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1. What is behind Ukraine's Kursk operation in Russia?

Why in News?

As of August 9, Ukrainian troops had advanced as far as 35 kilometers (21 miles) into Russian territory in the Kursk region. However, they reportedly do not have full control of the area. Other military experts believe this assessment to be realistic. There have been reports of fierce fighting, deaths and casualties in the area.



Why did the Ukrainian army advance into Russian territory?

Military experts have said various political and military factors explain Ukraine's surprise offensive.

1. One argument is that Ukraine wants to conquer as much Russian territory as possible and thus exert pressure on Moscow. This would strengthen Ukraine's position in possible peace negotiations with Russia. Ukrainian land occupied by Russia could be exchanged for Russian land conquered by Ukraine.

2. From a strategic perspective, the advance onto Russian soil could also create a buffer zone for the population in the contested areas of Ukraine. In addition, the advance is intended to weaken the Russian army.

3. It could also force Russia to deploy more troops to the embattled border region, thus weakening the Russian army along the main front line in Ukraine. Russia lacks the manpower to compensate for losses on the front, despite its conscription measures.

How is the Kursk operation linked to recent gas price increases?

Russia's Kursk region plays an important role in the gas supply chain. The last transit station through which gas flows from Russia to Europe via Ukraine is located near the small town of Sudzha. So far, gas has continued to flow uninterrupted.

The importance of Russian gas exports to Europe has, however, decreased since Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Relevance: GS Prelims; International Issues

Source: Indian Express

2. Will Saudi's new law aid migrant workers?

Why in News?

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, one of the world's largest recipients of migrant domestic workers (MDWs), will roll out a new domestic workers law in September. The six GCC states (Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, and Bahrain) employ close to 5.5 million migrant domestic workers, and all of them exclude MDWs from labour laws, with only four having passed specific domestic worker laws.

How many migrants work in Saudi Arabia?

In Saudi, as of the first quarter of 2024, there were 39,13,925 migrant domestic workers with 27,32,344 males and 11,81,581 females, making up 25% of the total workforce. The exclusion of these workers from the labour law leaves huge gaps in protection, as monitoring mechanisms such as labour inspections, complaints mechanisms, and the Wages Protection System do not apply to the sector. These vulnerabilities are further exacerbated by the systemic marginalisation of migrant workers under the Kafala system. The employer-tied visa system leaves lower-income migrant workers at the absolute mercy of their sponsors. In effect, the state has outsourced the immigration regime to individuals, the majority of whom are citizens. The current and upcoming MDW laws do not address these protection gaps sufficiently. It is common knowledge that female MDWs face extreme abuse at the hands of their employers within households and by officials when they seek remedy. Saudi Arabia's regulations have

failed to address these issues, and the broader justice mechanism that fails migrant workers in general is especially indifferent to the plight of MDWs.

Saudi still does not have a minimum wage, and mandatory referral wages apply only when prescribed in bilateral agreements by origin countries. This means MDWs are not only paid poorly but there are no clear calculations for overtime, though almost all of them are overworked.

Who are migrant domestic workers?

They are employed by individuals to render services in their household. The combination of exclusion from labour laws and the stranglehold of the Kafala system results in employers having absolute control over domestic workers. Saudi has 14 categories of domestic work. Some categories are recent additions, and concerningly, go beyond household work to roles requiring specialist skills.

As per the official data, there are over 20 lakh workers who fall under the category 'servants and house cleaners' — referring to domestic workers, nearly 60% of whom are female. The second most recruited category is drivers, at 18,17,120, almost all of whom are male. Saudi is the only GCC state where male domestic workers constitute the majority in the sector, at nearly 70%.

How does the Kafala system work?

THE KAFALA SYSTEM Despite the reforms underway, employers still have powers over migrant workers to:

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

- 1** SPONSOR THEIR VISA AND ISSUE THEIR RESIDENCE PERMIT
- 2** STOP A WORKER CHANGING JOBS WHILE IN CONTRACT, OFTEN FOR UP TO 5 YEARS
- 3** REPORT WORKERS AS HAVING "ABSCONDED", LEADING TO ARREST OR DEPORTATION
- 4** CONTROL WHETHER DOMESTIC WORKERS AND OTHERS CAN LEAVE THE COUNTRY BY ISSUING EXIT PERMITS

GCC citizens are wealthy and can afford 'engines of liberation' — mechanised consumer goods that were meant to reduce the domestic labour of women. This has not played out as desired in most patriarchal cultures, even if women are active in the labour economy and the dependence on women's labour at home is still high. Large joint families living together demand a host of unpaid services that women in the household were once responsible for. With growing affluence and the assumption that domestic work is menial, these tasks are now delegated to paid MDWs, but the value placed on their work — and by extension them —

remains low. Many of the mechanisms and institutions set up by Saudi to govern the sector tend to have an employer bias, including its Musaned system, the domestic worker recruitment platform, through which all aspects of the recruitment and employment of MDWs are regulated.

Consequently, the intersection of the Kafala system and labour law exclusion results in a type of bonded labour. The state makes it easy to recruit and employ migrant workers, resulting in extreme exploitation with impunity. The cost of recruitment excluding wages is steep — between U.S.\$2,000 and U.S.\$5,000 per worker — and employers feel they have 'bought' the worker, instead of seeing it as payment for services.

Is the new MDW law better?

Some notable features of the new law are a maximum of 10 working hours a day and entitlement to a weekly off day; prohibition of confiscation of identity documents; emphasis on workers' right to communication; workers have a right to terminate the contract without losing entitlements under certain conditions; compensation for unjust termination; one month paid leave yearly and employer must pay for the annual ticket home.

Saudi also introduced insurance on all new MDW contracts to protect workers and employers, the cost of which is built into the recruitment fees. More recently and quite significantly, the kingdom included all new MDWs in its WPS from July, and will gradually cover all existing MDWs by the end of 2025.

What are the persisting concerns?

Saudi has a poor record of implementation, especially when it comes to protecting the rights of migrant workers. Wage theft and labour exploitation are rampant, but employers are rarely held to account. When it comes to MDWs, especially women, they cannot leave the employer's household without permission and there's a risk of being reported as absconding (huroob).

Though the absconding regime has been reformed, making it more difficult to file false charges, and giving workers more time to challenge false accusations, the law still can be weaponised by abusive employers. The lack of labour inspections, limited access to communication, and language barriers make it difficult both for the state to assess the impact of reforms and for workers to report violations.

What is the status of Indian MDWs?

At 26.5 lakh, Indians constitute the single largest migrant population in the kingdom. Though Saudi does not furnish nationality-wise disaggregated data, by several estimations, the domestic work sector comprises a large percentage of Indians working as drivers, and also in other categories.

Recruitment of Indian MDWs must be through the eMigrate system. India's minimum referral wage for the sector is SAR1,500 (₹33,400). Special provisions for female MDWs — minimum age must be 30 — include a financial bank guarantee of U.S.\$2,500 in favour of the Embassy in Riyadh. The contract must be attested at one of the missions in Saudi.

However, according to many workers in distress, consular support is limited at best to repatriation and there is no effort to help with access to justice or ensure workers receive all their entitlements before deportation. Given the size of the kingdom and the diaspora, the Embassy in Riyadh and the consulate office in Jeddah are not equipped enough to deal with these needs.

Relevance: GS Prelims; International Issues

Source: The Hindu

3. How Centre's Clean Plant Programme plans to boost production of fruits

Why in News?

The Union Cabinet recently approved the Clean Plant Programme (CPP), aimed at increasing the yield and productivity of horticulture crops in India.

First announced in Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman's interim Budget speech in February 2023, the CPP is also targeted at enhancing the quality of fruit crops across the nation. The Ministry of Agriculture has sought an allocation of Rs 1,765 crore for the programme. One half of this will be sourced from the budget of the Mission for Integrated Development of Horticulture (MIDH), while the other half will be in the form of a loan from the Asian Development Bank (ADB).



GOVERNMENT OF INDIA
MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE
AND FARMERS WELFARE

Cabinet Approves Ambitious 'Clean Plant Programme (CPP)' to Revolutionize Horticulture Sector in India

Setting new standards for excellence & sustainability with a substantial investment of **₹1,765.67 Crores** towards this initiative

9 world class state-of-the-art Clean Plant Centres (CPCs) to be established across India in the ICAR's Institutes

A Robust **Certification System** will be Implemented ensuring thorough accountability and traceability in planting material production and sale

Support will be provided to large-scale nurseries for the development of **Infrastructure**

Implemented by the **National Horticulture Board** in association with **Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR)**

How will the CPP work?

The programme has three main components geared towards helping farmers obtain virus-free, high-quality planting material (plants used for vegetative propagation) in order to increase crop yields and improve income opportunities. These are:

- * Development of nine Clean Plant Centers (CPCs) which will provide disease diagnostics and therapeutics, create mother plants to be sent to nurseries, and quarantine all domestic and imported planting materials intended for commercial propagation and distribution;
- * Enhancement of infrastructure, including the development of large-scale nurseries to facilitate the efficient multiplication of clean planting material — the mother plants obtained from the CPCs will be multiplied in nurseries and distributed to farmers;
- * Creation of regulatory and certification process to ensure thorough accountability and traceability in the production and sale of planting material.

What is the need for the CPP?

India is the second largest producer of fruits and vegetables in the world after China. From 2013-14 to 2023-24, the area under horticulture crops has risen from 24 million hectares to 28.63 million hectares, and production has increased from 277.4 million metric tonnes (mt) to 352 million mt.

India is also a major importer and exporter of fresh fruits. In the financial year 2023-24, India exported fresh fruits worth \$1.15 billion, while it imported fruits worth \$2.73 billion. With the rising consumption of fruits in the country, demand has specifically increased for planting materials of foreign apples, and "exotics" such as avocado and blueberry.

According to sources, between 2018-20, the EXIM committee for import of planting material of fruit plants permitted the import of 21.44 lakh apple plants in 2018, which increased to 49.57 lakh in 2020. In 2018, permission was given to import only 1,000 avocado plants which increased to 26,500 in 2020. Similarly, permissions for the import of blueberry plants went up from 1.55 lakh in 2018 to 4.35 lakh in 2020.

At present, the process of importing plants is very cumbersome, with imported plants having to be kept in quarantine for two years. The CPCs will cut this period down to six months, and thus make it easier for farmers to access disease free and genuine planting material for horticultural crops in India.

Relevance: GS Prelims; Economics

Source: Indian Express