Belarus - Poland Refugee Crisis Stand off

What is the issue?

Tensions have flared in Eastern Europe and on the Belarusian-Polish border with thousands of asylum seekers attempting to enter Poland

Why is there a refugee crisis?

- Politicians in West and East Europe accuse Moscow as instigator of the crisis amid claims that Russia is about to invade Ukraine.
- Belarus is accused of permitting visa-free entry to refugees, in particular Kurds, from the war-torn West Asia and encouraging their passage to the EU border.
- Now thousands of asylum seekers attempt to enter Poland, which constitutes the external border of the European Union (EU).

How nations react to the crisis?

- **EU and Poland -** EU's external border constitutes its only line of defence against unwanted migrants, Poland used water cannon and tear gas to repel the asylum-seekers except for the gravely ill.
- In freezing conditions, some 15 or more refugees have died.
- **Belarus -** Belarus president denies inviting migrants to Belarus. Instead blaming the EU for closing its borders.
- **West and EU -** Politicians in West and East Europe view Russia plan to invade Ukraine as the reason for the crisis.

What is Ukraine stand on Russia's plan?

- Ukraine initially declared that it saw no evidence of Russian mobilisation.
- But Ukraine changed its way and endorsed NATO claims of an imminent invasion.

What is Russia's stand on Ukraine issue?

- Russian grievances concern the use of Turkish-built drones in the Donbass breakaway provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk, and provocative NATO activities close to its land and sea borders.

- The 2015 Minsk agreement was designed to end the conflict in Donbass through provincial elections, decentralisation and the restoration of socio-economic relations between Kiev and the breakaway self-styled republics
- But there has been no constitutional amendment, no elections, and Donbass is subject to an economic blockade.
- Moscow has evidently lost hope in Kiev observing the Minsk agreement for substantial regional autonomy.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin's decree of 2019 allowed Donbass people to claim Russian citizenship.
- The latest Kremlin moves to integrate Donbass economically, will turn Ukraine's east, like Crimea, slowly into a de facto Russian region.

Why Belarus is a concern for EU and Russia?

- **Russia's concern -** Belarus has economic and military alliances with Russia, effectively making it the last frontier against an encroaching North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).
- While Belarus is entirely dependent on Russia, this does not prevent Belarus from being a difficult partner.
- Belarus president threatened to block the pipeline transporting Russian gas through Belarus to the EU, a threat speedily negated by Moscow.
- **EU's concern–** Belarus President Aleksander Lukashenko, is under sanctions by the EU since last year's election when he secured a sixth dubious term
- He seeks to pressure the EU with a scenario akin the 2015 refugee crisis, when the EU gave money and non-financial incentives to Turkey and certain Libyan warlords to restrain the migration exodus.
- Finding these tactics blocked, Belarus proposed that Germany take in 2,000 refugees while 7,000 others would be repatriated, but this was rejected, and the majority of migrants are refusing to go home.
- Belarus President Aleksander Lukashenko's policy is viewed as brinkmanship with both the EU and Russia.

How Russia manages gas pipeline blockade?

- **Nord Stream 2 pipeline –** For Russia there is no need to stage a crisis with Germany which is the destination of the asylum seekers.
- Russia plans to certify Nord Stream 2 pipeline to deliver gas to the EU bypassing Ukraine and Belarus.

How Poland benefits from the Refugee crisis?

- Poland and the EU are entangled in a bitter dispute over the rule of law.
- Poland's Constitutional Tribunal invalidated some provisions of the EU Treaty.
- Contrary to EU's principles, Warsaw promotes 'traditional values' which include homophobic legislation, LGBT-free zones and a ban on abortions.
- Poland has imposed a ban on journalists and NGOs within three kilometres of its frontier, and is under criticism from human rights groups and the Council of Europe
- However EU Russian tension affords Warsaw to boost anti-Russian rhetoric and proclaim itself a defender of Europe, despite anti-immigrant tirades being a staple of its far-right politics.
- The border problem also gives the EU the opportunity to prove its worth to Poland by extending its fulsome support.

Reference

1. https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/in-border-stand-off-a-manufactured-refugee-crisis/article37796504.ece

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