Myanmar Crisis - India's Response; Need for a Refugee Policy

What is the issue?

- The Ministry of External Affairs has underlined the government's changing position on the Myanmar crisis.
- In this context, here is a look at the situation and an overview on India's refugee policy.

What are the recent remarks?

- India has moved to a more pro-active stand as concerns grow worldwide about growing internal strife and instability in Myanmar.
- After a closed-door UNSC meeting on Myanmar, Ambassador TS Tirumurti, India's Permanent Representative to the UNGA, responded.
- He condemned the violence in Myanmar and condoled the loss of lives.
- He also called for the release of detained leaders and urged maximum restraint.
- The messages underlined India's commitment to a democratic transition.
- There was a line about supporting peace efforts by the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN, of which Myanmar is a member).
- However, ASEAN has been tentative, even timid, in the face of China's support to the junta.

What is the significance with India's stance?

- The recent statement is the outright so far by India on Myanmar and a response to criticism of its earlier stand within and outside the country.
- This marks a welcome departure from the stance befriending the military (which has not always been friendly to India's interests) and engaging with the civilian government, which held office only for 5 years.

What is the current situation in Myanmar?

- There is increasing disorder in Myanmar which appears to be escalating as the civil disobedience movement (CDM) flares.
- The CDM has been innovative, energetic and driven by young people in the majority Burman and Buddhist-dominated heartland.

- Disobedience could lead to extensive civil disorder and worse.
- Already, telecommunications are cut, and curfews are in place.
- Nevertheless, daily shows of defiance occur, the banks are not functional, markets are shut.
- The only courts which appear to be open are those used to present detainees and those charged with violations of regime controls while the cases against Suu Kyi and her colleagues pile up.
- The battle-scarred armies of the ethnic groups had fought the Myanmar army to a standstill over nearly 70 years.
- They had recently signed a ceasefire with Suu Kyi.
- But these groups are now preparing for war again and are allying with each other.
- A provisional government of leaders who escaped detention has been announced.

What are India's priorities now?

- India's concerns at this stage are mainly two.
- **People of Myanmar** - The people of Myanmar have tasted freedom of expression, assembly and association for the first time in decades under Suu Kyi.
- They are rightfully determined to hold on to this freedom.
- **North-East** - Another concern is the future stability and security of India's North-east.
- The policies that have been espoused at the highest levels of government should also be preserved.
- Notably, the Act East and Neighbourhood First policies are anchored in the eight states of the North-east.
- India should also keep in mind the various insurgent groups from the North-east.
- They have a history of relations with ethnic armed groups in Myanmar.
- The insurgents have taken shelter there and established bases and some still live there.

What is the impact on Centre-State relations?

- The Four states of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram have long borders with Myanmar.
- The last two states have taken some 1,500 persons, including a number of junior police officials, fleeing from the crackdown in the bordering Chin State.
- This has raised issues of Centre-state relations.
- The New Delhi advised the states on the border not to allow Myanmar

nationals fleeing the crackdown to enter Indian territory.
- But Mizoram CM Zoramthanga has rejected this approach, saying that his government will accept people fleeing, on humanitarian grounds.
- He wrote to the prime minister saying that as the world's largest democracy India could not stand aside.
- The Manipur government, too, has withdrawn its circular which had asked district officials along the border to "politely" turn back refugees.

Why is a refugee policy essential?

- The Chins in Myanmar and the Mizos and Kukis (and sub-groups) in Mizoram and Manipur are kin.
- A historical affinity connects them by ethnicity, religion, and language.
- In the aftermath of the 1988 army crackdown on the pro-democracy movement that killed thousands, many Chins and other refugees fled to Manipur and Mizoram.
- Local leaders and non-government groups, with the tacit support of central and state agencies, allowed them to live, work and even settle.
- The present situation thus must be utilised by India to develop a long-term approach to the issue of refugees fleeing political persecution in their homelands.
- India does not have a National Refugee Law nor is it a signatory to the UN Convention governing refugees.
- India has allowed Tibetans, Tamil refugees from Sri Lanka, Chakmas of Bangladesh, the Lothsampas of Nepali origin from Bhutan, Afghans, Somalis and many others into this land.
- But these remain ad hoc approaches.
- This has been sought to be addressed for six "minority" communities of Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan in a long-term manner by the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act.
- However, the CAA does not cover many of the cases listed above.

What does this call for?

- A national mechanism needs to be developed which goes beyond short-term measures.
- It must take into account a needs-based assessment of how best to handle rapid outflows of persecuted persons.

Source: The Indian Express



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