

PART II · ENVIRONMENT TO DIRECT HIT TRACKER

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Friday, 28 August 2026

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INSIDE PART II

1. Environment
2. Places in News
3. Ethics & Integrity Cases
4. Prelims MCQs (20)
5. Mains Questions (9)
6. Answer Writing Value Addition
7. AKADEMIA Direct Hit Tracker
8. Proof of Precision

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GS3

Desertification · International Environmental Agreements

Concluded 28 Aug 2026

UNCCD COP17 Closes in Ulaanbaatar with \$1.3bn Land-Restoration Pledge but Drought-Protocol Deadlock

Why in News: The 17th Conference of the Parties (COP17) to the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) concluded in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia on 28 August 2026 with governments, development banks, funds and companies announcing a \$1.3 billion portfolio for land restoration and drought resilience across 23 countries, anchored by a \$1.2 billion, 45-project Rangelands Flagship Initiative — but parties failed to secure a binding or even voluntary international drought-response instrument, with the United States leading opposition to any such framework.

Background: UNCCD (1994) is one of the three Rio Conventions alongside UNFCCC (climate) and CBD (biodiversity); COP17, held under the theme "Restoring Land," opened 17 August 2026 with India (among others) calling for pastoralist communities to be placed at the centre of rangeland restoration, combining traditional knowledge with satellite science, and for accessible global finance for developing countries pursuing Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN).

⚡ KEY FACTS

- COP17 dates: 17-28 August 2026, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia; theme "Restoring Land."
- Closing pledge: \$1.3 billion portfolio for land restoration and drought resilience across 23 countries.
- Rangelands Flagship Initiative: \$1.2 billion across 45 projects for sustainable rangeland management and pastoralist livelihood support.
- Drought protocol: NO binding or voluntary international instrument secured — the US led a bloc rejecting any drought instrument, framing drought as a "national, not global" issue.
- The African Group had pushed for a binding protocol; other parties favoured a non-binding framework — neither prevailed.
- UNCCD is one of three Rio Conventions (alongside UNFCCC and CBD), all originating from the 1992 Rio Earth Summit.

Mains Dimensions:

- The gap between finance pledges (\$1.3bn mobilised) and binding governance (drought protocol failed) illustrates a recurring pattern in multilateral environmental diplomacy — money moves faster than law.
- Rangeland and pastoralist-centred restoration marks a shift from purely technical/afforestation approaches to community-knowledge-integrated desertification strategies.
- Major-power veto dynamics (the US blocking any drought instrument) mirror similar blockages seen in other Rio Convention negotiations, raising questions about consensus-based multilateralism's limits.
- India's rangeland-and-traditional-knowledge framing aligns with its own domestic priorities (grassland degradation, pastoralist livelihoods in arid and semi-arid zones).

💡 Let's Remember This Through a Trick

Remember "money moved, law didn't" — COP17 mobilised \$1.3bn in finance but could not mobilise consensus on a drought protocol.

📄 PYQ Linkage

GS3, thematic linkage: UNCCD and the three Rio Conventions (recurring UPSC theme on desertification and land degradation neutrality).

#UNCCDCOP17

#Desertification

#RangelandsInitiative

#GS3-PYQ

GS3

Climate Change · Forest Fires

Analysis published ~27-28 Aug 2026

India's 2026 Forest-Fire Activity Up 80% Over the Decade Trend, 50% Above 2024

Why in News: A Down To Earth analysis of NASA FIRMS (Fire Information for Resource Management System) satellite data finds that forest-fire activity in India during the first two months of 2026 rose by more than 80% compared with the decade-long trend since 2014, and was over 50% higher than in 2024 — previously the warmest year on record — with fires also starting earlier in the season and burning more intensely.

Background: India's forest-fire monitoring has increasingly relied on satellite-based systems (FIRMS, ISRO's Forest Survey of India inputs) rather than ground reporting alone, enabling more reliable year-on-year trend analysis; forest fires are distinct from wildfires in fully natural landscapes in that a large share of India's fire incidents are human-triggered (agricultural residue burning, encroachment-clearing) but amplified by climate-driven dryness and earlier fire-season onset.

⚡ KEY FACTS

- Fire activity, Jan-Feb 2026: up over 80% versus the 2014-2023 decade trend.
- Compared with 2024 (warmest year on record): over 50% higher fire activity.
- Fire intensity (thermal energy release rate) also increased compared with previous years.
- Worst-affected: north-east India; spikes also recorded in Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Odisha and the Rayalaseema region (Andhra Pradesh/Karnataka).
- Data source: NASA's FIRMS satellite fire-detection system, analysed by Down To Earth.

Mains Dimensions:

- Earlier fire-season onset is a direct climate-change fingerprint — warmer, drier conditions arriving sooner extend the annual fire-risk window.
- The National Action Plan on Forest Fire (NAPFF) and satellite-based early-warning systems need capacity that scales with intensifying fire trends, not static year-on-year budgets.
- North-east India's vulnerability (shifting agriculture, biomass burning, monsoon-timing shifts) differs mechanistically from Himalayan-state fires (dry conifer forests, tourism-linked ignition) — a one-size-fits-all fire policy under-serves both.
- Forest fires directly undermine India's carbon-sink commitments (NDC target of an additional carbon sink of 2.5-3 billion tonnes CO₂-equivalent through forest cover by 2030).

💡 Let's Remember This Through a Trick

Remember "80 over the decade, 50 over the record" — 2026's fire activity beat the ten-year trend by 80% and beat the previous record year (2024) by 50%.

📄 PYQ Linkage

GS3, thematic linkage: Forest fires, climate change and satellite-based environmental monitoring (recurring UPSC theme).

#ForestFires

#NASAFIRMS

#ClimateChange

#GS3-PYQ

2

Places in News

PLACES IN NEWS — 28 AUGUST 2026 | ANTIM ASSURED 100+



① New Delhi (28.61°N, 77.21°E)

National capital; anchor for the Election Commission's SIR claims-and-objections process and the newly announced border-railway upgrade plan.

② Bengaluru, Karnataka (12.97°N, 77.59°E)

ISRO's headquarters; site of the 23 August National Space Day announcement on exiting launch-vehicle manufacturing.

③ Mumbai, Maharashtra (19.08°N, 72.88°E)

RBI's headquarters, source of the draft Interest Rates on Loans and Advances Directions, 2026.

④ Dhaka, Bangladesh (23.81°N, 90.41°E)

Bangladesh's capital; PM Tarique Rahman's planned first India visit stalled here amid the Hasina press-conference row.

⑤ Kurung Kumey district, Arunachal Pradesh (~27.5°N, 93.5°E)

Remote Himalayan border district where BRO restored a 200-foot Bailey bridge after a July flash-flood washout.

⑥ Guwahati/Northeast India (26.14°N, 91.73°E)

Representative point for northeast India, the region worst affected by 2026's sharp rise in forest-fire activity per NASA FIRMS data.

⑦ Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia (47.89°N, 106.91°E)

Host city of UNCCD COP17, which closed 28 August 2026 with a \$1.3bn land-restoration pledge but no drought-protocol agreement.

3 Ethics & Integrity Cases

1 Balancing Accuracy and Inclusion in Electoral Administration

Concept: Non-Maleficence in Public Administration

The Special Intensive Revision's drive for roll accuracy carries a genuine risk of excluding eligible-but-under-documented voters. The ethical principle of non-maleficence — first, do no harm — demands that the claims-and-objections safeguard be made genuinely accessible, not just legally present, so that the cure for inaccuracy does not itself disenfranchise the vulnerable.

2 Protecting the Vulnerable Witness Without Sacrificing Fair Trial

Concept: Competing Rights and Proportionate Balancing

The Delhi HC's POCSO ruling embodies the ethical discipline of proportionate balancing — neither absolute protection of the child witness nor unlimited latitude for the accused's defence, but a calibrated middle path that honours both parties' legitimate claims to dignity and fairness.

3 When Free Expression Collides with Diplomatic Responsibility

Concept: Unintended Consequences in Statecraft

A press conference hosted with no diplomatic intent nonetheless produced a real diplomatic cost — a textbook case of unintended consequences. The ethical lesson for public institutions is that consequences, not just intentions, must be weighed before permitting even routine, otherwise-lawful activity with foreseeable geopolitical spillover.

4 The Duty of Care Behind Rapid Infrastructure Restoration

Concept: Duty of Care to Remote and Vulnerable Populations

BRO personnel rebuilding a bridge through monsoon flash-flood risk for a small, remote border village exemplifies duty of care extended to citizens with the least political voice — those in India's most inaccessible border regions deserve the same institutional urgency as those in well-connected cities.

5 Transparency as an Ethical Foundation of Consumer Trust Concept: Fiduciary Duty in Financial Regulation

RBI's push for board-approved, transparent loan-pricing policies reflects a fiduciary-duty principle: lenders holding an information advantage over borrowers have an ethical obligation, not just a competitive incentive, to price transparently rather than exploit that asymmetry.

6 Global Solidarity Under Sovereignty Constraints Concept: Collective Action Problem in Global Ethics

UNCCD COP17's failure to secure a drought protocol, despite mobilising real finance, illustrates the classic collective-action problem in global ethics: shared vulnerability to drought does not automatically translate into shared willingness to accept binding collective obligations, especially when one powerful actor insists the issue is purely domestic.

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4 Prelims MCQs

1. The Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls draws its legal basis primarily from which legislation?

- (a) Representation of the People Act, 1950 (b) Representation of the People Act, 1951 (c) National Voter's Day Act (d) Delimitation Act, 2002

Answer: (a)

SIR draws its basis from the Representation of the People Act, 1950, and Article 324.

2. Consider the following statements regarding Karnataka's SIR 2026: (1) The draft electoral roll was published on 17 August 2026. (2) The claims-and-objections period runs until 16 September 2026. Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- (a) 1 only (b) 2 only (c) Both 1 and 2 (d) Neither 1 nor 2

Answer: (c)

Both statements are correct.

3. The POCSO Act, 2012, as clarified by the Delhi High Court in August 2026, holds that:

- (a) Cross-examination of child witnesses is completely barred (b) Cross-examination is not barred but its manner is regulated (c) Only written testimony is permitted (d) The accused has no right to cross-examine

Answer: (b)

The Act regulates, but does not bar, cross-examination of child witnesses.

4. Bangladesh PM Tarique Rahman assumed office in which month of 2026?

(a) January (b) February (c) April (d) June

Answer: (b)

Tarique Rahman assumed office as Bangladesh PM in February 2026.

5. Consider the following statements: (1) Bangladeshi Prime Ministers have traditionally made India their first overseas visit destination. (2) Tarique Rahman's planned India visit was stalled due to a press conference held by former PM Sheikh Hasina. Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

(a) 1 only (b) 2 only (c) Both 1 and 2 (d) Neither 1 nor 2

Answer: (c)

Both statements are correct.

6. Bailey bridges, commonly used by BRO for rapid restoration, are best described as:

(a) Permanent concrete structures (b) Pre-fabricated modular steel truss bridges (c) Suspension bridges (d) Floating pontoon bridges

Answer: (b)

Bailey bridges are pre-fabricated, modular steel truss structures for rapid deployment.

7. India's planned ₹37,400-crore strategic border-railway upgrade covers border regions facing which countries?

(a) China and Nepal only (b) China, Pakistan and Bangladesh (c) Pakistan and Myanmar only (d) China and Bhutan only

Answer: (b)

The upgrade spans border regions facing China, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

8. ISRO's August 2026 announcement to exit launch vehicle manufacturing affects which of the following vehicles?

(a) PSLV only (b) PSLV, LVM3 and SSLV (c) GSLV Mk II only (d) All satellites, not launch vehicles

Answer: (b)

The transition covers PSLV, LVM3 and SSLV production.

9. IN-SPACe, referenced in ISRO's private-sector handover, was established in which year?

(a) 2017 (b) 2020 (c) 2023 (d) 2014

Answer: (b)

IN-SPACe was established in 2020 to enable private-sector participation in India's space economy.

10. Consider the following statements regarding the RBI's draft Interest Rates on Loans and Advances Directions, 2026: (1) They are proposed to take effect from 1 April 2027. (2) They apply only to scheduled commercial banks. Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

(a) 1 only (b) 2 only (c) Both 1 and 2 (d) Neither 1 nor 2

Answer: (a)

Statement 1 is correct; the directions also apply to NBFCs, cooperative banks, AIFIs and HFCs, not just commercial banks.

11. India's merchandise exports crossing \$200 billion this financial year were driven chiefly by which sectors?

(a) Textiles and gems/jewellery (b) Petroleum products and electronics (c) Agriculture and pharmaceuticals (d) IT services and tourism

Answer: (b)

Petroleum products and electronics were the chief growth drivers.

12. What is India's stated full-year merchandise export target?

- (a) \$300 billion (b) \$500 billion (c) \$750 billion (d) \$1 trillion

Answer: (b)

India's stated merchandise export target is \$500 billion.

13. UNCCD COP17 was held in which city?

- (a) Riyadh (b) Abidjan (c) Ulaanbaatar (d) Nairobi

Answer: (c)

COP17 was held in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, 17-28 August 2006.

14. Consider the following statements regarding UNCCD COP17's outcomes: (1) A \$1.3 billion portfolio for land restoration and drought resilience was announced. (2) A binding international drought protocol was successfully adopted. Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- (a) 1 only (b) 2 only (c) Both 1 and 2 (d) Neither 1 nor 2

Answer: (a)

Statement 1 is correct; no drought protocol was secured — a deadlock, not an adoption.

15. The Rangelands Flagship Initiative launched at UNCCD COP17 involves how many projects and what total funding?

- (a) \$1.2 billion across 45 projects (b) \$500 million across 10 projects (c) \$2 billion across 100 projects (d) \$800 million across 23 projects

Answer: (a)

The Rangelands Flagship Initiative involves \$1.2 billion across 45 projects.

16. UNCCD is one of three Rio Conventions. The other two are:

- (a) UNFCCC and CBD (b) UNFCCC and Ramsar Convention (c) CBD and CITES (d) Ramsar Convention and CITES

Answer: (a)

The three Rio Conventions are UNCCD, UNFCCC and CBD.

17. Per the Down To Earth/NASA FIRMS analysis, India's 2026 forest-fire activity (Jan-Feb) increased by how much over the 2014-2023 decade trend?

- (a) Over 30% (b) Over 50% (c) Over 80% (d) Over 100%

Answer: (c)

Fire activity rose over 80% compared with the decade trend.

18. NASA's FIRMS, used to track India's 2026 forest-fire trends, stands for:

- (a) Forest Information and Resource Management System (b) Fire Information for Resource Management System (c) Forest India Rapid Monitoring Satellite (d) Fire Index for Regional Meteorological Surveillance

Answer: (b)

FIRMS stands for Fire Information for Resource Management System.

19. Consider the following statements on India's 2026 forest-fire spread: (1) North-east India was the worst-affected region. (2) No spikes were recorded outside the Himalayan states. Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- (a) 1 only (b) 2 only (c) Both 1 and 2 (d) Neither 1 nor 2

Answer: (a)

Statement 1 is correct; spikes were also recorded in Odisha and the Rayalaseema region, not just the Himalayan states.

20. BRO's Kurung Kumey Bailey bridge restoration in August 2026 was executed under which BRO project?

- (a) Project Vartak (b) Project Arunank (c) Project Swastik (d) Project Beacon

Answer: (b)

The restoration was executed under BRO's Project Arunank.

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5

Mains Questions

GS2 · 150 WORDS

1. Discuss the tension between electoral-roll accuracy and voter inclusion, with reference to the Special Intensive Revision of electoral rolls.

GS2 · 150 WORDS

2. Examine how courts balance a child witness's protection with an accused's fair-trial rights under the POCSO Act, 2012.

GS2 · 150 WORDS

3. "Domestic political events can derail carefully sequenced diplomacy." Discuss with reference to the stalling of Bangladesh PM Tarique Rahman's India visit.

GS3 · 150 WORDS

4. Assess the significance of treating border infrastructure — roads, bridges and railways — as a standing strategic investment rather than a crisis response.

GS3 · 150 WORDS

5. Discuss the rationale and risks of ISRO's transition from launch-vehicle manufacturer to a research-focused agency.

GS3 · 150 WORDS

6. Examine the significance of standardised, transparent loan-pricing regulation for financial consumer protection in India.

GS3 · 150 WORDS

7. "Multilateral environmental negotiations increasingly mobilise finance faster than they mobilise binding law." Critically examine with reference to UNCCD COP17's outcomes.

GS3 · 150 WORDS

8. Discuss the climate-change dimensions of India's rising forest-fire activity and the adequacy of current monitoring and response mechanisms.

9. As an election official implementing the Special Intensive Revision in a district with a large seasonal-migrant population, you find that strict document-verification timelines risk excluding genuine voters who are away for work during the claims window. Discuss the ethical considerations and the course of action you would recommend.

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6 Answer Writing Value Addition

"SIR is being conducted in phases with multiple safeguards to protect eligible voters."

— Election Commission of India, Aug 2026

"The POCSO Act does not bar cross-examination of a child witness; it regulates the manner in which it is conducted."

— Delhi High Court, 19 Aug 2026

"A propitious environment needs to be created for the visit."

— Bangladesh government statement on the stalled Tarique Rahman visit, Aug 2026

"BRO's capital allocation for 2026-27 stands at ₹7,394 crore, aimed at speeding up strategic roads, tunnels, bridges and airfields."

— Union Budget 2026-27

"ISRO will not make any launch vehicles going forward — that responsibility now belongs to industry."

— Pawan Goenka, Chairman, IN-SPACe, Aug 2026

"India's merchandise exports have crossed \$200 billion this financial year, growing by more than 15%."

— Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Aug 2026

"A \$1.3 billion portfolio to support land restoration and drought resilience efforts across 23 countries."

— UNCCD COP17 closing announcement, 28 Aug 2026

"Forest-fire activity in early 2026 was over 80% higher than the decade trend and over 50% higher than 2024."

— Down To Earth, NASA FIRMS analysis, Aug 2026

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TOPIC	GS PAPER	ONE-LINE CAPSULE	PROBABILITY
SIR of Electoral Rolls — Karnataka Phase III	GS2	Draft roll 17 Aug; claims/objections till 16 Sept	★★★★
Delhi HC POCSO cross-examination ruling	GS2	Cross-exam regulated, not barred, under POCSO	★★★
Tarique Rahman's stalled India visit	GS2	Hasina press-conference row derails first visit	★★★★
BRO Bailey bridge, Kurung Kumey	GS3	200-ft rapid restoration after July flash flood	★★★
₹37,400cr strategic border-railway upgrade	GS3	Spans China, Pakistan, Bangladesh fronts together	★★★★
ISRO exits launch-vehicle manufacturing	GS3	PSLV/LVM3/SSLV production to HAL-L&T consortia	★★★★★
PSLV anomaly expert committee review	GS3	Root-cause review before next PSLV flight cleared	★★★
RBI draft Interest Rates on Loans Directions, 2026	GS3	Board-approved pricing policy, effective Apr 2027	★★★★
India exports cross \$200bn this FY	GS3	+15% YoY; petroleum and electronics lead	★★★★
UNCCD COP17 closes — \$1.3bn pledge, drought deadlock	GS3	Finance mobilised; binding protocol blocked by US	★★★★★
Rangelands Flagship Initiative	GS3	\$1.2bn, 45 projects for pastoralist-centred restoration	★★★
India's 2026 forest-fire surge	GS3	+80% vs decade trend; NASA FIRMS data	★★★★★
IN-SPACE's role in space-sector reform	GS3	2020-established body enabling private participation	★★★
Article 324 and ECI's constitutional mandate	GS2	Basis for electoral roll revision powers	★★
Rio Conventions — UNCCD, UNFCCC, CBD	GS3	All three trace to the 1992 Rio Earth Summit	★★★
Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN)	GS3	UNCCD's core target framework for member states	★★★
India-Bangladesh Neighbourhood First policy	GS2	Tested by post-Hasina political transition dynamics	★★★

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QUESTIONS FROM
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