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1. Farmers with more than 350 tractors staged a Parliamentary blockade in the French capital, Paris, against the EU's new trade deal.

(i) The European Union will finalize a trade agreement with the countries of the South American 'MERCOSUR' confederation of Brazil, Argentina, Bolivia, Paraguay and Uruguay.

(ii) If the agreement comes into force, agricultural products from those countries will be imported into Europe at very low prices. This would reduce the income of French farmers and seriously affect their livelihoods.

(iii) Farmers marched with hundreds of tractors along the famous Champs-Élysées road in Paris, demanding to block the deal. Crossing the river Seine towards Parliament, the farmers raised slogans demanding immediate Government action to ensure food security in the country. The rally, which took place under police protection, completely disrupted traffic on major roads in Paris.

(iv) Government's position: Responding to the demands of the farmers, Government Spokesperson Maud Bregeon promised that the Government would soon announce new schemes to benefit the farmers.

(v) French President Emmanuel Macron strongly opposes the deal. However, the agreement is expected to be signed on Saturday in Paraguay, with the support of most European countries, including Italy.

2. In order to condemn the Iranian Government's suppression of the people's protest against the regime, US President Donald Trump has announced that an additional 25 percent tax will be imposed on all countries that have trade relations with the country.

(i) With 2,000 people dead amid the protests, the sudden tariff announced by the US is expected to be a new crisis for Iran.

(ii) Central Government sources said that India will not be affected much by the US President's imposition of tariffs.

(iii) In this regard, the sources said, 'Iran is not even among the top 50 countries with which India trades. India's trade with Iran last financial year was worth $1.6 billion (roughly Rs.14,450 crore). This was just 0.15 percent of India's total trade in that financial year. India's trade value with Iran is expected to decline further in the current financial year due to some economic reasons.

(iv) While India trades with the country to a limited extent, trade in food and pharmaceuticals is predominant. Therefore, India will not be greatly affected by Trump's current tariff decision.

(v) It is noteworthy that due to the economic sanctions imposed by Trump, who was the President of the United States in 2019, India stopped purchasing crude oil from Iran.

3. According to data published by the European Institute, India is third in the list of countries importing Russian crude oil. Earlier, India was ranked second.

(i) Reliance Group and Central Government oil refiners have reduced Russian crude oil imports, according to a report released by the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air (CREA). Countries were ranked in the report as on December last year.

(ii) It further stated that: China continues to be the top importer of crude oil from Russia. China imports 6 billion euros worth of crude oil. China accounts for 48 percent of Russia's total export earnings.

(iii) Turkey imports 2.6 billion Euro of Russian crude oil after China. India ranks third with crude oil imports worth 2.3 billion Euros. Of this, India imported 1.8 billion Euros of crude oil, 424 million Euros of coal and 82 million Euros of petroleum products.

(iv) While India imported crude oil worth 2.6 billion Euros last November, it decreased significantly in December. This was attributed to Reliance Group's Jamnagar Refinery and Central Government oil refineries reducing imports of Russian crude oil.

(v) USA imposed economic sanctions on Rosneft and Lukoil, accusing them of providing excessive revenue to Russia in the war in Ukraine.

(vi) As a result, Reliance Group, Hindustan Petroleum Corporation (HPCL), HPCL-Mittal Energy Company, Mangaluru Refinery and Petrochemicals Company, which imported and refined crude oil from these two companies, drastically reduced their imports.

(vii) India, the third largest importer of crude oil globally, continues to be followed by other Russian companies that have not been sanctioned by the US. Last year, the US imposed a 50 percent tariff on Indian goods, accusing it of importing too much crude oil from Russia.

4. US Secretary of State - Marco Rubio

5. India has surpassed China to become the world's largest producer of rice. There is no doubt that this has strengthened India's food security. It cannot be denied that the consistent record production of rice and wheat, which are the main agricultural products of Indian farmers, has been made possible only through strong Government support.

(i) The long-standing demand that farmers should not rely solely on rice and wheat cultivation but should prioritize alternative crops remains unfulfilled. This is due not only to the farmers but also to the Government's policy decisions.

(ii) The Minimum Support Price, along with assured procurement, has established rice and wheat cultivation as highly profitable crops. Government support, irrigation facilities, grain storage facilities, and input credit facilities all guarantee the cultivation of rice and wheat.

(iii) The lack of price guarantees, market support, and post-harvest infrastructure for alternative crops such as pulses, oilseeds, millets, and maize encourages farmers to opt for rice and wheat cultivation, which offers more incentives and guaranteed profits.

(iv) There is no disagreement that rice and wheat cultivation are essential for food security. It is also true that India's achievement of becoming a country that exports large quantities of these grains to the global market through excessive production has, in a way, increased the nation's international standing. At the same time, we fail to realize that along with the benefits from rice and wheat cultivation, we also face many hidden losses.

(v) In particular, the excessive use of irrigation water for rice cultivation severely impacts Groundwater levels. The carbon dioxide emitted by rice and wheat crops contributes to global warming. We are also facing challenges such as declining soil fertility and increased input costs due to the increased cultivation of rice.

(vi) While the achievements in rice production and the increased area under wheat cultivation are superficially pleasing, we must view them with caution. Agriculture should not be limited to increased production and exports alone. An Agricultural policy that restricts farmers to one or two crops is not constructive. Government schemes will only be farsighted if they aim to increase the cultivation of other crops, including pulses, oilseeds, millets, and maize.

(vii) Due to the guaranteed yield and procurement of rice and wheat, it is not easy to attract farmers involved in these crops to cultivate other alternative crops. Without providing guaranteed procurement, a reliable market, and storage facilities to protect their produce, it is impossible to change their mindset. If they do not switch to alternative crops, not only the nation but also these farmers themselves may face the consequences.

(viii) 42% of the Indian population is engaged in agriculture; it provides employment to 46% of the workforce. However, the contribution of the agricultural sector to India's GDP is only 5%. According to the NABARD report, the average monthly income of agricultural families is Rs.13,663. Of this, the income from agriculture is only Rs. 4,476. The rest comes from other jobs and occupations.

(ix) Population growth has reduced the land holdings of farming families, making them less profitable and unsuitable for agriculture. In 1971, the average farm size of an Indian farmer was 2.28 hectares, but by 2021, it had decreased to a mere 0.74 hectares. As a result, most farmers are unable to cultivate profitably and secure their livelihoods.

(x) India faces the risk that most agricultural land will become fallow if cooperative farming or corporate agriculture does not emerge. With input costs and inflation rapidly increasing the prices of agricultural products, we are moving towards a situation where farmers will have to seek alternative professions or, tragically, take their own lives.

(xi) In 1991, 60% of the population in China was engaged in agriculture, compared to 63% in India. China has reduced this to 22%, while in India, it remains at 42%. Agriculture dependent on subsidies is not something to be proud of. India's Agricultural policy must now guide the sector towards profitable farming and the cultivation of all types of crops.