



Current Affairs of the Day

GS Paper II

- New land regulations spark protests in Lakshadweep
- Migrant workers may just want to go home, says SC
- Record foodgrain exports amid hunger say the group

GS Paper III

- Will not limit functions till new data law: WhatsApp
- 'GST Council should prioritise COVID relief, States' cash woes'



New land regulations spark protests in Lakshadweep

Discontent is simmering in the verdant environs of the Lakshadweep group of islands over a slew of regulations introduced by the new administrator.

Highlights:

1. The UT administration is accused of exploiting the restrictions, which prevent locals from gathering, to push “arbitrary legislation”.
2. The most recent of these is the creation of a Lakshadweep Development Authority (LDA) with extensive powers, including eviction of landowners.
3. Islanders have pointed out that the legislation is out of sync with the social and environmental realities of the archipelago.
4. The creation of the Lakshadweep Development Authority (LDA), with extensive powers, including eviction of landowners, is widely read as having been pushed by the real estate lobby and against the interest of the islanders.
5. Hundreds of islanders have written to the administrator demanding the withdrawal of the proposed regulation.
6. The regulation empowers the government, identified as the administrator, to constitute Planning and Development Authorities (PDAs) to plan the development of any area identified as having “bad layout or obsolete development”.
7. An authority thus created would be a corporate body with a government-appointed chairman, a town planning officer and three “expert” government nominees besides two local authority representatives.
8. The islanders opposing the plan have pointed out that the ecologically fragile islands are tiny and thickly populated.

Migrant workers may just want to go home, says SC

Whether it was the national lockdown in 2020 or the mini lockdowns in 2021, psychologically, the attitude of migrant workers remains the same — they would want to go home, Justice M.R. Shah addressed the Union government.



Highlights:

1. The court was hearing a suo motu case to provide migrant labourer families marooned in big cities dry rations and cooked food and public transport to workers travelling home to their villages, where they think they would be safe from the clutches of the virus.
2. Responding quickly, the government submitted that it had opened control rooms. But it was the responsibility of the States to provide cooked food for stranded migrant workers.
3. The court said unorganised labourers, wandering from one place of work to another in megacities, could not be expected to have ration cards.

‘Grimmer this time’

1. States like Delhi and Uttar Pradesh should provide migrants cooked food in government schools.
2. The court should direct the States to evolve a cash transfer mechanism to help these destitute workers stay alive. Ultimately, the money will come back into the economy. These people will use the cash to buy food and essentials.

Absence of a migrant database

1. The government’s delay in completing a national database to identify and register migrant workers in order to provide the benefits in times of dire need stood out like a sore thumb in a Supreme Court hearing.
2. Such a database would have made it easier for the government to identify and provide essentials such as food and dry rations to stranded migrant labourers during the second wave of the pandemic.
3. A uniform national data grid of migrant workers, in which both the Centre and States provide inputs should be there. This would ensure that benefits meant for migrant workers reach them and no other.
4. The court asked the government to clarify what steps it had taken under the Code of Social Security of 2020.



Record foodgrain exports amid hunger say the group

The record export of foodgrains at a time of widespread hunger and distress due to COVID-19 exposes “the government’s apathy towards the people”, according to the Right to Food Campaign.

Highlights:

1. The advocacy group has called for the universalisation of the public distribution system (PDS) for at least six months, noting that the quantity of exported grain could have been used to provide 25 crore people with rations for a year.
2. The surge of COVID-19, spread to rural areas and lockdowns in most parts of the country have led to severe economic distress, especially among informal sector workers, said the Right to Food Campaign.
3. It said the situation was worse than in 2020, due to the large number of households now dealing with illness and high healthcare expenses on top of a year of job losses and declining wages.
4. The Centre’s relief scheme, PMGKAY, only provides additional free grain for two months for those who already have ration cards. The food security crisis facing informal sector workers, many of whom do not have ration cards, has been “completely invisibilised”.
5. The government’s apathy towards people has been thoroughly exposed by the fact that this year has seen record exports of foodgrains.
6. Noting that over 13 million tonnes of non-basmati rice and more than two million tonnes of wheat were exported in 2020-21, the Campaign said this could have been used to give 5 kg grain per month to 25 crore people for a year. In fact, rice was exported at ₹27 per kg, lower than the FCI’s economic cost of ₹37 per kg, it said.
7. Foodgrain stocks in FCI’s warehouses stand at a record high of 100 million tonnes.

It is becoming quite apparent that the government does not care about filling the stomachs of the hungry and is happy to rather export the grains or use them for other purposes like it was done for ethanol production last year said the campaign.



Will not limit functions till new data law: WhatsApp

Facebook-owned WhatsApp has told the government that it will not limit functionality for users in the coming weeks, but will continue the current approach of reminding users about the update until “at least the forthcoming Personal Data Protection law comes into effect”.

Highlights:

1. WhatsApp has said this in its response to the notice by the Government of India asking the platform to withdraw the controversial update to its privacy policy.

Highest priority

1. It has responded to the Government and assured them that the privacy of users remains our highest priority. As a reminder, the recent update does not change the privacy of people’s personal messages. Its purpose is to provide additional information about how people can interact with businesses if they choose to do so.
2. The spokesperson added that WhatsApp will not limit the functionality of how the platform works in the coming weeks. Instead, it will continue to remind users from time to time about the update as well as when people choose to use relevant optional features, like communicating with a business that is receiving support from Facebook.
3. As per the government, WhatsApp’s updated privacy policy was a violation of several provisions of the existing Indian laws.

‘GST Council should prioritise COVID relief, States’ cash woes’

The Goods and Services Tax (GST) Council should prioritise giving relief on the taxes levied on COVID-19 vaccines and critical medical supplies, and rationalise GST rates to provide relief to sectors that are worst hit by the second wave, said regulatory experts.

Highlights:

1. A mechanism for paying States their compensation dues for this year shall also be a knotty issue for the council to figure out, while little headway is expected on more contentious problems such as bringing petroleum products under the



GST regime to reduce the burden of high retail fuel prices on the common man.

2. The council should consider reducing the tax rates or zero-rating the GST on essential material to combat COVID — from hand sanitisers to oximeters and oxygen concentrators.
3. Individuals and companies importing oxygen concentrators, oxygen cylinders, regulators and rakes are looking for exemptions or credits on these medical devices as in most cases, the imports are in the public interest or for donation to State governments and NGOs.
4. GST concessions and exemptions to COVID vaccines, and other equipment, as well as allowing an input tax credit for firms undertaking vaccination drives or providing oxygen concentrators to their employees need to be taken up.

States' burden

1. The last meeting in October 2020, had ended without a consensus with several Opposition States refusing to accept the Centre's compensation formula for last year as revenues tanked in sync with the economy due to the national lockdown.
2. States are still owed ₹63,000 crores from last year's dues and GST cess collections are unlikely to meet this year's compensation dues as well, following the spate of lockdowns across several States over the past two months.
3. Needless to say, the States are desperate for funds at the moment since the Centre has largely shifted the onus of improving the health infra and vaccination drives on the State governments.
4. Apart from the early release of outstanding dues, States may also press for a parley on a possible extension of the five-year period for which they were guaranteed compensation under the GST regime.

'Rescue industry'

1. Unlike last year, the second wave has proved to be much more lethal, even for businesses, and hence, any short-term measure may not yield desired results.
2. While industries such as entertainment, hotels and tourism are impacted badly due to COVID and need relief measures, even sectors that continue to operate need support on many fronts, including getting due refunds quicker to free up their working capital needs.