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Joshimath Crisis: SC Asks Petitioners To Move HC for Relief, Rehabilitation.

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In News: The Supreme Court asked petitioners seeking intervention in the Joshimath crisis, to move the Uttarakhand High Court for relief and rehabilitation of affected persons.

What is Joshimath Crisis?

Joshimath, is a town situated in Chamoli District of Uttarakhand. It is located in the Middle Himalayas at an altitude of ~1875 m. Joshimath is a religious and tourist place, and is situated near holy shrine of Badrinath (one of the Char Dhams in Uttarakhand). It is also proximal to Valley of Flowers National Park and Shri Hemkund Sahib (a holy shrine in Sikhism). The town of Joshimath in Uttarakhand is witnessing an unprecedented crisis. Wide Cracks have appeared on the roads and on hundreds of residential and commercial buildings in the town. Many structures have been declared unsafe, and the residents have been asked to vacate them. The Authorities have declared Joshimath as a landslide and subsidence-hit zone. The whole town is sinking. While the town is situated in a geologically unstable region, the major reason for sinking is being attributed to large-scale development projects being undertaken in the region. The Government and its agencies have responded to the crisis through various measures, yet they are rightly being criticized for long ignoring the warnings given by various environmental activists and geological experts about uncontrolled development being undertaken in the region.

What is the issue?

The plea has contended that the land subsidence in Joshimath has occurred due to large-scale industrialisation and sought immediate financial assistance and compensation to the people of Uttarakhand. It added, "Among other reliefs, the petitioner before the High Court sought directions to restrain the respondents from undertaking operations in the under-construction sites across Uttarakhand until early warning systems are established. The petitioner also sought a direction for the constitution of an expert committee to review the impact of all hydropower projects located on the upper reaches of the river across the state of Uttarakhand".

What is Land Subsidence?

According to National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Land subsidence is sinking of the ground because of underground material movement. Subsidence can be caused by gradual settling or sudden sinking of the Earth's surface. Subsidence is generally caused by: (a) Resource Extraction: The removal of water, oil, natural gas, or mineral resources out of the ground by pumping, fracking, or mining etc.; (b) Natural Causes: Natural events such as earthquakes, soil compaction, glacial isostatic adjustment, erosion, sinkhole formation, and adding water to fine soils; (c) Infrastructural Load: High load exceeding load-carrying capacity of the underlying soil.

What are all the Reasons for Joshimath Crisis?

The residents of Joshimath are alarmed over the unprecedented number of cracks appearing on roads, and commercial and residential buildings. People have been asked to vacate following fears of landslide and imminent disaster. Authorities have declared Joshimath a landslide and subsidence-hit zone.

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- Experts have pointed out that Joshimath city has been built on an ancient landslide material meaning it rests on a deposit of sand and stone, not rock, which doesn't have high load-bearing capacity. This makes the area extremely vulnerable to ever-burgeoning infrastructure and population.
- Unplanned and unauthorised construction has led to the blocking of the natural flow of water, which eventually results in frequent landslides.
- The construction of NTPC's Tapovan Vishnugad Hydro Power Project is also seen as one of the reasons for the incident. It was found that the tunnel had water seepage from a punctured aquifer, leading to the drying of water sources in Joshimath.
- It may also be the result of the reactivation of a geographic fault — defined as a fracture or zone of fractures between two blocks of rock — where the Indian Plate has pushed under the Eurasian Plate along the Himalayas.

What are all the recommendations with respect to Joshimath?

Mishra Committee (1976) was in 1976, to look into why Joshimath is experiencing a sink. This committee made various recommendations in this regard:

- In the slip zone, no new construction should be undertaken. Construction should only be permitted once the site's stability has been assessed, and such regions should be appropriately investigated before being delineated.
- No trees should be chopped down within landslide-prone sites, nor should boulders be removed by excavating or blasting to repair roads or perform any other building activity.
- The region between Marwari (most affected during the recent incident) and Joshimath, below the Joshimath Reserve Forest, and in the cantonment should all undergo extensive planting.
- It was also highlighted that there should be a complete restriction on gathering building material within a radius of 3 to 5 kilometres of the Joshimath township.