# Covid-19 & Indian Diaspora

## What is the issue?

- Covid-19 has put to the test the seriousness of the pledge of assistance and protection made by the government to every Indian abroad.
- There is an urgent need for India to have a well-structured and institutionalised rights-based "Citizen Evacuation policy".

## What was the MEA's 2017 declaration?

- **Declaration** - In 2017, then External Affairs Minister of India said, "Even if you are stuck on Mars, the Indian Embassy will be there to help you."
- This confidence-laden declaration to help Indians on foreign soil during crises stemmed from two factors.
- **Factors** - The glorious track record of 30-plus successful overseas evacuations by the government since Independence.
- These evacuations include the Kuwait Airlift and Operation Safe Homecoming.
- These, despite being held during wartime conditions, were characterised by a quick governmental will and intent to shield the diaspora.
- The assurance given in the Indian passport to every citizen is another factor.
- It reads, "Allow the bearer to pass freely and to affirm him or her, every assistance and protection of which he or she may stand in need".

## What were India's recent missions?

- Covid-19 has put to the test the seriousness of the pledge of assistance and protection made to every Indian travelling or studying abroad.
- "Vande Bharat Mission" and "Operation Samudra Setu" were commercialised, chargeable international missions.

- They expose the arbitrary and slow-footed response of the current central government towards the repatriation of Indians stuck abroad.
- They have created history by being the largest paid repatriation exercise.
- They have created history by being the most delayed and commercialised repatriation the world has seen in recent times.

## What difficulties did the Indian Diaspora face?

- The government shut down Indian skies to all inbound traffic on March 22, which left a large number of Indians stranded in various countries.
- Indians stranded abroad stared at the bleak possibility of not returning home.
- They faced evictions from hostels and hotels in certain cases due to safety measures as well as financial constraints.
- The events that followed gave the impression that the administration has a discriminatory approach towards its citizens in need overseas.

## What were the events?

- **Air India** - It signed a contract with the four countries - Germany, Canada, France and Ireland.
- The contract said that Air India would return safely the citizens of four countries.
- But it opted to fly back empty instead of ferrying back Indians, which left everyone with a sense of betrayal.
- **MEA** - The Ministry of External Affairs self-congratulated it for assisting 20,000 foreign nationals in exiting India.
- But it failed to even give a commitment about the return of Indian citizens abroad.
- This highlights the "out of sight-out of mind" mindset of the decision-makers.
- When the central government finally decided to offer a hand, it launched a paid repatriation mission rather than a free evacuation mission.

## What did the SC observe?

- More often than not, whenever the executive fails, the judiciary comes to the rescue.
- In the case of stranded Indians, even the Supreme Court of India said, "stay where you're" in an observation while dealing with the plea seeking directions to the government to initiate evacuation missions.

## What should be done?

- There is an urgent need for India to have a well-structured and institutionalised rights-based "**Citizen Evacuation policy**".
- This policy should be implemented without being held hostage to unpredictable political temperaments and the bureaucratic maze.
- Keeping in mind the increasing traffic of outbound Indians, India needs to revisit its overseas evacuation strategy.
- India needs to frame a set of **standard operating procedures**, which must be based on the requirement to strengthen the response mechanism of

Indian embassies worldwide (amongst other things).

- To reinstall the trust of the diaspora in the government as an effective rescuer, a Citizen Evacuation Policy must be tabled at the **earliest**.

**Source: The Indian Express**