Punjab's War on Drugs

Why in news?

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Amid a new wave of political churn against the government for failing to curtail drugs, the Punjab CM has sought to enhance punishment for offenders.

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How has the Punjab government's crackdown on drugs progressed?

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- In accordance with his campaign, immediately after assuming office, Punjab CM set up a "Special Task Force" (STF) against drugs.
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- STF began by arresting thousands of peddlers.
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- Within four weeks, the CM and the STF chief announced that the pre-election promise had been fulfilled, and supplies choked.
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- Notably, the last one year has seen the "arrest of 19,000 drug peddlers and treatment of more than 2 lakh drug victims".
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- Narcotic Drugs & Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act has also been involved in many cases with over 4,000 convictions already secured under the act.
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- Additionally, over 5,600 NDPS cases are under trial, and Punjab has recorded an impressive 82% conviction rate under NDPS.
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What are the recent developments?

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- **Protests -** Despite the initial intensive crackdown, the drug problem

seems to persisting in Punjab, and reports actually suggesting an increase in drug abuse.
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- A video of a woman wailing next to the body of her son who lies in a heap of garbage with a syringe still stuck in his veins has created a sensation.
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- Allegedly, there has also been a spurt in drug-related deaths, which is causing a political churn, with opposition parties voicing against the government.
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- While the government is believed to be under-reporting drug related deaths due to immense pressure, it has nonetheless asserted a stern crackdown.
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- **Reaction -** Punjab CM has written to the union government, seeking to enhance punishment under the NDPS Act to deter drug abuse.
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- He has sought to bring in the death penalty for first-time offenders, besides declaring that government employees must undergo drug screening.
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- But a previous Bombay High Court judgement had held death penalty under NDPS Act as unconstitutional, thereby making the CM's demand look naive.
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What are the important initiatives to curtail the drug menace?

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- **DAPO Project -** In March, the government launched "Drug Abuse Prevention Officer" (DAPO) project, a community participation programme.
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- Thousands volunteered registered as DAPOs to raise awareness and the government also leveraged its 3.5 lakh officials as DAPOs.
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- The effectiveness of the exercise is yet to be evaluated.
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- **Buddy Project -** The Special Task Force (STF) designed a "buddy project", aiming to include all schools and colleges for student awareness.
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- It has been launched in some areas and STF officers say it will soon be extended across the state and encompasses parents and teachers too.
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- **OOAT Program -** Health department has opened about 81 “Outpatient Opioid Assisted Treatment” (OOAT) clinics for opium and heroin addicts.
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- This program is running since May and addicts are for the time-being given buprenorphine (an opioid substitute).
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- **Confiscation Act -** Last year, the Cabinet had decided to enact the “Confiscation of Drug Dealers Property Act”.
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- This could not take off as the home department informed the CMO that a similar provision already exists under the NDPS Act.
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What are the challenges that the STF is facing?

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- The STF was to directly report to the CM’s office, overlooking the State DGP and other police hierarchy.
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- This created some tussle, which reached its peak when the STF questioned an SP and also arrested a police inspector on drug charges.
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- These skirmishes visibly slowed down STF’s work and subsequently it was place back within the police hierarchy (reporting to the DGP).
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- Earlier this year, the government issued a notification to exclude STF from the RTI, as it was facing pressure to release sensitive information.
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- STF also had to face political headwinds as it had to inquire into the alleged involvement of an ex-minister from the SAD party in a drug mesh.
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Source: Indian Express

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