Uttarakhand floods and Texas Cold Snap - Need for Climate Action

What is the issue?

- The recent Uttarakhand floods and the Texas cold snap highlighted the effects of global warming and climate change.
- In this context, here is a look at how vulnerable India is and the approach to be adopted for effective climate action.

What happened in these recent incidents?

- **Uttarakhand glacier burst** - Disaster struck Uttarakhand's Chamoli district in February 2021 in the form of an avalanche and deluge.
- It happened after a portion of the Nanda Devi glacier broke off.
- There was sudden flood in the middle of the day in the Dhauli Ganga, Rishi Ganga and Alaknanda rivers.
    - All these are intricately linked tributaries of the Ganga.
- The floods triggered widespread panic and large-scale devastation in the high mountain areas.
- Two power projects — NTPC's Tapovan-Vishnugad hydel project and the Rishi Ganga Hydel Project — were extensively damaged.
- Scores of labourers in these projects got trapped in tunnels as the waters came rushing in.
- At least 32 people are feared dead, and over 190 missing.
- **Texas cold snap** - A historic winter storm in Texas, U.S. has killed at least 21 people.
- It left millions of Texans without power.
- It has led to killer tornadoes into the U.S. Southeast.
- The brutal cold has engulfed vast swaths of the United States.
- It led to the closure of COVID-19 inoculation centers and hindering vaccine supplies.

Is global warming the cause?

- What precipitated both the above events was human-made global warming.
- The melting of the Himalayan glaciers that prompted the floods and landslides in Uttarakhand has the fingerprints of global warming.
- The United States has already witnessed many deadly avalanches since the

beginning of 2021.

- Furthermore, as glacier cover is replaced by water or land, the amount of light reflected decreases.
- This aggravates warming, a contributor to the sweltering heat in cities like Delhi and Hyderabad, or the epic floods in Chennai or Kerala.
- The extreme cold weather in Texas is connected to Arctic-peninsula warming, at a rate almost twice the global average.
- Usually, there is a collection of winds around the Arctic keeping the cold locked far to the north.
- But global warming has caused gaps in these protective winds.
- This made way for the intensely cold air to move south, a phenomenon that is accelerating.

How vulnerable is India?

- The stakes are laid out in alarming reports, which show that India is particularly vulnerable.
    - HSBC ranks India at the top among 67 nations in climate vulnerability (2018).
    - Germanwatch ranks India fifth among 181 nations in terms of climate risks (2020).
- But public spending does not reflect these perils.
- Worryingly, the Uttarakhand government and the Centre have been diluting, instead of strengthening, climate safeguards for hydroelectric and road projects.
- Studies had flagged ice loss across the Himalayas, and the dangers to densely populated catchments, but policy response has been lacking.
- Similarly, Kerala ignored a landmark study calling for regulation of mining, quarrying and dam construction in ecologically sensitive places.
    - These notably contributed to the massive floods and landslides in 2018 and 2019.

What should be done?

- **Emission** - India is the third-largest carbon emitter after China and the United States.
- For India, a decisive switch is needed from highly polluting coal and petroleum to cleaner and renewable power sources.
- China has announced carbon neutrality by 2060, Japan and South Korea by 2050, but India is yet to announce a target.
- The acceleration of hazards of nature should prompt countries to advance those targets, ideally by a decade.
- **Budget** - A vital step should be explicitly including policies for climate

mitigation in the government budget.

- Specifically, growth targets should include timelines for switching to cleaner energy.
- The government needs to launch a major campaign to mobilise climate finance.
- **Adaptation** - Even if major economies speed up climate mitigation, catastrophes like Uttarakhand will become more frequent due to the accumulated carbon emissions in the atmosphere.
- So, climate adaptation needs to be a priority.
- India's Central and State governments must increase allocations for risk reduction.
- E.g. better defences against floods, agricultural innovations to withstand droughts

What is the way forward?

- Sustainable growth depends on timely climate action.
- For that to happen, policymaking needs to connect the dots between carbon emissions, atmospheric warming, melting glaciers, extreme floods and storms.
- Unless climate change is tagged as a primary cause, climate action will continue to falter.
- Events like Uttarakhand and Texas should be treated as lessons for urgent climate action.

Source: The Hindu