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1. How did Indians end up in the Russia-Ukraine war? What did the CBI uncover with respect to the illegal recruitment of Indian youth to the Russian military?

Why in News?

The deaths of two Indian nationals in the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war and the recent raids by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) which uncovered a human trafficking network recruiting Indians as "security helpers" and other personnel for the Russian military have sparked widespread concern. This has highlighted the plight of dozens of Indians stuck on the frontlines of the Russia-Ukraine war after they were deceived into working with the Russian military under false pretences.



What happened?

The presence of Indians in combat roles on the Russian side, first surfaced in February this year. Initially hired as "army security helpers," Indians were compelled to fight against their will after their passports and documents were seized.

One of the men, a resident of Uttar Pradesh, told that he went to Russia with the help of an agent in November last year after he was assured that there would be no deployment in the war zone. However, he was sent to the frontline in January after some basic training in handling weapons. "We were categorically told that we would not be sent to the battlefield and promised ₹1.95 lakh salary and ₹50,000 additional bonus per month. Except for the ₹50,000

bonus for two months, I have not received any money," he said. The U.P. resident claimed that he tried to contact the Indian Embassy in Moscow but all his pleas went in vain.

In the subsequent days, more Indian citizens and their families came forward to seek the government's intervention. A group of seven Indians from Punjab and Haryana released a set of videos, claiming that they arrived in Russia on tourist visas but were forced to join the Russian Army as "helpers" after being detained.

How did the agents con people?

A multi-State human trafficking network busted by the CBI in a crackdown on visa recruiters in seven cities across India last week revealed how Indian youths were allegedly pushed into the war zone by consultancy firms on the pretext of a better life and livelihood with the Russian military as security guards and helpers, as well as higher education. So far, the probe agency has found 35 instances of people sent to Russia and listed at least 17 consultancy companies spread across India who were involved in the trafficking.

As per the CBI, the "organised network" lured Indian youth through social media and local agents, offering them highly paid jobs and lucrative employment opportunities in Russia. A number of students were reportedly tricked into enrolling in dubious private universities by agents promising low fees and visa extensions. Once the aspirants reached Russia, the local agents seized their passports and forced them to join the armed forces, the CBI said. At least two Indians with the Russian military have lost their lives in the fighting so far.

What has the government said?

The Indian government is in talks with the Russian authorities about the early release of Indian citizens who were duped into working with the Russian military.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Indians Diaspora

Source: The Hindu

2. How will the recently proposed highway tolling system work? Will it be based on the U.S.'s Global Positioning System? Will it be mandatory for all vehicles to fit an on-board unit device? What about the FASTags collection system?

Why in news?

Road Transport and Highways Minister Nitin Gadkari said in Parliament in February that the government plans to implement a new highway toll collection system based on the global navigation satellite system.

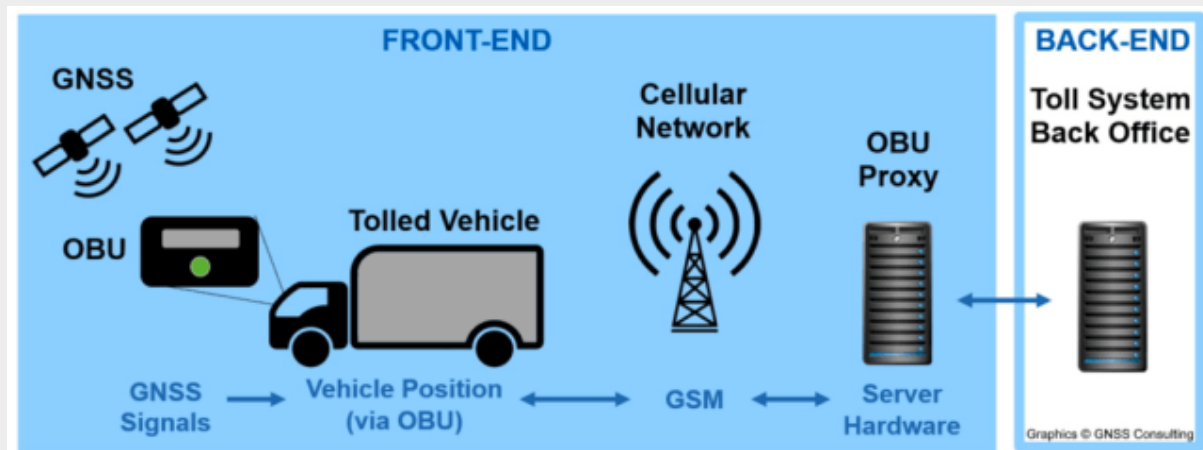
What is the new proposed highway tolling system?

The global navigation satellite system is a term used to refer to any satellite-based navigation system, including the United States' Global Positioning System (GPS). It uses a large constellation of satellites to provide more accurate location and navigation information to users globally as compared to the GPS alone.

An official of the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways explained that its implementation will involve an On-Board Unit (OBU), or a tracking device, fitted inside a vehicle whose location

can be mapped using GAGAN, the Indian satellite navigation system with an approximate accuracy of 10 metres. The co-ordinates of the entire length of the country's national highways will have to be logged with the help of digital image processing, and software will be used to assign the toll rate on a particular highway, calculate the toll amount for a vehicle as per the distance travelled by it and then deduct it from a wallet linked to the OBU.

The Ministry official further explained that the aim of the technology is to provide users the benefit of paying toll only for the actual distance travelled on a highway, or pay-as-you-use. The government also hopes that it will eventually allow barrier-free movement.



What are some of the challenges?

One of the major challenges posed by this technology is that of recovering the toll amount if a road user fails to clear his payment after completing a journey on a highway, for instance, if the digital wallet linked with the OBU is empty.

Because there are no barriers involved that can stop a non-compliant vehicle, there are other issues such as when a vehicle travels on a highway without an OBU device linked or the OBU device is deliberately switched off to avoid payment or if a car's OBU is installed on a truck to pay less toll.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Science & Technology

Source: The Hindu

3. France inscribed the guaranteed right to abortion in its constitution

Why in News?

In a global first, France inscribed the guaranteed right to abortion in its constitution on March 8 sending a powerful message of solidarity with women's rights on International Women's Day. The move comes after a rollback of abortion rights in the U.S. in recent times, especially the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in 2022 to overturn a 50-year-old ruling in Roe versus Wade.

What is the reform's legislative history?

The amendment had already been passed by the National Assembly in January and by the Senate last week. However, final approval by parliamentarians at a joint session was needed

to effect constitutional change. During the voting session, out of the 902 legislators, 780 voted in favour of the reform, 72 voted against it and 50 abstained.



Abortion, although legal in France since 1975, will now be a “guaranteed freedom” for women. Although rare, amending the constitution is not without precedent in France. The French constitution has been modified nearly 25 times since it was adopted in 1958. The last instance was in 2008 when Parliament was awarded more powers and presidential tenure was limited to a maximum of two consecutive five-year terms in office.

What about other European countries?

Abortion is currently accessible in more than 40 European nations, but some countries are seeing increased efforts to limit access to the procedure. In September 2022, Hungary’s far-right government made it obligatory for women to listen to the pulse of the foetus, sometimes called the “foetal heartbeat,” before they can access a safe abortion.

Poland, which has some of the most stringent abortion laws in Europe, allows termination only in the event of rape, incest or a threat to the mother’s health or life. Restrictions were further tightened in 2020 when the country’s top court ruled that abortions on the grounds of foetal defects were unconstitutional.

The U.K. permits abortion up to 24 weeks of pregnancy if it is approved by two doctors. Delayed abortions are allowed only if there exists a danger to the mother’s life. However, women who undergo abortions after 24 weeks can be prosecuted under the Offences Against the Person Act, 1861.

Italy resisted Vatican pressure and legalised abortion in 1978 by allowing women to terminate pregnancies up to 12 weeks or later if their health or life was endangered. However, the law allows medical practitioners to register as “conscientious objectors,” thereby making access to the procedure extremely difficult.

The French initiative could, however, embolden efforts to add abortion to the European Charter of Fundamental Rights.

What is India's stance on abortion?

India implemented the Medical Termination of Pregnancy (MTP) Act in 1971 to allow licensed medical professionals to perform abortions under specific conditions as long as the pregnancy did not exceed 20 weeks. The Act was further amended in 2021 to permit abortions up to 24 weeks for certain cases.

The opinion of only one registered medical practitioner will be required for the abortion of a foetus up to 20 weeks of gestation. If a pregnancy is 20-24 weeks, the right to seek abortion is determined by two registered medical practitioners but only under certain categories of forced pregnancies, including statutory rape in case of minors or sexual assault; women with disabilities; or when there is a change in the marital status of the woman during pregnancy. After 24 weeks, the Act requires a State-level medical board to be set up in "approved facilities", which may "allow or deny termination of pregnancy" only if there is substantial foetal abnormality.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Issues

Source: The Hindu