A growing rights crisis in Sri Lanka

What is the issue?

- The human rights situation in Sri Lanka has worsened since Gotabaya Rajapaksa became President in 2019.
- The issue gains significance with the next session of the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) set to take place.

What happened in the 2005 - 2015 period?

- Gotabaya Rajapaksa was the defence secretary in the government led by his brother Mahinda Rajapaksa from 2005 to 2015.
- This period was marked by many human rights abuses.
- Critics of the government were murdered, tortured, and forcibly made to disappear.
- Tens of thousands of civilians were killed in the civil war between government forces and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).
- The war ended in 2009, with both sides responsible for numerous war crimes.
- In the final months of the war, the armed forces indiscriminately shelled civilians and summarily executed suspected LTTE fighters.

What happened with the shift in Presidency in 2015?

- When Mahinda Rajapaksa lost the 2015 presidential election, there was hope for change.
- There was greater freedom of expression.
- The repressive and heavily militarised situation in Tamil-majority areas began to improve.
- The new government supported a consensus resolution at the Human Rights Council.
- This offered victims of abuses and their families, truth, justice, and reconciliation.

What is the present situation?

- The human rights situation has worsened since Gotabaya Rajapaksa became the President in 2019.

- Tamil communities in the north and the east now fear increasing abuses.
- Since 2020, singing the national anthem in Tamil has been dropped from Independence Day celebrations.
- The religious rights of minorities are under attack, including interference with Hindu temples.
- In January 2021, the authorities bulldozed a memorial at Jaffna university that commemorated Tamil civilian victims of the civil war.
- People who participated in a protest march in February 2021 are now facing criminal investigation.
- The Rajapaksa government, in 2020, renounced its commitments under the 2015 Human Rights Council resolution.
    - It is now threatening victims' families and activists who supported it.
- A presidential commission was set up to investigate "political victimisation" of officials by the previous government.
    - It has recommended the acquittal of those implicated in cases of abuse.
- Also, numerous people who were involved in war crimes have been appointed to senior roles.

- The Rajapaksa government has shown outright disdain for accountability.
- In October 2020, the government amended the Constitution to remove constraints on political interference in Sri Lanka's courts.

What is the global response?

- Since 2012, the Human Rights Council has sought to work with Sri Lanka to promote reconciliation and accountability.
- And India has backed these efforts.
- But Sri Lanka is now rejecting that endeavour.
- Instead, it is proposing a new domestic commission that UN experts have dismissed as lacking credibility or independence.

What should be done?

- At the session, the UNHRC will face a crucial test in taking action for protecting vulnerable Sri Lankans and upholding international law.
- The UNHRC should recognise the Sri Lankan government's actions for what they are, an effort to impede justice.
- A new resolution is urgently needed to protect vulnerable minority communities in Sri Lanka.
- The UNHRC must take strict action against the gross abuse of human rights by Sri Lanka.
- It should uphold the principle of accountability for the worst crimes.

Why is India’s role significant?

- India, as a council member of the UNHRC, will have a key role too.
- Indian leaders have committed to supporting the rights of minority Tamils in Sri Lanka to “live with equity, equality, justice, peace and dignity”.
- In pledges to the United Nations, the Indian government has also vowed to uphold global human rights.
- These commitments have become crucial now.
- India should join other member states in supporting a resolution to reduce the growing risk of future atrocities.

Source: The Hindu

