Sri Lanka's National 'food emergency'

Why in news?

Sri Lankan government has announced food emergency to check the soaring prices of food and hoarding of essentials by a food mafia.

What are the issues hampering the Sri Lankan government?

- Huge foreign debt burden
- Decline in tourism industry since the 2019 Easter attacks
- Pandemic hit tea and garment industries
- Decreasing foreign exchange reserves
- Devaluation of currency by 10.1% against the dollar this year
- Imports became costlier
- Increase in liquidity due to Rs 800 billion printed by the Central Bank of Sri Lanka
- Sharp spike in inflation
- Fixation of prices of all essential items made traders reluctant to buy at high prices internationally
- Restrictive import licensing regime
- Ban on chemical fertilisers to grow only organic food aggravated the shortage

What is the current emergency about?

- The emergency has been declared under the legal framework of the Public Security Ordinance (PSO).
- It empowers the President to declare a State of Emergency in two situations when the President is of the opinion that it is
    1. in the interest of public security and the preservation of public order
    2. for the maintenance of supplies and services essential to the life of the community
- President is now able to promulgate Emergency Regulations dealing with any subject at any given time
- While the emergency has to be taken to Parliament for renewal every three months, the President is empowered to bring in regulations that do not need parliamentary oversight or approval

- It must be recognised as a **temporary** conferral of extraordinary power for the government during times of acute crisis and not a substitute for the normal legal regime

What are the counter arguments against the proclamation of emergency?

- Opposition members argued that other legislations were available to check hoarding and cap food prices
- The appointment of a serving major general as the Commissioner General of Essential Services has raised concerns of bypassing the civilian administration
- It was alleged that emergency was proclaimed to violate the freedom of expression, movement, etc
- Ill-timed decision to switch from chemical to organic fertilizer might lead to food crisis.

Source: The Hindu, The Indian Express

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