Sri Lanka at the UN Rights Council

Why in news?

At the current session of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), Sri Lanka faces another resolution on human rights violations and war crimes.

Why is this significant?

- Sri Lanka abruptly withdrew in 2020 from an earlier UNHRC resolution (Resolution 30/1) on war crimes.
- Under the resolution, it had committed, 5 years previously, to a time-bound investigation of war crimes.
    - war crimes that took place during the military campaign against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)
- In this backdrop, the country faces another UNHRC resolution now.
- Sri Lanka has described the resolution as "unwanted interference by powerful countries".
- It has officially sought India's help to gather support against the resolution.
- Whichever way it goes, the resolution is likely to resonate in India-Sri Lanka relations.
- For India internally, it will reflect in the run-up to the Assembly elections in Tamil Nadu.

What does the resolution say?

- The draft resolution is based on a report by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UN Human Rights).
- The report warned Sri Lanka on the failure to address human rights violations and war crimes committed in the past.
- It said that this had put the country on a "dangerous path" that could lead to a "recurrence" of policies and practices that gave rise to the earlier situation.
- The report flagged the "warning signs":
    - accelerating militarisation of civilian governmental functions
    - reversal of important constitutional safeguards
    - political obstruction of accountability
    - exclusionary rhetoric, intimidation of civil society
    - use of anti-terrorism laws

What is the changing scenario in Sri Lanka?

- The report pointed to the appointment of at least 28 serving or former military and intelligence personnel to "key administrative posts."
- It also mentioned the appointments of two senior military officials implicated in UN reports on alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity during the final years of the conflict.
- The report expressed concerns at these appointments.
- Also, the government had created parallel military task forces and commissions that encroach on civilian functions.
- It has reversed important institutional checks and balances, threatening democratic gains, the independence of the judiciary and other key institutions.
- The shrinking space for independent media and civil society, and human rights organisations are also themes in the report.

What did the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights say?

- Michelle Bachelet has said that the government in Sri Lanka was "proactively" obstructing investigations into past crimes to prevent accountability.
- This had a "devastating effect" on families seeking truth, justice and reparations.
- UN member states "should heed the early warning signs of more violations to come."
- She also called for "international action" including targeted sanctions such as asset freezes and travel bans against "credibly alleged" perpetrators of grave human rights violations and abuses.
- States should also pursue investigations and prosecution in their national courts of international crimes committed by all parties in Sri Lanka.
- She has also asked the UNHRC to support "a dedicated capacity" by countries to collect and preserve evidence for future accountability processes.

Source: The Indian Express

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