before the apex court in 2015, 2017, 2021, and 2022, which broadly called for a fair and transparent system to choose Election Commissioners.

On October 23, 2018, while considering the 2015 petition, a two-judge bench felt that the matter required interpretation of Article 324 of the Constitution, which deals with the role of the Election Commission of India. This issue hadn’t been discussed before in the Supreme Court, and so it was referred to a Constitution bench. In September 2022, a five-judge Constitution bench led by Justice KM Joseph started hearing the petitions.

The petitioners pointed out that Article 324(2) specifies the President’s role in appointing Election Commissioners, with the caveat that this appointment is subject to any law passed by

Parliament. However, successive governments had not shown any inclination to enact such a law. They criticised the current appointment system for being opaque and said it raises doubts about the institution's independence. They called for a consultative process in which a collegium or a body of persons is tasked with the responsibility to select the Election Commissioners.

### **How were Election Commissioners appointed then?**

The power to make appointments rested exclusively with the Executive (the Union government). The government maintained a database of serving and retired officers, primarily Secretaries to the Government of India and Chief Secretaries, from which the Law Ministry would create a shortlist. The Prime Minister held the power to decide the appointment, with the President formally appointing the chosen candidate.

Notably, past Election Commissioners were predominantly retired officers of the Indian Administrative Services (IAS), with very few exceptions.

### **What was the Supreme Court's ruling?**

On March 2, 2023, the five-judge bench ruled on the matter.

The Supreme Court delved into the legislative history of Article 324, including the discussions in the Constituent Assembly regarding the role of the Election Commission and the appointment of its members. The Court observed that it was evident that the founding fathers of the Constitution did not want the Executive to have exclusive authority in appointing Election Commission members. Therefore, the inclusion of the words "subject to any law to be made by Parliament" in Article 324 (2) was representative of the need for Parliament to legislate on this matter.

The absence of such a law, the court noted, left a vacuum. Taking note of the "devastating effect of continuing to leave appointments in the sole hands of the Executive", the court deemed it appropriate to lay down a process for the appointment of election commissioners. Accordingly, it ruled that "the appointment of the Chief Election Commissioner and the Election Commissioners shall be made by the President on the advice of a Committee consisting of the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition of the Lok Sabha, and in case no Leader of the Opposition is available, the leader of the largest opposition Party in the Lok Sabha in terms of numerical strength, and the Chief Justice of India."

However, the Court was careful to specify that these norms were "subject to any law to be made by Parliament". In other words, Parliament was free to enact a law on the appointment process in the future.

### **What happened after the SC judgment?**

The Centre introduced a Bill in Parliament in August last year, outlining a procedure for appointing Election Commissioners. Since the Court had specified that its appointment norms are "subject to any law to be made by Parliament," the government was well within its right to bring a Bill. However, the appointment process proposed in the Bill raised concerns regarding its potential to undermine the reforms sought by the Court.

The Bill, passed by Parliament in December 2023, establishes a committee comprising the Prime Minister, the Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha, and a Cabinet Minister nominated by the PM. The selection will be made from five names shortlisted by a screening panel headed by the Law Minister and comprising two Union secretaries.

The composition of the committee was criticised by the Opposition. This is because, as per the intent of the Constitution's framers, the Election Commission should be an independent body. The proposed committee's composition effectively sidelines the Leader of Opposition, who could be consistently outvoted by the Prime Minister and the Union minister.

This Bill was passed by Parliament in December 2023 and the President gave her assent within a week.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: The Indian Express