



## Explosions Rock Iran's Capital, And More Attacks Target Israel As US Warns Bombing Will Intensify

LT NEWS SERVICE

Dubai, Mar 7: Explosions sent up clouds of dark smoke in the Iranian capital city early Saturday, and Tehran retaliated by firing missiles at Israel as the United States warned of a forthcoming bombing campaign that officials said would be the most intense yet in the weeklong conflict.

There was no foreseeable end to the fighting. US President Donald Trump's administration approved a new USD 151 million arms sale to Israel after Trump said he would not negotiate with Iran without its "unconditional surrender." Iran's UN ambassador said the country would "take all necessary measures" to defend itself.

Associated Press video showed explosions flashing and smoke rising over western Tehran as Israel said it had begun a broad wave of strikes. Also early Saturday, the Israeli military said it was moving to intercept a new salvo of missiles launched from Iran.

In a sign of the widening nature of the conflict, sirens sounded -- Contd. on P2

## Domestic LPG Cylinder Costlier By Rs 60, Commercial Up Rs 115 Amid West Asia Conflict

LT NEWS SERVICE

New Delhi, Mar 7: The prices of domestic LPG and commercial cylinders were hiked by a steep Rs 60 and Rs 114.5, respectively, amid rising energy costs linked to the West Asia conflict.

Non-subsidised LPG, the one that common household users other than the Ujjwala beneficiaries use in their kitchens, will now cost Rs 913 per 14.2-kg cylinder in Delhi as against Rs 853 previously, according to the Indian Oil Corporation (IOC) website. This is the second increase in prices in less than a year. Industry officials said the increase follows a steep rise in global energy prices since the breakout of military conflict in West Asia.

Despite the price increase, cooking -- Contd. on P2

## New Ladakh LG Saxena Faces Twin Tasks: Reviving Dialogue, Conducting LAHDC Leh Elections



LT NEWS SERVICE

Leh: The biggest tasks before the newly appointed Lieutenant Governor of Ladakh, Vinai Kumar Saxena, are to take the ongoing dialogue process to its logical conclusion and ensure the smooth conduct of elections to the Panchayats and the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC), Leh, in the Union Territory.

Vinai Kumar Saxena is the fourth Lieutenant Governor of Ladakh, which was carved out as a Union

Territory from the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir in 2019.

After the unprecedented violence in Leh in September 2025, the dialogue process between the agitating groups of Ladakh and the High Powered Committee (HPC) of the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) was stalled. Although the talks have since resumed, the responsibility of the newly appointed LG will be to ensure that the dialogue continues without any hurdles and yields positive results.

The last round of talks between the

High Powered Committee (HPC) of the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) and agitating Ladakhi groups was held in New Delhi on February 4, 2026, and earlier on October 22, 2025. The discussions focused on demands for statehood, Sixth Schedule protection, and job reservations, with the MHA offering safeguards under Article 371. The agitating Ladakhi groups comprise the Leh Apex Body (LAB) and the Kargil Democratic Alliance (KDA). The last round of talks remained inconclusive as the agitating groups continued to press for more than the Article 371 provisions proposed by the MHA.

The LAB and KDA are seeking constitutional safeguards to protect land, culture, and jobs, separate Lok Sabha seats for Leh and Kargil, along with full statehood.

Another important task before Saxena will be to conduct elections to the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC), Leh. These elections were scheduled to be held in November 2025 but were postponed due to the violence that erupted in Leh on September 24, 2025.

The Ladakh Union Territory administration -- Contd. on P2

## CEC Kargil Meets Newly Appointed Lieutenant Governor Vinai Kumar Saxena; Discusses Developmental Agenda



LT NEWS SERVICE

New Delhi, March 07, 2026: The Hon'ble Chairman and Chief Executive Councillor of the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC) Kargil, Dr. Mohd Jaffer Akhoo, today met with the newly appointed Hon'ble Lieutenant Governor of Ladakh, Vinai Kumar Saxena, at Lok Niwas in New Delhi.

On the occasion, the CEC congratulated the Lieutenant Governor on assuming the charge as the Lieutenant Governor of

Ladakh and expressed hope that under his leadership the developmental aspirations of the people of the Union Territory would be further strengthened.

During the meeting, the CEC discussed various socio-political, developmental and geographical aspects of the Union Territory of Ladakh, with particular focus on the challenges faced by the region due to its vast terrain, harsh climatic conditions and remote habitations. He also highlighted the developmental aspirations and key issues concerning the people of both Kargil and Leh districts. -- Contd. on P2

## LG Sinha Inaugurated Infrastructure Upgradation And Beautification Works At Holy Shiv Khori

LT NEWS SERVICE

Jammu, Mar 7: Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha on Saturday inaugurated the infrastructure upgradation and beautification works at holy Shiv Khori Shrine in Reasi District. The works were completed by JSW Group under its Corporate Social Responsibility.

In his address, the Lieutenant Governor expressed gratitude to Sajjan Jindal, CMD of JSW Group and his entire team for the historic endeavour. "I see this as a profound act of kindness for humanity's shared heritage," he said.

The Lieutenant Governor said since the 2023 MoU with JSW Group, we awaited this day and today, anticipation ends. "Shiv Khori's awakening begins. We have not only upgraded infrastructure but fortified faith itself.

I have always held a firm conviction that the light of spirituality must be readily accessible to every person in society," the Lieutenant Governor said. The Lieutenant Governor emphasised that the infrastructure upgradation of Shiv Khori is an announcement that the holy shrines of our ancient tradition are being reawakened and restored to life. He said that, today, devotees' perseverance bears fruit and we fulfilled the vibrant dreams of our ancestors who yearned for it.

"Our strong belief in spirituality has guided every effort -- from the historic upgradation for Baba Amarnath Yatra, to



the Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board's vision of transforming the entire region into a living spiritual corridor, to placing Shiv Khori firmly on the map of India's great centers of devotion," he said.

The Lieutenant Governor reiterated that it is his prime objective to make Jammu Kashmir a vibrant, breathing spiritual heart of the nation.

"After five years of sustained efforts, I can say with quiet satisfaction that dream is no longer distant.

Today I say with deep confidence that after centuries, Jammu Kashmir is experiencing a genuine spiritual, cultural, and social renaissance. This Union Territory is re-emerging as a center of knowledge, art, music, and philosophy," the Lieutenant Governor said.

He said that the flame of tapas and dharma for which this land was once renowned across the world -- we are relighting it with full conviction.

The Lieutenant Governor called upon the youth to create balance in inner and outer life. "This renaissance is for you. Come to the sacred shrines -- Contd. on P2

## Modi Congratulates Nepal Govt, People For Successful Polls; Reiterates India's Vow To Work Closely

LT NEWS SERVICE

New Delhi, Mar 7: Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday congratulated the people and government of Nepal for the successful conduct of elections in the Himalayan nation, and said the historic milestone is a proud moment in Nepal's democratic journey. Modi also said that as a close friend and neighbour, India remains steadfast in its commitment to working closely with the people of Nepal and its new government to scale new heights of shared peace, progress and prosperity.

"I warmly congratulate the people and government of Nepal on the successful and peaceful conduct of elections. It is heartening to see my Nepali sisters and brothers exercise their democratic rights so vibrantly. This historic milestone is a proud moment in Nepal's democratic journey," Modi said in a post on X. Rapper-turned-politician Balendra Shah's Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) was on Saturday heading towards a landslide victory in Nepal's first general elections since the violent Gen Z protests last year, shattering the dominance of the established political parties. The RSP, which was formed in 2022 by



Ravi Lamichhane, has won 39 of the 50 seats declared so far, including a clean sweep in the 10 constituencies of Kathmandu district, and is leading in 80 others, according to the Election Commission of Nepal.

The RSP, which has projected Balendra Shah as its prime ministerial candidate and organised its first election campaign at Janakpur in Madhesh, is heading towards a clean sweep of the province. ( Besides Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Omar Abdullah on Saturday

welcomed the elections in Nepal, saying the formation of governments must be the choice of the people of the country and not the result of external intervention or aerial bombardment. Abdullah said he had suggested reviewing the FIRs and releasing those detained during protests in the Kashmir valley over the killing of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

"As I said earlier, the only people who get to choose their regime are the people -- Contd. on P2



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## CONTINUATIONS

## Ladakh LG

was expected to issue the election notification in September to hold elections to the Hill Council in October and complete the process by November 1.

However, the UT administration cited the creation of new districts and the proposal to reserve one-third of the seats in the Council for women as reasons for delaying the elections to the LAHDC Leh, which was ruled by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

Both the Leh and Kargil Hill Development Councils have 30 seats each. Of these, elections are held for 26 seats, while four councillors are nominated by the UT administration.

Elections were last held in October 2020 for the 26 seats of the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council, Leh. It was also the first election after Ladakh was carved out of Jammu and Kashmir and made a separate Union Territory.

Saxena earlier served as Delhi LG

Vinai Kumar Saxena, who has served as the Lieutenant Governor of Delhi since 2022, has now been appointed as the new Lieutenant Governor of Ladakh.

Before entering constitutional office, Saxena headed the Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC), where he implemented several programmes aimed at promoting rural employment and traditional industries.

During his tenure as Delhi LG, Saxena frequently clashed with the elected Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) government over administrative powers and governance issues in the national capital.

As the Lieutenant Governor of Ladakh, Saxena will now oversee governance in a strategically important Himalayan Union Territory bordering China and Pakistan.

His appointment follows the resignation of Ladakh's LG Kavinder Gupta, who had served less than a year in office since his appointment in July last year. Gupta has now been appointed as the Governor of Himachal Pradesh.

Earlier in the day, West Bengal Governor C.V. Ananda Bose resigned, and former Tamil Nadu Governor R.N. Ravi was appointed as his successor.

Kavinder Gupta was the third Lieutenant Governor of Ladakh, succeeding Brigadier B.D. Mishra, who had assumed the role in February 2024 after R.K. Mathur, Ladakh's first-ever Lieutenant Governor, following the bifurcation of Jammu and Kashmir in 2019

## LG Sinha

of this land and allow yourself to feel what centuries of unbroken devotion feel like when it meets you in silence. That energy does not belong to the past. It flows still- and it is yours to draw from," he further said.

The Lieutenant Governor also highlighted a series of upcoming facilities designed to enhance the safety and convenience of pilgrims at visiting the holy Shri Shiv Khori shrine.

"The new helipad is slated for completion this month. Helicopter services for the devotees of Shri Shiv Khori is also expected to start from the month of April. To protect pilgrims from unpredictable weather and shooting stones, a protective track shed will also be completed soon.

A future development roadmap has also been prepared. Recognizing the heavy footfall during festive seasons, an alternative track between Ram Mandir and Shiv Khori will be constructed for decongestion.

Comprehensive repair and renovation work of the Ransoo Shrine building and existing tracks will be taken up, while adequate sanitation facilities will be provided along the track. A serai and langar facility will also come up for pilgrims in Ransoo," he said.

The Lieutenant Governor said that the time has come for the Shri Shiv Khori Shrine Board to introduce a 'Sound and Light Show' to enrich the experience of the devotees. With the collective interest and consensus, the feasibility of a Ropeway project may be explored, he said.

"We are fully committed to creating a thriving ecosystem where local traders, artisans, youth, and women can access new opportunities, ensuring prosperity for every family," the Lieutenant Governor said.

The Lieutenant Governor also flagged off garbage collection vehicle donated by J&K Bank to Shri Shiv Khori Shrine Board.

The works inaugurated today includes renovation of Shivam Dwar (Darshani Deodi); repair and renovation of Mahadev Bhawan including Yatra Registration Counter; existing Ghat refurbishment (near Shivam Dwar); Gazebos near bathing Ghat and near Shani Mandir; Toilet Complexes; renovation of Medical Kiosk near Ram Mandir; construction of Pony Shed at Ransoo near Darshani Deodi and installation of Lights at various locations.

Kuldeep Raj Dubey, Member of Legislative Assembly from Reasi; Sajjan Jindal, Chairman and Managing Director (CMD), JSW Group; Ramesh Kumar, Divisional Commissioner Jammu and Chairman Shri Shiv Khori Shrine Board; Sarah Rizvi, DIG Udhampur and Reasi Range; Kumar Abhishek, Deputy Commissioner Reasi; senior officials; prominent citizens from different walks of life and devotees in large number attended the inaugural ceremony. Besides Lieutenant Governor Shri Manoj Sinha on Sunday offered three principles to strengthen the Made in India and Atma-Nirbhar Bharat initiative - Quality, Innovation, and Reliability. He stressed that these three mantras must become the new identity of domestic manufacturing sector.

"I view Swadeshi Apnao (Embrace Swadeshi) not as a slogan, but a way of life. I urge people of Jammu Kashmir and across the country- let it shape our daily habits," the Lieutenant Governor said.

The Lieutenant Governor was speaking at Atma-Nirbhar Bharat event organised by Federation of Trade & Industry of India (FTII). The Lieutenant Governor felicitated the recipients of Vyapar Ratan Awards for their significant contribution.

The Lieutenant Governor spoke on fortifying domestic manufacturing prowess and "Made in India" goods translates to surging Indian jobs and a resilient economy. "Atma-Nirbhar Bharat is a national awakening. It is an economic revolution propelled by industry's might. 'Made in India' now symbolizes trust in global trade. We must ensure that when someone, anywhere in the world, sees 'Made in India' on a product, it inspires confidence," the Lieutenant Governor said.

The Lieutenant Governor highlighted that India began scripting a new chapter in 2014, forging a new path to self-reliance under the leadership of Hon'ble Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi.

He said that under Hon'ble Prime Minister's visionary leadership, India did not follow a predetermined path but it built its own.

"India resolved to rise not ordinary, but empowered. Today, it is witnessing a genuine economic renaissance. Our MSMEs are the backbone of our economy. They embody hope for millions of families and businesses.

Spread across every district and every town of this country, MSMEs innovate even under the constraint of limited resources. And that is why when we purchase a product from a small enterprise, we are not simply buying a commodity- we are securing the future of a family, and giving birth to employment, skill and opportunity," the Lieutenant Governor said.

The Lieutenant Governor emphasised that every stakeholder must understand that trade is not merely the act of buying and selling. He said that Trade must be viewed as the flow of opportunity.

The Lieutenant Governor said that small-scale and micro-enterprises now anchor J&K's economy. He highlighted the efforts that have revolutionized work in villages and towns, instituting ease of living and ease of doing business, vowing to transform Jammu Kashmir into a genuine market powerhouse.

"We have crafted fresh opportunities for youth and women, starting thousands of small and micro manufacturing ventures that sustain families, stabilize society, and now shaping Jammu Kashmir business landscape. This winds of change stir palpably in Jammu Kashmir too. Post-2019's historic shift, revolutionary strides reshaped industrial growth and MSMEs. The new industrial policy earned the Union Territory its place among the most preferred investment destinations in the country," the Lieutenant Governor said.

The Lieutenant Governor emphasized the necessity of rapid economic growth and the implementation of technological solutions to ensure a transparent, corruption-free system.

## Domestic

gas in India is priced at the lowest when compared with neighbouring countries, they said.

The price increase, the website showed, is effective from March 7.

This is the second increase in rates in 11 months. Prices were last hiked by Rs 50 in April last year.

In Mumbai, non-subsidised LPG now costs Rs 912.50, Rs 939 in Kolkata and Rs 928.50 in Chennai, according to the IOC website.

Rates differ from state to state depending on the incidence of local sales tax or VAT.

Ujjwala Yojana beneficiaries, the over 10 crore poor who have got free LPG connections since the scheme was launched in 2016, will continue to get a subsidy of Rs 300 per 14.2 kg cylinder for up to 12 refills in a year.

The price of commercial LPG, the one used by establishments such as hotels and restaurants, was increased by Rs 114.5 per 19-kg cylinder. It now costs Rs 1,883 in Delhi. This increase comes on top of the Rs 28 per 19-kg cylinder increase on March 1. Commercial LPG rates have risen by Rs 302.50 this year.

Amid escalating tensions in West Asia and disruptions in maritime movement through the Strait of Hormuz, India faces potential risks to its supply of Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG).

Since more than 80% of India's LPG imports transit through this route, the Government of India has invoked emergency provisions under the Essential Commodities Act, 1955 to ensure uninterrupted cooking gas supplies for over 33 crore households.

The Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas (MoPNG) has directed oil refiners to maximize LPG production and prioritize domestic consumption, preventing diversion of propane and butane streams to petrochemical industries.

## ADC Kargil Reviews Arrangements for Shab-e-Qadr, Martyrdom Day of Hazrat Ali and Jamiatul-Vida



Kargil, March 07, 2026: Additional Deputy Commissioner, LAHDC Kargil, Inteeaz Kacho today convened a meeting to review arrangements for the upcoming religious events including Shab-e-Qadr, the commemoration of the Martyrdom Day of Hazrat Ali on 21st Ramadan, related processions and Jamiatul-Vida. The meeting was attended by concerned officers and representatives of various religious organisations.

During the meeting, the representatives of religious organisations requested the District Administration to make necessary arrangements for the upcoming nightly prayer gatherings (shab), processions and Jamiatul-Vida congregations.

The ADC directed the concerned departments to ensure all essential arrangements including medical facilities, adequate water supply, uninterrupted electricity, and proper traffic management during the events. He also instructed the religious institutions to arrange volunteers to coordinate with the administration so that the processions move smoothly along the designated routes within the scheduled time.

Representatives of IKMT requested the administration to vacate the parking area of Hussaini Park well in advance for the processions and also urged that public conveniences remain accessible during the events. Representatives of JUIAK requested proper cleanliness in the Inqalaab Manzil Complex and its

vicinity and stressed that the schedule and arrangements should follow the practices adopted in previous years. It was also advised to keep the Khri Sultan Cho Sports Stadium, Byamthang available for parking during the events.

Besides this, various other issues related to the smooth conduct of the religious programmes were discussed in detail. The meeting was attended by Additional SP, Kargil, Deputy CMO, Executive Engineer, PDD, Assistant Director, FCS&CA, Tehsildar Kargil, Headquarter Assistant to DC, Assistant Commissioner, Food Safety, District Traffic Inspector, beside representatives of IKMT, JUIAK and various other religious organisations.

Additional Deputy Commissioner (ADC), Kargil, Inteeaz Kacho chaired a meeting of the committee constituted for preparation of the Draft District Disaster Management Plan (DDMP) in his office chamber today.

The meeting was attended by Additional Superintendent of Police, Superintending Engineer PWD, Assistant Director FCS&CA, Deputy CMO, Headquarter Assistant to DC, Deputy Superintendent of Police UTDRF, from UTDRF, Accounts Officer to Deputy Commissioner, Assistant Director, Information/Wildlife Warden, District Mineral Officer, experts from the Department of Disaster Management, University of Ladakh (Kargil Campus), besides other officials.

During the meeting, the ADC sought

department-wise suggestions from the concerned officers and experts to make the Draft District Disaster Management Plan more effective and comprehensive. He emphasized the importance of coordination among departments for strengthening disaster preparedness and response mechanisms in the district.

The ADC directed departments including Mechanical Engineering, FCS&CA, Public Works, Information, Municipality Committee and other concerned stakeholders to share their detailed inputs at the earliest so that the suggestions could be incorporated in the draft plan.

Experts from the Department of Disaster Management, University of Ladakh suggested utilizing religious infrastructures during times of disaster for relief and shelter purposes. The committee also recommended ensuring readiness of Motor Garages along with drivers during emergencies, identifying alternate traffic routes, and enhancing training and awareness programmes for Aapda Mitras and volunteers.

The need for proper zonation, hazard mapping, resource mapping and strengthening disaster-resilient infrastructure, along with social capacity building initiatives to improve community preparedness was also discussed.

The experts also suggested the introduction of Ham Radio communication systems to strengthen communication during disasters when conventional networks may fail.

## Modi

who live in that country. Therefore, it is for the people of Iran to decide about their regime, not for somebody sitting in Washington DC or Tel Aviv or New Delhi or Beijing or anywhere else.

"It is for the people of Iran to decide what sort of government they want and how they want to bring about that change. I think the prime minister of the United Kingdom was absolutely correct. You cannot affect regime change by aerial bombardment," the chief minister told reporters on the sidelines of a function here.

He said that in the attempt to bring about a change of government, the life of a religious leader had been sacrificed.

He said that Iran's regime is headed by the president, who is still alive, and therefore the regime has not changed.

"Instead, a religious leader, whose leadership was acknowledged not only by the Shia community but by Muslims across the world, had been killed. This was not regime change but a gross misuse of force and a violation of international law," Abdullah said.

Drawing a parallel with other countries, Abdullah referred to Nepal and Bangladesh, saying governments are chosen by the people themselves.

"That is a good thing. As I said about Nepal — who decided the government of Nepal? The people of Nepal did. Just like earlier, who decided the government of Bangladesh? The people of Bangladesh did.

"Now, the people of Nepal have chosen a young prime minister. Earlier, he was perhaps the mayor of Kathmandu. Now the responsibility of the entire country has been placed on his shoulders. It is good. We can only hope that his country maintains good relations with neighbouring countries — that would be the right thing," Abdullah said. Rapper-turned-politician Balendra Shah's Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) was on Saturday heading towards a landslide victory in Nepal's first general elections since the violent Gen Z protests last year, shattering the dominance of the established political parties.

Asked about the statement of his father and National Conference president Farooq Abdullah lashing out at the Centre over a US waiver allowing Indian refiners to purchase Russian oil, the chief minister said that when Farooq Abdullah had spoken about it, he didn't need to say anything more. "Farooq sahib spoke on behalf of the party and on behalf of all of us. There is no need to say anything beyond that," he said.

Farooq Abdullah had said that the country should take decisions on its own and nobody should decide for it.

On PDP president Mehbooba Mufti's demand for immediate release of protesters arrested in the valley, the chief minister referred to his recent meeting with civil society in Srinagar and said two points clearly emerged during the discussions.

"First, in the cases where FIRs have been registered, the government — meaning the law and order machinery — should adopt a softer approach. Second, those who have been arrested should be released. Civil society has put forward these suggestions, and we have conveyed them further. Now a request will be made to them to take some initiative in this matter with the improved situation," he said. (Agencies)

## CEC

Dr. Akhoo emphasized the need for strengthened coordination between the UT Administration and the Hill Councils to ensure the timely implementation of developmental projects, improvement of basic infrastructure, and enhanced delivery of public services, particularly in remote areas. He also underlined the importance of balanced and inclusive development across the region.

The Hon'ble Lieutenant Governor gave a patient hearing to the concerns and suggestions raised by the CEC and appreciated the proactive role being played by the Hill Council in addressing local issues and promoting development in the district.

While assuring his full cooperation and support, the Lieutenant Governor stated that the Administration remains committed to the welfare and holistic development of the people of Ladakh. He expressed confidence that through collective efforts and coordinated planning, ongoing and upcoming developmental initiatives in both Leh and Kargil districts will be further accelerated.

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# Workshop on Credit Outreach for MSMEs and SHGs Conducted at DIC Kargil under RAMP Scheme

Kargil: A one-day workshop aimed at strengthening credit outreach and financial awareness among Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) and Self-Help Groups (SHGs) was successfully conducted today at Kargil under the Raising and Accelerating MSME Performance (RAMP) Programme of the Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises, Government of India. The workshop was organized by the District Industries Centre (DIC) Kargil as part of the LA-12 intervention to enhance engagement between entrepreneurs and banking institutions. The programme witnessed the participation of 30 local MSME entrepreneurs, SHG members, and artisans from Handloom and Handicraft sector.

The objective of the workshop was to enhance awareness regarding various credit facilities, government schemes, and financial procedures required for enterprise development. Functional Manager, DIC Kargil, Sh. Mudassir Rahowf Wani, welcomed the participants and distinguished guests. He delivered a detailed presentation on the RAMP scheme and highlighted various initiatives and schemes being implemented by the Industries Department for the promotion and growth of MSMEs in the region. He emphasized the importance of formal registration, financial discipline, and institutional credit in strengthening the local entrepreneurial ecosystem. Lead District Manager (LDM) Kargil, Sh. Tsering Morup, addressed the gathering and apprised the participants about



various bank credit schemes and financial products available for MSMEs and entrepreneurs. He explained the procedures for availing bank loans, documentation requirements, and the role of banks in supporting small businesses. DDM, NABARD, Sh. Anub Tsetan Paljor, delivered an informative session on various interventions and initiatives of NABARD aimed at strengthening Self-Help Groups (SHGs), cooperative institutions, and rural enterprises. He elaborated on financial support mechanisms and capacity-building initiatives being implemented by NABARD for community-based organizations and entrepreneurs.

During the programme, Mr. Mohd Ali from the Ladakh Rural Livelihoods Mission (LRLM) also addressed the participants and created awareness about various schemes and initiatives of LRLM that support SHGs, rural entrepreneurs, and livelihood promotion activities in the region.

The workshop provided a valuable platform for direct interaction between banker's government officials, and entrepreneurs. Participants actively engaged in discussions and sought clarification regarding loan procedures, documentation GST compliance, and available support schemes. The programme concluded with an interactive session where participants raised queries related to credit facilities, enterprise development, and MSME Schemes which were addressed by the resource persons.

## Launch of Cleanliness Drive in Leh District



The Deputy Commissioner, Leh, Shri Romil Singh Donk, IAS, today launched a district-wide cleanliness initiative titled (Leh m gLagsmo) aimed at promoting a cleaner, healthier, and more beautiful Lehtown. The initiative, which will run for six months, seeks to enhance sanitation standards, promote responsible waste disposal, and encourage active participation from the community in maintaining public hygiene. As part of the programme, a special cleanliness drive will commence from 9th March 2026 and continue for one week across Leh town, during which focused cleaning activities will be carried out in streets, marketplaces, public places, and identified waste hotspots.

The drive will be conducted with the active participation of municipal teams, volun-

teers, educational institutions, and various local associations, including the Leh Merchant Association, All Ladakh Gonpa Association (ALGHA), and All Ladakh Tour Operators Association (ALTOA).

The initiative emphasizes community participation, waste segregation, and collective responsibility towards maintaining a cleaner town environment. Citizens, business establishments, and stakeholders have been encouraged to actively contribute and support the campaign to make Leh a clean and sustainable district.

The District Administration Leh appeals to all residents and stakeholders to extend their cooperation and participate wholeheartedly in the cleanliness drive for the collective benefit of the community.

## Department of Information and Public Relations, Khaltse, Leh-Ladakh.

Khaltse: Two-Day Community Awareness Programme on disaster management for employees and general public organised by 13 Battalion National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) concludes today at Khaltse Sub-Division.

The second day of the programme was conducted at Bus Stand, Khaltse, for general public, shopkeepers and hoteliers of Sub Division Khaltse. SDM Khaltse, Mohd Sharif, SHO Khaltse, Jamyang Namgyal, Sub-Inspector, Sharma Angchok, Naib Tehsildars, and general public actively participated in the programme. The team was led by Dy. Comdt. SD Prasad, Inspector Iqbal Singh, ASI Rakesh Kumar, along with 14 trained rescuers. The session focused on disaster preparedness measures and the role of general public in effective disaster response and post-incident recovery planning. Practical demonstrations and awareness sessions were conducted to enhance preparedness at the community level.

Key topics covered during the programme included:

- Earthquake safety measures and protective actions
- Basic first aid techniques and CPR demonstration for cardiac emergencies
- Safe handling of LPG cylinders and response to gas leakage or explosion incidents



- Use of portable fire extinguishers and fire safety protocols
  - Immediate first aid response during accidents and emergencies
  - Safe evacuation during floods
- The initiative aimed to build resilience among government officers and officials, ensuring

better preparedness to handle disasters and emergencies effectively.

The programme received an encouraging response from participants, who appreciated the practical training and pledged to spread awareness within the community.

## Workshops with Bankers Strengthen Credit Outreach for MSMEs and SHGs in Leh



Leh: Workshops titled "LA-12: Workshop with Bankers for Increasing Outreach Lead" was successfully conducted in Leh district under the "Raising and Accelerating MSME Performance (RAMP) Programme of the Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises, Government of India". The workshop aimed to enhance awareness and improve access to institutional credit among "Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs)" and "Self-Help Group (SHG) members" in the Union Territory of Ladakh.

The workshops were organized at the Conference Hall of the District Industries Centre Leh and bringing together entrepreneurs, bankers, and officials to strengthen credit linkages and financial awareness. Around 30 entrepreneurs and SHG members from sectors including food processing, pashmina, handicrafts, and handloom participated in the programmes. The sessions featured expert guidance from key representatives of the

banking and financial ecosystem. The experts present included Stanzin Dolker, Lead District Manager; Tsewang Tamchos, Manager, State Bank of India; Tsewang Dorjey, Assistant General Manager, National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development; Stanzen Paksang, Senior Manager, SIDCO; K. Isfindyar Khan, Inspector, State Taxes Department (GST Office); and Asiya Tabassum, District Programme Manager, Ladakh Rural Livelihoods Mission, Rural Development Department.

During the workshop, the resource persons provided detailed sessions on "MSME loan schemes, credit facilitation, documentation requirements, and procedures for availing institutional finance". Participants were also guided on Udyam Registration, GST compliance, and various government schemes such as PMEGP, PMFME, and RAMP. The workshops facilitated direct interaction between bankers and entrepreneurs, allowing participants to clarify queries regarding loan

eligibility, working capital requirements, and financial management practices necessary for scaling their enterprises. The initiative also emphasized the importance of digital transactions, proper bookkeeping, and improved financial discipline among MSMEs.

Officials highlighted that such initiatives are essential for "improving credit absorption capacity, strengthening financial inclusion, and supporting the growth of local enterprises" in Ladakh. The workshops are expected to lead to "increased MSME loan applications, improved financial preparedness, and stronger collaboration between financial institutions and entrepreneurs" across the region. The initiative forms part of the approved activities for FY 2025-26 under the RAMP Programme, aimed at enhancing the competitiveness, growth, and sustainability of MSMEs in the Union Territory.

## DIET Leh Organises Two-Day Training Programme for Anganwadi Workers.

Kargil: A two-day training programme for Anganwadi workers commenced today at the District Institute of Education and Training (DIET), Leh. The training is being conducted with the support of resource persons from Zampa Foundation Pvt. Ltd. and aims to strengthen the capacity of Anganwadi workers in early childhood care and education.

Around 160 Anganwadi workers from various parts of Leh district are participating in the programme. The training focuses on enhancing the skills and understanding of Anganwadi workers in handling young children and improving the quality of early childhood education at the grassroots level.

During the inaugural session, Shri Mirza Mehdi, Principal DIET Leh, warmly welcomed the resource persons from Zampa Foundation and all the participating Anganwadi workers. In his address, he emphasised the significant responsibility of Anganwadi workers in nurturing young children during their most important developmental stage. He encouraged all participants to take the training seriously and actively engage in the sessions, stating that the early years of a child's life form the foundation for their future learning and development.

Smt. Tsering Yangdol, Head of Department, DIET Leh, also addressed the participants and highlighted the crucial role played by Anganwadi workers in shaping and guiding young minds. She explained the importance of the foundational stage of education and stressed the need to incorporate the principles of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 in early childhood education practices.

In compliance with Circular No. CS/UTL (Circular)/2026/01-06 dated January 01, 2026, the Office of the Assistant Regional Transport Officer (ARTO), Leh organized special public service camps in the Nubra Sub-



Division to provide responsive and accessible transport-related services to the general public.

The camps were held at Tehsil Sumoor on February 28, 2026 and at Tehsil Diskit on March 02, 2026. During the camps, a total of 126 applications were received and addressed on the spot.

Various services were provided during the camps, including driving tests, issuance of learner's licences, vehicle fitness tests, renewal of vehicle permits, registration of vehicles, and other transport-related services.

Additionally, road safety awareness sessions were conducted for the general public, highlighting the importance of safe driving practices and strict adherence to traffic rules and regulations. The initiative aimed to make transport-related services more accessible, transparent, and citizen-centric, particularly for residents of remote areas.

As per the schedule prepared by the District Disaster Management Authority (DDMA), Leh, the 13 Battalion National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) organised a two-day Community Awareness Programme on Disaster Management for employees, shopkeepers, hoteliers and the general public of Sub Division Khaltse.

The first day of the programme was conducted at SDM Ground, Khaltse, for employees of various departments of Sub Division Khaltse. The second day of the programme will be conducted at Bus Stand Khaltse for shopkeepers, hoteliers and the general public of Sub Division Khaltse.

During the programme, Sub Divisional Magistrate (SDM) Khaltse, Mohd Sharif, Station House Officer Jamyang Namgaal, and Sub Inspector Skarma Angchuck, along with officers and officials from various departments and police personnel, actively participated in the programme.

The NDRF team was led by Dy. Comdt. S.D. Prasad, Inspector Iqbal Singh, and ASI Rakesh Kumar, along with 14 trained rescuers. The training programme aimed to equip employees with essential skills in disaster preparedness, rescue techniques, and emergency response during natural calamities such as floods, landslides and earthquakes.

The SDM briefed the participants on the importance of disaster management training. He stressed the need for awareness of basic disaster management practices and appreciated the participants for attending the training programme.

## Indian-origin surgeon leads UK's first long-distance robotic surgeries

LONDON, Mar 7: A London-based Indian-origin surgeon has created medical history by successfully completing the UK's first remote robotic surgeries on patients in Gibraltar, at a distance of around 2,400 km away. Professor Prokar Dasgupta, a world-leading robotic urological surgeon who heads The London Clinic's Robotic Centre of Excellence, said his two test cases were an excellent example of the responsible use of artificial intelligence (AI).

He completed the prostatectomy, a partial or complete removal of the prostate gland, on a 52-year-old unnamed patient on Wednesday, with a previous successful procedure on February 11.

"This is an excellent example of teamwork, friendship, international determination and responsible AI to make this happen after a year of planning," said Dasgupta.

The London Clinic said it establishes the hospital as the first in the country to conduct such a remote robot-assisted telesurgery, in collaboration with the Gibraltar Health Authority and urological surgeons James Allan and Paul Hughes at St. Bernard's Hospital in Gibraltar.



The procedure, performed with the Toumai Robotic System by Microport, has the potential to revolutionise surgery for patients globally.

In January, 62-year-old Paul Buxton, was diagnosed with prostate cancer and offered the opportunity by the two hospitals to take part in a telesurgery trial.

He had moved to Gibraltar, a British Overseas Territory, from

the United Kingdom around 40 years ago and was originally planning to travel to London for the surgery.

"I explained to Mr Buxton that we now have the technology to perform this remotely. Why waste time, energy, money and inconvenience to fly over? I stay in London, he stays in Gibraltar," recalled Prof. Dasgupta.

Buxton, recovering well from his surgery, said it was a "privilege" to be part of medical history and is hopeful that it will pave the way for many similar surgeries.

"Of course, I was concerned at first, but having researched it, I thought someone has to be the first, don't they?"

"I hope my experience encourages other people to consider telesurgery. I've had three or four operations before, for hernias, and I didn't feel that great after, but I felt completely different this time - the recovery is so much quicker and I've not had to travel overseas," he said.

The telesurgery was supported by logistics from global technology services and solutions provider Presidio, using a 3D camera with a time lag of just 0.06 seconds across the two countries.

## Afghan mortar shell kills Pakistani civilian

Peshawar

A person was killed and seven others injured after Afghan forces allegedly carried out mortar shelling on civilian areas near the Afghanistan border in northwestern Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa over the past 24 hours, security officials said on Friday. According to officials, Meena Khan Wazir, a local tribesman, was killed when

figure from Mohmand district, urged both the Pakistani and Afghan Governments to avoid targeting civilian populations despite the ongoing tensions. He emphasised that civilians should not bear the consequences of the strained relations and the ongoing conflict along the border.

Officials on Thursday said security forces carried out coordinated ground and aerial strikes against militant



mortar shells allegedly fired from the Afghan side struck his house in the border town of Angoor Adda in South Waziristan district. In a separate incident, seven people, including two women and two children, were injured when a mortar shell hit two houses shortly before 11pm on Thursday in Mohmand district. Several houses were also damaged in the attack. Meanwhile, Mohibullah Khan, a social

positions along the border with Afghanistan in southwest Pakistan, targeting dozens of posts used by the Afghan Taliban and Fitna al-Khawarij militants. Fitna al-Khawarij is a term that the state uses for the banned Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). According to security officials, the Pakistan Army conducted effective ground and air operations during the night between Wednesday and Thursday.

## Indonesia to ban social media for children U-16

Jakarta

Indonesia will ban social media for children under 16, Communication and Digital Affairs Minister Meutya Hafid said on Friday.

Hafid in a statement to media said that she just signed a Government regulation that will mean children under the age of 16 can no longer have accounts on high-risk digital platforms, including YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, Threads, X, Bigo Live and Roblox. The implementation will start gradually from March 28, until all platforms fulfill their compliance obligations. "The basis is clear. Our children face increasingly real threats.

From exposure to pornography, cyberbullying, online fraud, and most importantly addiction. The Government is here so that parents no longer have to fight alone against the giant of algorithms," Hafid said.

She added that the Government is taking this step as the best effort in the midst of a digital emergency to reclaim sovereignty over children's futures. "We realize that the implementation of this regulation may cause some discomfort at first. Children may complain and parents may be confused about how to respond to their children's complaints," Hafid said.

Earlier this week, Indonesia's Ministry of Communication and Digital



Affairs conducted a surprise inspection of Meta Platforms' Jakarta office over concerns about the handling of harmful content on its platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp. The ministry in a statement said that through this inspection, the Minister of Communication and Information Technology issued a stern warning regarding Meta's low level of compliance with national regulations.

The *Associated Press* has sent email requests for comment to TikTok and Meta, but has not yet received a response.

Indonesia will be the first country in Southeast Asia to restrict the access of children to social media.

The restriction of social media access for teens began in Australia in December 2025. Social media companies have revoked access to about 4.7 million accounts identified as belonging to children in Australia.

## Pakistani Shiites rally to denounce US-Israeli strikes on Iran as US Embassy issues security alert

Islamabad

Hundreds of minority Shiites rallied on Friday in Pakistan's capital and elsewhere in the country to denounce the killing of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in US-Israeli strikes, as the US Embassy in Islamabad issued a security alert warning Americans of possible violence.

Amid heavy police presence, about 300 protesters staged a sit-in in Islamabad, holding posters of Khamenei and chanting "Death to America" and "Death to Israel." Islamabad



police had parked shipping containers on roads leading to the US Embassy in Islamabad to prevent any potential escalation.

Pakistani authorities said the protesters had agreed not to march toward the embassy in Islamabad,

located about 3 kilometres from the sit-in. The protesters planned to end their sit-in later Friday. Khamenei, who ruled Iran since 1989, has long been a central religious and political figure for Shiites worldwide, including in Pakistan. His death in a

joint US-Israeli operation at the start of the war last week sparked outrage among many Shiites.

Security was also beefed up in the port city of Karachi, where hundreds of Shiites stormed the US Consulate on Sunday, smashing windows and attempting to set the building on fire. Police used batons, tear gas, and live fire to disperse the crowd.

The violence left 10 protesters dead in Karachi, and at least 13 were killed in northern cities, including Skardu and Gilgit. In Karachi, Shiite protesters gathered on Friday some 4 kilometres from the consulate.

## China congratulates Nepal for smooth polls

Beijing

China on Friday congratulated Nepal for holding the polls smoothly while warily watching the trends of the results, which pointed to the rout of pro-Beijing CPN-UML headed by former Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli.

Results trends show Oli, a four-time Prime Minister, trailing far behind the Rastriya Swatantra Party's rapturously-political Balen Shah in his own parliament seat.



## Trump pressures Latin America to curb China

Washington

The US imposed travel bans on three Chilean officials over the possible construction of a submarine fiber optic cable with China, while warning Peru against ceding control over a Chinese-built mega port.

Under pressure from President Donald Trump, who had threatened to take the Panama Canal back under US control, the Panamanian Government seized two ports at either end of the canal that had been run by a Hong Kong company. And when the US captured Venezuela's then-President Nicolas Maduro in January, China saw its extensive interests in the oil-rich



country suddenly vulnerable.

The Trump administration in recent weeks has taken forceful steps in one Latin American country after another aimed at curbing the influence and economic dominance of China. As part of his quest to restore US pre-eminence in the Western Hemisphere, the president is

hosting Latin American leaders at his golf resort near Miami this weekend for a summit dubbed the "Shield of Americas."

Supporters of the White House pivot say it is necessary to push back against what they see as China's malign influence on the US doorstep, warning that it

could help tip the world order in Beijing's favour. Others question the effectiveness of such a blunt approach when China's interests in Latin America run deep and wide.

Francisco Urduz, an associate professor at the Political Science Institute of the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile, said he worries that Latin American countries will have to pick a side. "Trump's approach is making hedging increasingly difficult," he said. "The most likely outcome is a more fragmented region."

Right-leaning Governments will align more closely with Washington, while left-leaning Governments will maintain or deepen ties with China. (AP)

## Mexico, US to start free trade ties review talks on March 16

Mexico City

Mexico and the US said they will start talks on March 16 ahead of a review of the free trade agreement that has shaped both economies and kept some of their commerce steady despite US President Donald Trump's constantly changing tariff policy.

The bilateral trade talks are ahead of a scheduled review later this year of the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement, or USMCA, the latest version of free trade agreements among the US, Mexico and Canada, dating back to the early 1990s that



have intertwined the economies of the three North American countries. The USMCA has allowed Mexico to avoid much of Trump's protectionist measures because many Mexican goods are covered by the free trade agreement. However, a number of

products are not covered, including medium- and heavy-duty trucks, which face a 25 per cent tariff. A 50 per cent tariff on steel, aluminium and copper remains in effect, as does a 17 per cent tariff on Mexican tomatoes.

Mexico's Economy Secretary Marcelo Ebrard said on X that the first round of upcoming bilateral talks was arranged with US Trade Representative Jamieson Greer, and that they would address issues related to rules of origin, increasing production, supply chain security and integrating economies to boost competitiveness against other regions.

## EU suspends visa-free travel for Georgian diplomats

Brussels

The European Union on Friday suspended visa-free travel in Europe for diplomats and officials from Georgia for at least a year over democratic backsliding and the crackdown on anti-Government protesters.

"If a Government attacks its own people, silences journalists, and curtails freedom, there are consequences," EU foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas said in a statement.

Protests unrest have rocked Georgia since the ruling Georgian Dream party halted talks on joining the EU in November 2024.

The move triggered waves of protests that have been met with mass arrests and police violence. It came after the longtime ruling party declared victory in a parliamentary election the opposition said was rigged. The European Commission said it had suspended official travel "in response to Georgia's deliberate and persisting violation of the commitments taken under its visa-free regime in key areas of democracy and fundamental rights." (AP)

## Hungary seizes \$80 million from armoured cars, detains 7 bank employees

Budapest

Hungarian authorities have detained seven Ukrainian citizens, including a former Ukrainian intelligence officer, and seized two armoured cars carrying large amounts of cash across Hungary on suspicion of money laundering, officials said Friday.

Ukraine accused Hungary of taking the Ukrainians hostage and illegally seizing millions of dollars in cash.

"This is state terrorism and racketeering," Ukraine's Foreign Minister Andrii Sybha wrote on X late Thursday. The seven were employees of the Ukrainian state-owned Oschadbank,



and they were travelling in two armoured cars that were carrying the money between Austria and Ukraine when they were detained, Sybha said. The armoured cars

were carrying cash as part of regular services between state banks, he said, adding that the status of the employees was unknown.

In a separate statement,

Oschadbank wrote that 40 million US dollars as well as 35 million euros and 9 kilograms (19.8 pounds) of gold - worth around USD 1.5 million at current prices - had been apprehended by Hungary.

Hungary's National Tax and Customs Administration confirmed Friday that it had detained seven Ukrainian citizens and seized the two armoured cash-transport vehicles. It added it was conducting criminal proceedings on suspicion of money laundering.

Hungary's Interior Ministry, Foreign Ministry and Counter-Terrorism Centre did not immediately respond to requests for

comment. GPS data showed the vehicles were in the centre of Budapest near one of Hungary's law enforcement agencies, but that the location of the bank employees remained unknown, the Ukrainian bank said.

The incident further inflamed tensions between Hungary and Ukraine, which are embroiled in a bitter feud over Hungary's access to Russian oil through a pipeline that crosses Ukrainian territory.

Oil shipments through the Druzhba pipeline have been interrupted since January 27. Ukraine says a Russian drone strike damaged the pipeline's infrastructure, and that repairing it carried risks to

technicians. It said that even if restored, it would remain vulnerable to further Russian attacks. Hungary's Government, however, has accused Ukraine of deliberately holding up supplies of Russian crude, and has vowed to take countermeasures against Kyiv until oil flows resume.

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, who has maintained close relations with the Kremlin while escalating an aggressive anti-Ukraine campaign ahead of crucial elections next month, has called Ukraine Hungary's "enemy," and accused Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy of seeking to provoke an energy

crisis in order to sway the April 12 vote. Orban did not directly mention the detention of the bank vehicles but alluded to the incident in statements to state radio Friday, saying: "We will stop things that are important to Ukraine passing through Hungary until we get the approval of the Ukrainians for oil shipments."

"The Ukrainians will run out of money sooner than we will run out of oil," he added. Trailing in most polls behind a popular centre-right challenger, the populist Orban has staked the election on convincing voters that Ukraine poses an existential threat to Hungary's security. (AP)

# PM Modi Highlights Affordable Healthcare Push On Jan Aushadhi Diwas

NEW DELHI, Mar 7: Prime Minister Narendra Modi has extended his greetings on Jan Aushadhi Diwas 2026, saying the government's flagship affordable medicine initiative reflects its commitment to ensuring accessible healthcare for all citizens.

In a message posted on social media platform X, the Prime Minister said the Pradhan Mantri Bhartiya Janaushadhi Pariyojana has helped millions of people access quality medicines at significantly lower prices.

"On #JanAushadhiDiwas2026, my best wishes to all those who have been positively impacted by the Pradhan Mantri Bhartiya Janaushadhi Pariyojana," Modi said.

Highlighting the objective of the scheme, he added that the programme demonstrates the government's resolve to make healthcare more affordable. "This initiative reflects our commitment to ensuring that every citizen has access to quality medicines at affordable prices," the Prime Minister said.

The scheme operates through a network of dedicated outlets known as Jan Aushadhi Kendras, which supply generic medicines at prices significantly lower than branded alternatives. According to the government, these centres have helped reduce the financial burden of healthcare on families across the country.

"Through Jan Aushadhi Kendras, countless families are saving on healthcare expenses and receiving proper treatment," Modi said in his post.

Launched by the Central government to promote the use of generic medicines, the



Pradhan Mantri Bhartiya Janaushadhi Pariyojana aims to expand access to affordable drugs, particularly for economically weaker sections. Over the years, thousands of Jan Aushadhi Kendras have been opened across India, supplying a wide range of medicines covering various therapeutic categories.

Jan Aushadhi Diwas is observed annually to raise awareness about the benefits of generic medicines and to highlight the Government's efforts to make quality healthcare more accessible and affordable for people across the country. Union Home and Cooperation Minister Amit Shah on Friday unveiled 199 developmental projects in police, health, education and other departments valued at Rs 3,275 crore in Odisha. During his one-day visit to the state, Shah inaugurated 69 projects worth Rs 1,159 crore and laid foundation stones for 130 projects, valued at Rs 2,116 crore in presence of Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi.

Taking to X, Majhi said, "Today marks a historic milestone in Odisha's journey of progress and administrative reform. In the gracious presence of Hon'ble Union Minister for Home and Cooperation, Shri @AmitShah Ji, development projects worth Rs 3,275 crore were inaugurated and foundation stones laid across the state, reflecting our collective commitment to building a stronger and more prosperous Odisha." Shah has inaugurated 20 cyber police stations in different districts of the state, a sulfuric acid plant of the IFCCO at Paradip, 19 modern 'Atal bus stands', Common Service Centres (CSCs) for primary agricultural cooperative societies (PACS), and 141 mandis (marketing yards).



## Shah announces CISF deployment at all EXIM Ports

Bhubaneswar

Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Friday announced that the Central Industrial Security Force will now oversee the security of various sea ports across the country. In his address at the 57th Raising Day of the Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) here, Shah said the force already protects 361 critical installations, including 71 airports, the Parliament complex, and the Statue of Unity near Kevadia in Gujarat.

"The CISF undertakes such a variety of tasks. You are securing the grand monument of Sardar Patel, you are protecting our Parliament complex, the largest panchayat of our democracy,



and elsewhere you are securing dams and critical railway installations," Shah said.

The home minister also detailed the strategic shift toward maritime and aerial defence, saying that, along with these established roles, the Government has worked to include the security of ports for the CISF.

Shah announced that the CISF has been designated as the nodal agency for drone security and said that the Ministry of Home Affairs has decided to create a new vertical for this purpose.

Highlighting the force's growing footprint over the

past year, Shah listed several new locations approved for CISF protection, including the Kartavya Bhavan, Seva Teerth, Noida International Airport, Navi Mumbai Airport, and various critical energy and mining projects such as the Talaiapali coal mine project in Chhattisgarh.

"After the CISF takes over the security of the ports, our maritime safety will improve in tandem with the country's economic growth," Shah said.

The announcement follows a decision by the Centre to designate the CISF as a Recognised Security Organisation (RSO) under the International Ship and Port Facility Security (ISPS) code, effectively making it the new safety regulator for approximately 250 facilities along India's maritime borders.

## AI cleaner G-SPIDER takes on Thiruvananthapuram canals

New Delhi

Taking a cue from western countries and improving the safety of sanitation workers, the Thiruvananthapuram Municipal Corporation (TMC) has deployed an AI-powered robotic system to clean canals in the city under the Swachh Bharat Mission - Urban 2.0. The robotic system, known as G-SPIDER, has been introduced at the Amayizhanchan canal near the railway station in Thiruvananthapuram.

The canal, especially the covered stretch beneath the Thampanoor Railway Station, has long posed challenges for routine cleaning due to limited vertical clearance, continuous water flow and the absence of safe human entry points. As a result, routine cleaning and maintenance of this stretch became extremely difficult through conventional methods.



The AI-powered canal-cleaning system was commissioned by Kerala's Minister for Local Self-Governments, MB Rajesh. The initiative is the result of a collaboration between the municipal corporation and Genrobotic Innovations, a technology firm based in Technopark and known for developing the robotic scavenger Bandicoot. The introduction of this advanced robotic system would effectively remove the need for workers to enter dangerous and unhygienic environments, as mentioned by officials. They termed the initiative a groundbreaking move that enhances operational efficiency while significantly strengthening safety standards in waste management.

The G-SPIDER Automated Canal Cleaning Robot, created by Genrobotic Innovations, is engineered to operate in complex, high-risk canal environments without any human entry. Built on a Cable-Driven Parallel Robotics (CDPR) architecture and powered by AI-enabled vision and sensor intelligence, it enables precise detection, assessment, and removal of accumulated waste.

Using advanced machine vision, the system autonomously identifies and adapts to different waste types, flow conditions, and structural challenges in real time. Its five-degrees-of-freedom robotic mechanism, equipped with a biomimetic claw-type grabber, ensures accurate positioning and secure handling of mixed and irregular debris. The extracted waste is directly transferred into designated collection vehicles, enabling a fully hands-free, end-to-end canal cleaning process — from detection to safe disposal.

## What Trump did to Maduro, Modi has done to Nitish Kumar: Jairam Ramesh

New Delhi

Congress leader Jairam Ramesh on Friday took a swipe at the BJP over Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar's decision to move to the Rajya Sabha, saying what US President Donald Trump did to then Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro in January, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has now done to the JD(U) chief.

He also said that Kumar's decision to step down as chief minister is a betrayal of the mandate the people gave in Assembly polls in November last year. Ramesh said the people of the State voted for Kumar's re-election and not for



a BJP chief minister. Ramesh's remarks came a day after JD(U) chief Kumar filed nomination papers for Rajya Sabha elections, marking a turning point in Bihar politics and virtually bringing the curtain down on his tenure as the State's longest-serving chief minister. The move has paved the way for a new Government in the Hindi heartland State, likely to be headed by the BJP.

Expressing gratitude to the people of the State, Kumar had said on X, "For more than two decades, you have consistently placed your trust and support in me, and it is on the strength of that trust that we have served Bihar and all of you with complete dedication. It is the power of your trust and support that has enabled Bihar today to present a new dimension of development and dignity."

Asked about this major development in Bihar politics, Ramesh told PTI, "During the Bihar election campaign,

in the present term and he's being removed, Ramesh said. Taking a swipe at Prime Minister Modi and the BJP, Ramesh said, "What Trump did to Maduro, Modi ji has done to Nitish Kumar. This is a coup". The US military had seized Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores, from their Caracas home on January 3 in a stunning operation that landed them in New York to face federal drug trafficking charges.

On Kumar's move to the Rajya Sabha, Ramesh said, "This was inevitable. This is a betrayal of the people of Bihar and the mandate they gave."

The mandate wasn't to make a BJP chief minister, but

to make Nitish Kumar the chief minister. "It's possible that tomorrow, (Chandrababu) Naidu is brought here and made a minister, a coup can happen there too. There was a coup in Maharashtra too, the split the NCP and Shiv Sena... This is all the work of the 'G2'," Ramesh said.

He said the Congress just has six MLAs in Bihar but it will continue to raise the issues of the people and Kumar's move to Rajya Sabha is a "betrayal of the mandate".

The Congress on Thursday had said a "leadership coup and regime change orchestrated by G2" has taken place and is a "huge betrayal" of the mandate of the people.

## NCW to hold nationwide Jan Sunwai in 500 districts

New Delhi

The National Commission for Women (NCW) will organise nationwide 'Jan Sunwai' in around 500 districts between March 8 and March 14 to hear women's grievances and ensure quicker redressal, its chairperson Vijaya Kishore Rahatkar said here on Friday.

Rahatkar noted that the initiative aims to expand the commission's grievance



redressal mechanism by taking hearings closer to women across the country. The hearings will be conducted jointly by the NCW and State women's commissions, she said, adding that the move is intended to strengthen outreach and ensure justice, safety and equal opportunities for women.

"As part of the campaign, hearings will be held in nearly 500 districts across most States and UTs, where more than 15,000 cases are expected to be taken up, including walk-in cases," Rahatkar said. Some States may not host the programme due to elections, she added. The districts have been

## Mamata stages sit-in protest over voter roll deletions ahead of polls

Kolkata

Ahead of the West Bengal Assembly elections, Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee will start a sit-in here on Friday to protest against the alleged arbitrary deletions in the post-SIR electoral rolls in the State. The protest comes just two days before the proposed visit of the full bench of the Election Commission to the State.

The sit-in, scheduled from 2 pm at the Esplanade Metro Channel in central Kolkata, was announced by TMC national general secretary Abhishek Banerjee on Sunday.



He had accused the Election Commission of carrying out a "politically motivated" exercise that could disenfranchise lakhs of legitimate voters months ahead of the Assembly elections. The protest marks a dramatic political escalation by the ruling party just days after the Election Commission published the post-SIR electoral rolls, which have significantly redrawn the contours of the State's electorate.

## Indian airlines cancel 281 flights amid West Asia crisis

New Delhi

Indian carriers cancelled 281 international flights on Thursday due to the Middle East crisis, and the Government is closely monitoring the evolving situation in the region.

The escalating conflict in the Middle East involving the US, Israel and Iran has resulted in airspace closures that have significantly impacted flight operations.

The civil aviation ministry on Thursday said it continues to closely monitor the evolving situation in West Asia. "As of 5 March, a total of



Meanwhile, a Passenger Assistance Control Room (PACR) is operational. "A total of 1,461 grievances have been addressed during this period through AirSewa, social media platforms, and dedicated helpline calls, in coordination with airlines and other concerned stakeholders. For assistance, passengers may reach out to the Ministry's PACR helpline numbers: 011-24604283/011-24632987," the ministry said.

Meanwhile, at least 170 international flights were cancelled at Mumbai, Delhi and Bengaluru airports on Thursday due to the Middle East crisis, officials said.

## Global conflicts continue due to overlooking oneness: Bhagwat

Jaisalmer

RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat on Friday said global wars and conflicts continue because people fail to recognise the fundamental oneness among all. He was speaking at the 'Dharma Sabha', marking the inauguration of the Jain community's Chadar Mahotsav in Jaisalmer.

Bhagwat said wars do not stop because humanity overlooks the truth of ekatva (oneness). "People appear different, but all are one," he said, adding that the League of Nations was set up after the First World War to prevent future wars, but it failed. "The United Nations came



into being after World War II for the same reason, yet conflicts persist worldwide," he said.

Drawing from Indian thought, Bhagwat said the absolute truth is one, eternal and universal for everyone. "Diversity exists because the divine chose to appear in many forms. One should recognise unity while moving through this variety," he said.

Bhagwat said India's ability to survive difficulties comes from this understanding of unity in diversity. "Disputes should be settled through goodwill and harmony, not through arguments. Society needs to build this goodwill step by step to remove divisions and selfish-

ness," he said. "India has the answer to world problems through its ancient wisdom of unity. Society must stand without discrimination to protect dharma and help create a better world. By doing this, India will not only become prosperous but will emerge as Vishwaguru, giving rise to a new harmonious world," he said.

Bhagwat urged people to see the whole world as their own, with no one as an outsider. He said different paths and traditions exist because no single way suits all. "All sects lead to the divine and deserve respect, while each person follows their path with faith," he said.

Talking about Acharya Jinadattasuri, a prominent Jain monk who lived during the medieval period in India, Bhagwat said Suri's work and teachings have endured through centuries of challenges, and reflected the strength of Sanatan culture.

He said great figures have appeared at different times in history to rid society of divisions such as caste and selfishness, and to teach oneness and a sense of duty. The RSS chief said that

when foreign invasions and internal divisions took place in his time, Suri brought back unity and helped overcome crises.

A special Chadar Mahotsav is being organised in Jaisalmer from March 6-8, during which events such as the viewing and worship of the "miraculous garments" will take place.

Thousands of devotees are expected to arrive to express their devotion to Acharya Jinadattasuri, who is also called 'Dada Gurudev'.

It is believed that when the body of Jinadattasuri was consigned to the funeral pyre, his physical form was consumed by the fire, but the garments he wore remained completely unburnt.

EDITORIAL

Why Is Nitish Headed To The Rajya Sabha?

Bihar will soon have a new chief minister. Nitish Kumar, the long-time chief minister of Bihar, is officially preparing to leave the CM post and get elected to the Rajya Sabha. Nitish, the leader of the Janata Dal (United), filed his nomination for the Rajya Sabha on March 5.

With BJP leading the government, JD(U) may be accommodated with two deputy chief minister positions as part of a power-sharing arrangement. The change could usher in a new chief minister from the BJP, which is the dominant partner in the ruling NDA alliance in Bihar. Speculations are also rife that with Nitish's entry into the Upper House, his son Nishant Kumar is expected to make entry into politics and may be given an important position in the government.

In last November's Assembly election, the NDA won 202 of the 243 seats - the BJP was the largest party with 89 seats while the JD(U) got 85, a jump of 42 seats from the previous election. Nitish was the face of the election. This is not merely another political shuffle - it could reshape the state's power equations dramatically and reshape party strategies at both state and national levels.

Several strategic and political factors appear to be driving this possibility. At 75, Nitish (celebrated his birthday on March 1) has been a dominant figure in Bihar politics for decades. Since Nitish has been unwell for a long time, this move has been on the cards. His shift to Rajya Sabha might reflect a planned succession strategy within JD(U) and the broader alliance.

Earlier, even within JD(U), there was a debate over who should be nominated to Rajya Sabha. Nitish and his close confidantes including leaders like Manish Verma (former bureaucrat, who belongs to the same caste Kumi as Nitish) preferred son Nishant Kumar for Rajya Sabha. But Nishant reportedly wanted to pursue state politics.

This process was more than just a formal step; it's a potential inflection point towards intra-party power dynamics. There is still a section in the party which wants Nitish to continue as the CM.

Sources say that Nitish's son, Nishant Kumar entering active politics, possibly as deputy CM or in a growing leadership role could be part of a succession calculus inside JD(U). The JD(U) has been steered by its supreme,

his son on the top post of the party would ensure its durability and survival. It could keep the flock together at least for the next 5 years with Nitish still around.

Nitish has a clean image and had kept his family away from politics hitherto unlike the RJD, Congress and other political parties in the state. Nitish has a unique governance model - a mix of development promises, lean social engineering, and strategic alliances (with both BJP and adversarial blocs at different times) - which has kept him politically relevant for years. Whether Nishant would be able to carry forward his father's political legacy and governance model given that he is a political rookie? Other political scions like RJD's (Rashtriya Janata Dal) Tejashwi Yadav and Union Minister Chirag Paswan (Lok Janshakti Party - Ram Vilas) have already cut their political teeth.

The NDA (National Democratic Alliance) - especially after its strong performance in assembly elections - may be recalibrating leadership roles to balance power between JD(U) and the BJP. A BJP chief minister could strengthen the alliance's cohesion and reflect its electoral weight.

BJP's strategic opportunity From the vantage of the BJP, this could be a long-anticipated moment. Following the state elections, the BJP emerged as the single largest party in the assembly, even though the JD(U) has historically held the chief ministership. If Nitish vacates the CM post, the BJP - with its stronger seat count - naturally positions itself to stake a claim for the top job.

BJP is well-placed to push for its own leader as the chief minister. Given that, it now has most seats, this would be legitimate both constitutionally and politically. BJP sources said that the chief ministerial candidate from their party would either be from the Backward Class (27% of the population) or Extremely Backward Class (36%). Buzzing names are those of Samrat Choudhary, current deputy chief minister, Union Minister Nityanand Rai. Bihar minister Dilip Jaiswal, and Digha BJP MLA Sanjiv Chaurasia are also in the fray.

The recent precedent cases in Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh shows the BJP springing surprises in the choice of Chief Ministers. Bihar might continue this trend.

A Dark Truth: Why Iran, Ukraine Get Bombed, But Pak, Israel, N Korea Don't

Aditi Bhaduri

Events have moved very fast since Israel and the US launched joint strikes on Iran on February 28. Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, has been killed in an American strike on his compound. Scores of other high-ranking Iranian officials, including the head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, have also been killed. An Iranian warship returning from a naval exercise in India has been sunk by an American submarine right off the coast of Sri Lanka - the first such attack in the Indian Ocean region after the Second World War. The Hormuz Strait lies paralysed. Iran is retaliating by launching missiles and drones not only at Israel but also at US military bases across the region, as well as at Azerbaijan. In the process, it has created divisions between itself and the Arab states, too. The UAE announced it was withdrawing its ambassador from Tehran and closing down its embassy there. The Saudis have warned that they would make available all their resources to help their "Arab brothers". Iran seems to be pretty isolated, with its allies, Russia and China, issuing statements condemning the joint attacks and the assassination of Ayatollah Khamenei but not expressing any proclivity to intervene militarily.

So, where do things go from here? The Darkest Nuclear Age

Twenty-three years ago, around this same time, George Bush, together with the UK, launched its assault on Iraq to topple the government of Saddam Hussein, on the false premise that Hussein was stockpiling weapons of mass destruction.

There is an eerie similarity this time around. Trump justified the war on Iran by saying that he was not going to allow Tehran to acquire nuclear weapons. But less than a year ago - last June - when America had bombed Iran, he had declared that he had annihilated Iran's nuclear facilities. In fact, it must be remembered that the latest attacks came when negotiations between the US and Iran were ongoing in Oman and were close to a breakthrough.

This is a great violation of the international rules-based order. Iran is infinitely weaker militarily than both the US and Israel. Its air force is non-existent, and it has no nuclear weapons, unlike the US and Israel. The message to militarily smaller, non-nuclear states is unmistakable. An unintended consequence of Operation "Epic Fury" may well be unchecked nuclear proliferation.

'Get That Bomb'

For, after all, this has become an oft-repeated pattern - militarily strong states attacking weaker ones. Take Iraq, for instance. Half the size of Iran, the Anglo-US coalition could attack it only because it knew Iraq did



not have weapons of mass destruction. It has been the same in the case of Ukraine. At the time of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Ukraine had been a nuclear state. It voluntarily gave up nuclear weapons in exchange for security guarantees. Yet, Russia invaded it. It is doubtful whether Russia would have taken this step had Ukraine retained its nuclear arsenal.

Coming back to Iran, everything it has been accused of doing by Israel and the US, which makes up the casus belli for the war, is true of Pakistan, too. Iran is accused of instrumentalising terrorism as policy, but so does Pakistan. If Iran is guilty of creating proxies that target Israel, all the different jihadi groups that Pakistan has created remain India-centric. If Iran is said to be guilty of exporting terrorism to the world, so is Pakistan, whose name has cropped up in most terror attacks across the world. Yet, the difference in the policy pursued towards Iran and Pakistan by successive US administrations could not be starker. And the reason is only one - Pakistan is a nuclear state, while Iran is not. It is extremely doubtful whether Iran could have been attacked in this manner had it possessed nuclear arms.

What Iran Really Possessed - And What It Didn't

It was years ago that Iran eschewed the pursuit of nuclear weapons. It is a signatory to the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT). The Ayatollah had even issued a fatwa against the pursuit of weapons of mass destruction. What Iran did insist on was its right to use nuclear power for peaceful means and the right to

enrich uranium at a lower threshold than weapons-grade levels. And even in the latest round of negotiations, Iran had already agreed to unprecedented compromises. Yet, it was attacked.

The only known nuclear state in the Middle East is Israel. Now imagine a scenario where, to obtain parity, countries like Saudi Arabia and Qatar suddenly go nuclear. In fact, the cover of a nuclear umbrella is what is widely believed to be behind the Saudi defence pact with Pakistan, or behind Turkey's courting of Pakistan.

It is the same with North Korea. Despite all the acrimony between it and the US - including the personal friction between Kim Jong Un and Trump - there are red lines that no one crosses.

Illegal Recourses

Over and over, the message to smaller and military states is this: create a nuclear deterrent, and you are safe. But the example of Iran will also mean this: 'illegal nuclear proliferation is the only way'. The same way that Pakistan perhaps went nuclear, buying the raw material on the black market so it cannot be traced. Or more states may seek the security of a nuclear umbrella from states like Pakistan and North Korea.

Even officially, nuclear-powered states such as France are mooting the increase of their arsenal of nuclear warheads after the beginning of this war.

And such nuclear proliferation may be the biggest, most chilling fallout of Operation Epic Fury.

Iran And The Actual Questions India Should Be Asking About IRIS Dena Storm

Brig Rakesh Bhatia

The Iranian ship was our invitee, took part in our Fleet Review, and its personnel paraded before our President. As hosts, this put some moral burden on us to express our regrets at the tragedy that befell those who were earlier our guests.

It is unfortunate that the political controversy in India over government's failure to express condolences over the political assassination of Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei got out of control.

The opposition took the opportunity provided by the government's initial silence on the issue to attack it politically for losing our moral voice and succumbing to US pressure, etc. In defence, the ruling party justified its silence by pointing at Khamenei's record of anti-Indian positions on the Babri Masjid demolition, the revocation of Article 370, the Delhi riots, and generally on the treatment of Muslims in Kashmir.

This was an entirely needless internal political debate. The issues involved transcend party politicking in any country. But the political polarisation in India has corroded the national consensus on foreign policy that once existed.

It would be relevant to point out that India has been traduced in the West by governments, think tanks, the media, academic circles, human rights organisations, even the UN Human Rights Commission, on all the issues that Khamenei reproached us with. An international campaign against us has been promoted on these minority-related issues by western circles. The US has figured prominently in this, in the State Department's annual reports on human rights or religious freedoms.

Yet, we have, quite rightly and pragmatically, not allowed all this to affect our overall relationship with the US and other western countries, which have many positive aspects too. Khamenei and Iran, on the other hand, have not campaigned against us on these issues or promoted anti-Indian international narratives to tarnish our image.

Within the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Saudi Arabia and Turkey have been most vocal on these issues, while even those close to us, such as the UAE and Oman, or friendly countries like Egypt or Iraq, have not entered reservations to the OIC resolutions.

India has state-to-state ties with Iran. In 2003, when Atal Behari Vajpayee was Prime Minister, Iranian President Mohammed Khatami was the Chief Guest at our Republic Day celebrations. In September 2020, our Defence Minister made an official visit to Iran. In January 2024, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar visited the country. Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a state visit to Iran in May 2016, while the Iranian President Hassan Rouhani came to India on a state visit in February 2018. In the joint statement issued on the occasion of Rouhani's visit, apart from noting "the mutually beneficial ties between the two countries were based upon the strong foundations of the two millennia old cultural and civilisational connect", it was also stated that the "Indian side reaffirmed its support for full and effective implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which has been endorsed by the UN Security Council and is crucial contribution to the non-proliferation framework and international peace, stability



and security". Khamenei's Death Is A Dangerous Precedent

Ali Khamenei did not die a natural death. He was assassinated in an act of total violation of international law and the UN Charter. His close family members were also killed, which made the lawless act worse on humanitarian grounds. The assassination of the Supreme Leader of a sovereign state, more so without any declaration of war, sets a terrible precedent. Such assassination of political leaders of weaker countries with which powerful states have differences must not be normalised.

One hopes that with the Indian Foreign Secretary visiting the Iranian embassy in New Delhi to sign the Condolence Book opened on Khamenei's death, the political controversy in India will be put to rest. It has been announced that Jaishankar has spoken to the Iranian Foreign Minister, and the former has done well to publicise on X his meeting with the Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister, who is participating in the Raisina Dialogue. The political messaging is clear.

The IRIS Dena Controversy

On the heels of the Khamenei-related controversy, another has arisen over the US submarine attacking and sinking close to Sri Lanka waters an Iranian frigate that was returning home after participating in the biennial Milan

(means meeting or confluence) exercise organised by the Indian Navy. India, of course, had no political or military responsibility for this sinking of the Iranian warship. The irony is that the warship had participated in an exercise aimed at increasing maritime understandings and cooperation and building camaraderie between navies operating in the Indian Ocean in the interest of peace, stability, freedom of navigation, openness, inclusiveness, and addressing shared threats.

India, as the major maritime power in the Indian Ocean, has taken many initiatives to reduce threat perceptions and foster collaboration in these waters with initiatives such as SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) introduced by PM Modi in 2015. In March 2025, he introduced the MAHASAGAR concept (Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions), with a focus on fostering collaborative, sustainable, and secure maritime growth across the Global South and Indian Ocean region (IOR).

In this larger context, for the US to bring war into the Indian Ocean in waters so close to India is antithetical to India's Indian Ocean peace strategy. The US was invited to the Milan exercise but withdrew its warship at the last minute. It limited its participation to its powerful P8 Poseidon

maritime surveillance aircraft. The US was aware of the participation of the Iranian frigate and no doubt tracked its movement with its surveillance aircraft, which enabled the its submarine to position itself close to Sri Lanka and sink the vessel.

A Moral Burden

The Iranian ship was our invitee, took part in our Fleet Review, and its personnel paraded before our President. As hosts, this put some moral burden on us to express our regrets at the tragedy that befell those who were earlier our guests. If the ship had been sunk near the Iranian coast, the situation would be different. As this was done by the US in our vicinity and the US got the opportunity because of the Milan exercise, ignoring this aspect was bound to raise questions about the reasons for our reticence.

Keeping in mind the sensitivities of our ties with the Trump administration, if we wanted to avoid making a statement at the political level, that of the Defence Ministry, commiserating the tragedy, this could have been done at the professional level by the Indian Navy expressing condolences for the grievous loss of lives, without attributing any responsibility on any one. It can be argued that we have been remiss in not doing the least we could do at the human level.



## BUSINESS

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# Petroleum lobby won't easily allow shift to alternative fuels: Gadkari citing Rs 22L cr import bill

PUNE, Mar 7 : The petroleum lobby, which has a vested interest in the import of fossil fuels worth Rs 22 lakh crore, will not easily allow the country's aim of shifting to alternative fuels, Union minister Nitin Gadkari said on Friday. Addressing the IFGE's compressed bio-gas conclave in Pune, he said the lobby is using all its might against him as he is promoting alternative fuels in the country.

"Green fuels, alternative fuels will boost the rural agriculture economy and will reduce pollution and subsequently will reduce the import bill of fossil fuels. Becoming self-reliant in energy will ultimately realise the country's dream of becoming a USD 5 trillion economy," he said, adding the current crisis in West Asia shows how imperative the issue of energy security is for the country.

"We import 86 percent of our energy and Rs 22 lakh crore goes out of our country as bill towards fossil fuels. That is why our objective is to make our transport ecosystem smart, safe and sustainable by 2030. To achieve this objective, we have taken several initiatives which include



promotion of non-polluting fuels, indigenous fuels that can boost our agri industry and we are gaining benefits also," he added.

He said that there is great potential in green and alternative fuels and a lot of companies are working on the technology.

"In the next couple of years, there will be at least 5,000 firms working in this field. The only thing is the technology should not fail. You will have to compete on productivity, cost effectiveness and quality parameters," he told the gathering. He added that for the first time, the objective to promote green fuels is to make farmers prosperous, end the import of fossil fuels, end the dependency on fossil fuels and generate employment in rural areas.

"I can see that now we are on the right track and the future is bright. Barriers do come in the journey but these alternative fuels are in the interest of the environment, the economy and are cost-effective for consumers. I am happy that this alternative fuel economy is developing nicely," he said. He added that he has been the transport minister for the last 12 years and has seen the

evolution of CNG, LNG and electric vehicles. "In all this green fuel economy, we do not have even zero percent stake but still the petroleum lobby is after me with full might. One thing is very clear. A lot of people have vested interest in the import of fossil fuels and, considering the import bill of Rs 22 lakh crore, this lobby will not easily allow your dreams regarding green fuels to come true. You and I have experienced that," he said. The Union minister for road transport and highways, however, asserted he was not scared. "A man is not finished when he is defeated, but he is finished when he quits. No need to get scared. We will fight back and we will win," Gadkari said. The Union minister also reviewed key highway projects costing Rs 50,000 crore in the Pune region along with officials of NHAI, MSRDC, Metro and the district administration. Interacting with the media after the meeting, Gadkari announced that the ground-breaking ceremony for these projects will be held within a month and the projects will be completed in the next four to five years to ease the traffic situation in and around Pune.

## Govt to use every tool to help exporters deal with West Asia crisis: Piyush Goyal

New Delhi

The Government will use all policy tools and support measures to help domestic exporters deal with the ongoing West Asian crisis, Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal said on Friday. He said that the Government has set up an inter-ministerial group to look into the issues on a daily basis.

"And the Government will use every policy tool and the export promotion mission to support our exporters," Goyal told reporters here on the sidelines of IIFT's vice chancellors' conclave. "We will be formalising some ways to give comfort to our exporters," he said.

Exporters are facing issues with regard to the movement of consignments to West Asia following the joint attack launched by the US and Israel on Iran. "Every day the inter-ministerial group talks to the exporters...



They take feedback, and we will not be found wanting in supporting our exporters in any way," he said. He added that India would continue to meet all the commitments that the country's industries have made to foreign buyers in goods and services.

The commerce ministry is in dialogue with the ministry of shipping and with shipping companies on the issues of exporters. "And I do hope we will find a resolution to this issue also," he said. When asked about the

issue of increasing freight, he said the ministry is working with them to see how the burden of exporters can be supported with.

"But I can assure you, this Government stands with our industry and will continue to ensure that all our international commitments are met. Because that is what defines India," he said, adding that even during Covid, India met all its international commitments, "which earned us the acronym of a trusted partner".

## Indian refiners turn to Russian oil cargoes at sea

New Delhi

Indian refiners have begun buying some of the over 15 million barrels of Russian crude currently floating on tankers near the country, as they move to offset supply concerns arising from disruptions in the Middle East.

Sources said refiners stepped up purchases after the US Treasury Department issued a 30-day licence allowing India to buy Russian oil cargoes currently stuck at sea.

India, which was among the top buyers of Russian oil, curtailed purchases after US pressured New Delhi to avoid buying Russian barrels in an effort to reduce money flowing to Moscow's war effort in Ukraine.

India's imports of Russian crude in February fell to 1.04 million barrels per day — the lowest since November 2022. The US had made cuts to tariffs on Indian goods contingent on New Delhi reducing its purchases of Russian crude.

This left several ship loads

of Russian oil stranded on high-sea, sources said.

India, which had turned to buying discounted Russian crude following Western sanctions in February 2022, is now adjusting its purchases amid disruptions in Middle East supplies.

The country had previously imported record volumes of Russian oil when cargoes were available at deep discounts, helping refiners offset rising global crude prices. Russian cargoes hit a peak of 2.15 million barrels in May 2023.

However, with the widening West Asia conflict blocking shipments through the Strait of Hormuz and raising concerns over oil and LNG supplies from the Middle East, Indian refiners are now balancing purchases from both Russian cargoes at sea and other sources to ensure an uninterrupted domestic fuel supply.

"President Trump's energy agenda has resulted in oil and gas production reaching the highest levels ever recorded," US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent said.



"To enable oil to keep flowing into the global market, the Treasury Department is issuing a temporary 30-day waiver to allow Indian refiners to purchase Russian oil."

Calling the move a stopgap measure, he said Washington expects India to eventually buy more US oil. "India is an essential partner of the United States, and we fully anticipate that New Delhi will ramp up purchases of US oil. This stop-gap measure will alleviate pressure caused by Iran's attempt to take global energy hostage," Bessent said in a post on X. The short-term measure will not

provide significant financial benefit to the Russian Government as it only authorises transactions involving oil already stranded at sea, he added.

India, which has inventories to cover for 25 days of demand for crude (raw material for making fuels like petrol and diesel), sources 40-50 per cent of its crude oil needs from the Middle East through the Strait of Hormuz. The escalating conflict in West Asia has effectively shut the Strait.

Sources said Indian refiners are now buying the Russian oil to build inventories. There are more than a dozen tankers with Russian

oil in the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal, sources said, adding that another eight vessels are idling off Singapore and could reach India within days.

Beyond that, ships laden with Russian oil are also in the Mediterranean Sea and the Suez canal which would also reach India in under a month.

"With nearly 50 per cent of India's crude imports transiting the Strait of Hormuz, the country remains highly exposed to potential supply disruptions," said Sumit Ritolia, an analyst at the data intelligence firm Kpler. "The US waiver allowing additional purchases of Russian crude over base load offers short-term relief, though competition from Chinese buyers for the same barrels could limit the extent of India's benefit."

Indian refiners had already been importing around 1 million barrels per day of Russian crude in recent months, meaning the waiver effectively acts as a green signal to lift volumes above this base load, he said.

## Electric passenger vehicle registrations rise 44% YoY in February: FADA

New Delhi

Electric passenger vehicle retail sales rose 44 per cent year-on-year in February, dealer's body FADA said on Friday. The overall sales rose to 13,733 units last month as against 9,505 units in the year-ago period.

VinFast Auto and BYD India with registrations of 384 and 306 units, respectively.

In the two-wheeler space, total sales rose to 1,11,709 units, up 46 per cent, as compared with 76,722 units in February 2025.

TVS Motor Company led the segment with registrations of 31,614 units as com-



Tata Motors led the space with registrations of 5,568 units, up 38.5 per cent as compared with 4,020 units in February last year. JSW MG Motor India retailed 3,312 units in February as against 3,490 units in the year-ago period, a dip of 5 per cent.

Mahindra & Mahindra sold 2,913 units last month as against 508 units in February 2025. It was followed by

pared with 18,955 units, an increase of 67 per cent. Bajaj Auto sold 25,328 units while Ather Energy chipped in with 20,584 units last month. It was followed by Hero MotoCorp and Greaves Electric Mobility with sales of 12,514 and 4,724 units, respectively. Ola Electric Mobility sold 3,968 units last month, a dip of 54 per cent, as against 8,675 units in February last year.

## India's investment climate remains strong on robust fundamentals, reform measures

New Delhi

India's investment climate remains strong supported by the country's robust economic fundamentals, prudent fiscal management and regulatory reforms, said Ajay Sethi, Managing Partner at accounting and consulting firm Baker Tilly ASA India, on Friday.

He said reforms such as simplified labour codes, changes to the Income Tax framework and improved access to policymakers have helped strengthen the business environment.

Responding to a query on the factors behind rising investor confidence in India, Sethi said the country's growth trajectory and the Government's cautious fiscal approach have boosted global confidence.

"From a global reference, India's fundamentals are on the high trajectory of growth and the Government is taking a very sensible approach. We have set a fiscal deficit target of 4.3 per cent, instead of 4.4 per cent, so we haven't taken very exuberant targets, which gives confidence," he said.

He added that regulatory reforms, including the simplification of labour codes and the Income Tax Act, have further improved the investment climate. So "Investments are continuing to boom, and sectors are continuing to attract investments all across". Globally, many organisations now



consider India a priority market, with expectations that the country could emerge as one of the biggest growth drivers in the Asia-Pacific region.

However, Sethi cautioned that foreign investors must recognise that India is not a single uniform market, as consumer preferences vary significantly across regions. He said detailed feasibility studies are crucial for businesses entering the Indian market, as they need to account for multiple layers of taxation and regulatory requirements beyond federal taxes.

"For the foreign investor looking at India, the first thing is that they should not look at India as a single market, and by that I mean the taste, the way

people look at the markets and the products it can vary from location to location. So a foreign investor should try to understand that what is going to sell in North India may not necessarily sell in South India, and therefore you have to do better research,"

Commenting on the recent Supreme Court ruling involving private equity firm Tiger Global, Sethi said the verdict fundamentally differs from the earlier Vodafone tax dispute and has not significantly impacted investor sentiment.

He noted that the ruling focused mainly on the manner in which taxes were structured and how capital gains were routed through a pass-through entity, rather than questioning India's residency or treaty framework.

However, private equity funds may become more cautious in structuring their investments and could consider more tax-efficient jurisdictions such as Singapore.

"The only likely outcome is that private equity funds may be more careful about how they structure their operations and may prefer tax-efficient jurisdictions like Singapore," Sethi said.

In January, the Supreme Court upheld the decision of Indian tax authorities that capital gains arising from US-based investor Tiger Global's exit from Flipkart in 2018 are taxable in India.

## Sensex, Nifty dive over 1% on West Asia conflict

Mumbai

Stock market benchmark indices Sensex and Nifty tumbled over 1 per cent on Friday after a day's breather as the conflict in the Middle East entered its seventh day, driving crude oil prices higher.

Weakness in the US equities, subdued trend in European markets and relentless foreign fund outflows also dampened sentiments.

The 30-share BSE Sensex tumbled 1,097 points, or 1.37 per cent, to settle at 78,918.90. During the day, it sank 1,203.72 points, or 1.50 per

cent, to 78,812.18. The 50-share NSE Nifty dropped 315.45 points, or 1.27 per cent, to end at 24,450.45.

A sustained rise in oil prices could weigh on investor sentiment and adversely affect India's twin deficits, inflation trajectory, and the RBI's monetary stance," Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Investments Ltd, said.

In Asian markets, South Korea's Kospi, Japan's Nikkei 225, Shanghai's SSE Composite index and Hong Kong's Hang Seng index ended higher.

Markets in Europe were



trading in negative territory. The US market ended lower on Thursday.

Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth ₹3,752.52 crore on Thursday, while Domestic Institutional Investors (DIIs) bought stocks worth ₹5,153.37 crore, according to exchange data.

On Thursday, the Sensex rebounded 899.71 points, or 1.14 per cent, to settle at 80,015.90, snapping its four-day decline.

The Nifty climbed 285.40 points, or 1.17 per cent, to end at 24,765.90, ending its three-day falling streak.

## FMCG growth moderates in December quarter as GST transition impacts pricing

New Delhi

Sales growth of the FMCG industry has moderated to 7.8 per cent in the December quarter of 2025 amid the GST rationalisation and a high base due to increased festival season sales, a report from data analytics firm NielsenIQ said.

Volume growth has also dipped to 2.6 per cent in the December quarter on a year-on-year basis, which was

the lowest in 2025, it said.

"Both price and volume growth softened sequentially, particularly within traditional trade, which experienced temporary supply and pricing recalibrations during the initial phase of (new GST rate) implementation," said NielsenIQ India FMCG Quarterly Snapshot Q4 FY25.

The moderation reflects a combination of a higher festive base in the previous year and transitional adjustments linked to GST 2.0 rate



revisions, it said. However, the report also said that the recent data indicate improv-

ing availability of GST-related launches and pricing alignment across the retail

network, suggesting stabilisation following the transition.

In the December quarter, modern trade (large retail chains) recorded a three-fold acceleration versus the previous quarter, and e-commerce channel shares reached 18 per cent in FMCG sales in the top 8 metros. This was due to the quick adaptation of changes in prices by the organised channels.

"Nearly 60 per cent of the FMCG portfolio underwent

GST rate revisions, requiring coordinated pricing adjustments across manufacturers, distributors, and retailers. While these changes temporarily impacted traditional trade performance, organised channels adapted more quickly," it said.

Moreover, the gap between urban and rural markets has narrowed in the December quarter, though rural still outpaced the urban market in terms of growth.

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# Mixed-soil pitch set to offer minimal turn and good bounce for India-NZ final

Ahmadabad: The T20 World Cup final between India and New Zealand in Ahmedabad is set to be played on a similar-natured pitch to the one used in the semi-final in Mumbai. A greenish-tinged pitch in Mumbai initially raised eyebrows ahead of the semi-final, but a record 499 runs were eventually scored. The pitch at the Narendra Modi Stadium on Sunday is expected to take minimal turn, but will facilitate good pace and bounce.

ESPNcricinfo has learned that the centre pitch for the T20 World Cup final between India and New Zealand will be a mix of red and black soil. Just like the Wankhede pitch on Thursday, the final pitch, too, is likely to have good bounce and be seamer-friendly. The par score is likely to be around 200.

This pitch is as good as fresh, having hosted just one match in this T20 World Cup - the Canada vs South Africa game, played nearly a month ago on February 9. It was an evening match, which South Africa won by 53 runs after scoring 213 on being put in to bat.

While New Zealand have played only one match in



Ahmedabad in this tournament, India have played two. In a group match on February 14, played on a red-soil pitch, South Africa chased down 177 with 17 balls to spare against New Zealand, and defeated them by seven wickets. Four days later, in India's final group fixture, they beat Netherlands by 17 runs after posting 193 on opting to bat. On February 22, in the Super Eight match between India and South Africa played on a black-soil pitch, India suffered a 76-run defeat as South Africa successfully defended 187. India will have their training on Saturday. New Zealand, meanwhile, reached Ahmedabad on Thursday and had their first training session the same evening. This is the second time in one year that the teams will meet in the final of a global tournament after India beat New Zealand in the 2025 Champions Trophy final in Dubai. Faf du Plessis has lavished praise on Jasprit Bumrah, calling him a "superpower that every captain will dream of", after the quick produced another sensational spell to help India overcome England in a high-scoring semi-final of the T20

## Mentally tougher Samson has come of age, says Shastri

Mumbai

All praise for Sanju Samson's mental fortitude, former India head coach Ravi Shastri said the seasoned batter seems to have "come of age" in the ongoing T20 World Cup after realising the need for consistency and wiser shot selection.

The opener smacked a 42-ball 89 against England in the semifinals to be the hero of India's seven-run win on Thursday here. Before that, his 50-ball 97 laid the foundation of the defending champions' five-wicket win over the West Indies in a virtual quarterfinal.

"I think (he is) finally real-

ising and coming to terms with the fact that he needs to be more consistent. He's got to be wiser with his shot selection and he's got to back his strengths. The thing with Sanju is he's got every shot in the book, but lapses in concentration," Shastri said on 'The ICC Review'.

"I think he's toughened up mentally and there's never anyone who's doubted his skill or talent ever since he made the side. What people have been disappointed is that the run of consistency that should have been there by now isn't there, but he's come of age now," he added.

India will take on New



Zealand in the summit clash in Ahmedabad on Sunday. Samson was ignored in the early part of the tourna-

ment when Ishan Kishan was preferred as opener and Rinku Singh too got the nod ahead of the

Keralite. But he eventually got his place in the playing XI and lit up the tournament with two consecutive match-winning player-of-the-match performances.

Shastri believes Samson's best is yet to come.

"He's still just 31 years of age and a genuine match-winner," the cricketer-turned-commentator noted. "And when you see shots like (Thursday) that is being played, there's class, there's touch there, there's power there, there's brute force. It's just unbelievable."

'Stick with Abhishek': In complete contrast to Samson's run, his opening partner Abhishek Sharma's form is a cause of concern going into Sunday's final.

Abhishek has managed to score just 89 runs from seven innings at the T20 World Cup, but Shastri believes India should persist with the No.1 ranked T20I batter.

"I think they've just got to stick with him now," Shastri noted.

"Don't make any changes as the side's having a good run. Stick with that and just tell him 'believe in your ability, believe in your strengths and back your strengths, don't go into a shell where you're tentative or you're timid'."

"We back you, you back your strengths and go out there and play. The last game might be the best game for you," he added.

## Samson nominated for WC Player of the Tournament

Dubai

In-form India opener Sanju Samson figured in the eight-man shortlist for the T20 World Cup Player of the Tournament announced by the ICC on Friday.

The other nominees are England all-rounder Will Jacks, Pakistan opener Sahibzada Farhan, South Africa's pacer Lungi Ngidi and captain Aiden Markram, New Zealand's all-rounder Rachin Ravindra and batter Tim Seifert, and American bowler Shadley van Schalkwyk.

Samson, who did not play in the early part of the tournament, lit up the T20 World Cup with consecutive player-of-the-match performances.

The opener smacked a 42-ball 89 against England in the semifinals to be the hero of India's seven-run win on Thursday. Before that, his 50-ball 97 laid the foundation of the defending champions' five-wicket win over the West Indies in a virtual quarterfinal.

The wicketkeeper-batter has so far amassed 232 runs at an average of 77.33 and a strike rate of 201.73 in four matches that he had played in the tournament.

Jacks has been instrumental in his team winning six of their eight matches at the T20 World Cup. He won four player-of-the-match honours, and has scored 226 runs and picked up nine wickets from eight matches.

Farhan made 383 runs in six innings to record the most runs scored in a single



edition of a T20 World Cup. He also became the first player to score two centuries at a single edition of the tournament as he scored a hundred each against Sri Lanka and Namibia.

With 12 wickets from seven matches at an economy rate of 7.19, Ngidi proved to be the vital cog in South Africa's pace battery and was their most consistent fast bowler.

South Africa skipper Markram was central to Proteas' performances at this T20 World Cup, with the right-hander compiling three half-centuries across eight matches, amassing 286 runs and also picked up a wicket.

New Zealand all-rounder Ravindra has proved valuable for his side with both bat and ball, scoring 128 runs and scalping 11 wickets from eight matches.

Even though the USA exited after the opening group stage, van Schalkwyk set the benchmark for bowlers at this T20 World Cup.

In just four matches, the American pacer claimed 13 wickets from four matches at a respectable economy rate of 6.80.



## Axar says he is still the 'X-factor' in team India

Mumbai

The mystery seems to have unravelled and though his teammates still consider Varun Chakravarty the 'X-factor', the leg-spinner knows that he is racing against time to arrest what has been a stunning slide.

The world's top-ranked bowler would be a weak link for India going into the T20 World Cup final against New Zealand on Sunday if the team management chooses to persist with him.

The steady dip in his form since the Super Eight phase of the tournament can't be brushed aside and Chakravarty would need to clear the doubts in his mind after being taken to the cleaners in the business end of the tournament.

The hammering he received at the hands of England swashbuckler Jacob Bethell on Thursday night in a narrow seven-run win for India could well prove to be the last straw.

India vice-captain Axar Patel has had conversations with Chakravarty of late and stressed on the impor-

ance of sticking to plans even when things are not going one's way.

"We have talked about it (about Chakravarty's ongoing issues), we have played a lot of knockout games at this moment, so it is very important to have a mindset, yes, there is skill and all, but what we talk to them is, when you go for runs, don't change your plan even if the batter is targeting," Axar said on Thursday.

"You have a plan to put it in the stumps first, and then suddenly you change the line. Yes there could be mistakes in the pressure situations, we keep telling him, yes, you are the X Factor, trust yourself, and when it comes to the ball, it is all about confidence."

The mystery spinner put in the hard yards at the nets ahead of the semifinal but wasn't able to find his lengths after being introduced in the powerplay. He ended with forgettable figures of 64 for one in four overs to be the most expensive of the five front-line bowlers on a belt of a track. (PTI)

## Will India drop Abhishek for final? Looks unlikely

Ahmedabad

The murmurs of concern have turned into full-blown criticism but despite his prolonged lean patch, India are likely to keep faith in Abhishek Sharma for the T20 World Cup final against New Zealand given their well-documented unwillingness to disturb a winning combination.

In many ways, the tournament has seen a reversal of fortunes when it comes to the Indian opening pair.

When the competition began, Abhishek was expected to be the batting mainstay at the top while questions lingered over Sanju Samson's place with many predicting that the event could well



decide the course of his international career.

But since the must-win Super Eight clash against the West Indies, the narrative has changed significantly.

Samson's assured per-

formances have silenced many doubters while the spotlight has increasingly shifted towards Abhishek's struggles.

If Samson's form dominated discussions at the beginning, the decibel levels have

now risen around Abhishek's wretched run in the business end.

The aggressive left-handed opener has struggled for rhythm through the tournament, managing scores of 0, 0, 0, 15, 10 and 9 in his last six outings. Barring a half-century against Zimbabwe, he has nothing spectacular to show for in an event he was tipped to dominate.

However, the team management is understood to be reluctant to make a change at the top with the summit clash approaching on Sunday in Ahmedabad. "We are taking care of all our players. GG bhai and Surya have a lot of faith and confidence in Abhishek," his opening partner Samson said after the England game. (PTI)

## Sanju Samson eyes one more match-winning innings

Mumbai

Sanju Samson is relieved to have produced two superlative innings to carry India into the final of the T20 World Cup, but he is not done yet and aims to play another match-winning knock to help India win the trophy for a record third time.

Samson, who had lost his spot in the Indian team due to lack of runs not long ago, has come back roaring with scores of 97 not out in a virtual knockout against the West Indies followed by 89 against England in the semifinal, especially when Abhishek Sharma is going through a lean patch.

Samson said while he is grateful, his toil must help



the defending champions India lift yet another title with a win over New Zealand in the summit clash on Sunday in Ahmedabad.

"It feels really great or relieved that I have been actually, from (a) few years, trying to do something like this for my country," Samson told reporters after India beat England by seven runs

in the second semifinal here Thursday night.

"(I was) just waiting with lot of patience, lot of inner work, lot of training, lot of practice. Definitely, I should be very grateful, but I feel that we have one more step to go. If we do that, then I think all the work, everything, was worth it."

## Thought ball was chasing me, enjoyed Brook's catch more: Axar

Mumbai

India vice-captain Axar Patel joked that the ball was "chasing" him throughout England's run chase after his individual brilliance on the field made a decisive difference in the defending champions' nervy seven-run win in the high-scoring T20 World Cup semifinal here.

On a belt of a track at the Wankhede, 499 runs were scored with England just falling short in their mammoth chase of 254.

India, who were guilty of dropping as many as 13 catches heading into the semifinals, upped their game on Thursday with Axar setting a rather high benchmark. He got rid of the dangerous Harry Brook and Will Jacks in two different yet important phases of the game. The in-form Brook perished in the powerplay and it was down to a superhuman effort of Axar, who ran 24m backwards from the cover position to pull off a stunning catch off a slow-cutter from



Jasprit Bumrah. Axar's second act of sheer brilliance came

in the 14th over when Jacob Bethell and Jacks threatened to take the game away from India. It was a wide full toss from Arshdeep Singh that Jacks sliced towards deep point and Axar scampered to his left to catch the ball before relaying it to Shivam Dube as he crossed the ropes. The grab of Jacks was more important considering the match situation but Axar felt the effort to dismiss Brook was a lot tougher.

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