Reviewing WHO Response

What is the issue?

- Many countries, including India, have asked for a comprehensive evaluation of the WHO's response to Covid-19.
- At this pivotal moment, India has become the chair of the World Health Organization (WHO) Executive Board.

Why has WHO's response come under question?

- A resolution in the World Health Assembly (WHA) was adopted by consensus without a vote.
- This WHA resolution has asked for a "systematic review" of the WHO's response to Covid-19.
- It calls for impartial, independent and comprehensive evaluation to review experience gained and lessons learned from the WHO-coordinated international health response to Covid-19.
- This, it wants to be done at the earliest and appropriate time in consultation with member states.
- WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus has been under criticism for not acting decisively on time.
- WHO could have questioned China's handling of the outbreak in Wuhan so that it could better prepare the world for the dangerous disease.
- The WHO head has said he would initiate the evaluation at the "earliest appropriate time".

Who has raised this criticism?

- This criticism stems from the International Health Regulations (IHR).
- IHR is the leading international agreement on infectious diseases and other serious disease events adopted by WHO member states in 2005.
- The IHR empowers the WHO to take actions that can challenge how governments exercise sovereignty.
- The IHR authorises the WHO to collect disease-event information from non-governmental sources and seek verification from governments about such information.
- If necessary, the WHO can share the information with other states.
- The IHR grants the WHO Director-General the power to declare a public

health emergency of international concern (PHEIC).
- The WHO Director-General can declare PHEIC, even if the country experiencing the outbreak objects.

How effectively has WHO responded to earlier global outbreaks?

- **SARS 2003** - During the SARS outbreak in 2003, then WHO Director-General Gro Brundtland had taken on China over the outbreak.
- Brundtland had issued warnings against travel to SARS-affected regions, without the nod of the countries concerned.
- Brundtland had acted without authority to take these steps.
- In adopting the IHR in the aftermath of SARS, WHO member states gave WHO the authority with regard to state sovereignty and expanded the need for WHO's scientific, medical, and public health capabilities.
- **H1N1 2009** - After the IHR guidelines came into play in 2007, the H1N1 influenza spread around the world in 2009.
- The then WHO Director-General Margaret Chan declared the world's first PHEIC.
- She issued recommendations that advised against trade and travel measures, among other things. This was seen as a success of the IHR.
- **Ebola 2014** - Then came the Ebola outbreak in West Africa in 2014, which was a disaster for WHO and the IHR.
- The WHO's response was so bad that UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon created an ad hoc emergency response effort.
- The WHO failed to act on information that it received from non-governmental sources.
- It did not challenge governments that wanted to keep the outbreak quiet.
- It declared a PHEIC only after the epidemic was already a crisis.
- **Ebola 2018** - The next major crisis was an Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of the Congo that started in late 2018.
- The WHO's response to this outbreak demonstrated that it had re-invigorated its functional capacities.

What is the political significance of the resolution?

- WHO's approach in not confronting the China over Covid-19 and China's general resistance to any external criticism has been at the centre of the debate.
- The US administration under President Trump has blamed China for the pandemic, as it faces an election year.
- China, which views itself as a successor to the global leadership role, it is riled at the international community's calls for transparency and accountability.

- An unprecedented coalition has emerged among those asking for accountability.
- Countries like Australia, Europe, India, South Korea, etc who have high stakes in their bilateral relations with China, have questioned it.

How important is India in this debate?

- India has been advocating for reforms of the WHO along with other international organisations.
- During the virtual G-20 summit in March 2020, Prime Minister Narendra Modi articulated this demand.
- India has a unique opportunity to play a role in the WHO.
- As India takes the leadership role, much will depend on how it will,
    1. Navigate the global politics over the next 3 years in the Executive Board.
    2. Handle its own disease trajectory in a transparent manner.

Source: The Indian Express

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