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## Lurinjoyti questions EC's decision of single-phase polling

**AJP names candidates for 8 Assembly seats**  
**● Two more names to be announced shortly**

**GUWAHATI, March 17:** The opposition Assam Jaitya Parishad (AJP) on Tuesday announced its first list of candidates for eight seats for the state assembly elections, putting its president Lurinjoyti Gogoi and working president and former Union minister Rajen Gohain in the fray.

The party, which is part of a Congress-led alliance in the state, will name its candidates for two more constituencies in which the grouping will contest as a united front, Gogoi said.

The elections to the 126-member Assam assembly will be held on April 9. Votes will be counted on May 4.

Addressing a press conference, the AJP president said, "Our party will be contesting in 10 seats as a united alliance in the coming elections. There may be a friendly contest with other alliance parties in a couple of seats, talks on which are on to reach a consensus."

Gogoi will be contesting from Khowang, Gohain from Barhampur, Bani Das from Morigaon, Pankaj

Lochan Goswami from Palasbari, Jibon Chutia from Sarupathar, Dilip Baruah from Bajali, Rejaul Karim Choudhury from Bindakandi and Mounak Patra from Dibrugarh.

The party will announce its candidates for Guwahati Central and Sadiya constituencies soon, the AJP leader added.

Gogoi also questioned the single-phase polling and short campaigning period, alleging that it was done to help a specific political group.

He claimed that there are two primary reasons for the Election Commission's hurriedly announcing the polls.

"First, as the government failed to provide justice in the Zubeen Garg death case and emotions will run high as soon as the Bohag Bihu (marking Assamese New Year in mid-April) festivities start, the government wanted to conclude the elections before it," he said.

Garg, a popular singer, died on September 19 last year while swimming in (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## I-T dept opens control room to check black money

**GUWAHATI, March 17:** The Income Tax department has set up a round-the-clock control room in Assam to check use of black money in the ensuing Assembly elections, an official statement said on Tuesday.

It urged citizens to contact the control room with any credible information regarding suspicious movement or distribution of cash, precious metals or other valuables in connection with the elections, adding that the identity of the informant will remain confidential.

Elections for the 126-member state Assembly will be held on April 9, and votes will be counted on May 4.

The statement said the control room has been set up in a bid to assist the Election Commission in "curbing the role of black money in elections".

"During the period of the Model Code of Conduct, the Directorate of Income Tax (Investigation), North Eastern Region, Guwahati will maintain strict vigil on the movement of unaccounted cash, bullion, precious metals and other valuables that are likely or suspected to be used for electoral purposes within the state," it said.

As part of these measures, a 24x7 Control Room has been established at the Aayakar Bhawan in Guwahati.

Mobile number/WhatsApp 9401085214, mobile number/WhatsApp 9181324184, landline number 0361-2340396 and email: ssamelections26[at]gmail[dot]com have been made operational for the public to "report credible information regarding suspicious movement or distribution of cash, bullion, precious metals or other valuables in connection with the elections," it said.

Urging the public to reach out through the communication channels, the statement added, "Informants are not required to disclose personal details such as name or identity. However, it is essential that the (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## BJP may offer poll ticket to Pradyut Bordoloi if he joins us: Himanta

**Staff reporter**  
**GUWAHATI, March 17:** Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Tuesday said that the BJP would accord "due respect" to Congress leader Pradyut Bordoloi if he chooses to join the party, amid growing political churn ahead of the Assembly elections.

Speaking after attending a meeting of the BJP's election committee in New Delhi, Sarma said the party is open to leaders who wish to contribute to its organisational strength in Assam.

"If Pradyut Bordoloi comes to the BJP, he will be given due respect. The party will also consider giving him an Assembly ticket if he joins us," the chief minister said, adding that the BJP remains focused on expanding its base in the state.

The remarks come in the back-

drop of recent developments within the Assam Congress, where Bordoloi had written to the party high command expressing dissatisfaction over its functioning in the state.

Fresh internal tensions have surfaced recently in the Assam Congress with senior party leader and Nagaon MP Pradyut Bordoloi reportedly writing to the party high command alleging links between a party MLA and a person accused of attacking his convoy during the 2024 Lok Sabha elections.

In his communication, Bordoloi alleged that Imdadul Islam, who was accused of attacking his convoy during the Lok Sabha election campaign, has been "shielded" by the Lahorighat MLA Asif Mohammad Nazir.

The Congress MP further claimed that Gogoi was seen sit-

ting together with the same individual, raising concerns about the party's stand against those involved in acts of violence.

Bordoloi has reportedly attached photographs to the letter sent to the party high command in support of his claims about Gogoi's alleged association with Imdadul Islam.

Sources said the issue had earlier surfaced during a Congress meeting in New Delhi, where Bordoloi raised the matter before senior leaders of the party.

Bordoloi is also understood to have expressed disappointment that Gogoi did not respond to the allegations during the discussion in the meeting. The development has exposed simmering differences within the Assam Congress at a time when the party is trying to strengthen its organisational base ahead (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## WKA ready for Assembly polls, over 2,000 personnel deployed

**HT Correspondent**  
**HAMREN, March 17:** The district administration of West Karbi Anglong has completed preparations for the smooth conduct of the forthcoming Assam Legislative Assembly Election 2026, officials said on Tuesday.

With the Model Code of Conduct already in force, all election-related activities are being carried out in accordance with the guidelines of the Election Commission of India.

According to the notified schedule, the last date for filing nominations is March 23, scrutiny will be held on March 24, the last date for withdrawal of candidature is March 26, polling will take place on April 9, and counting of votes will be conducted on May 4.

In terms of preparedness, the 111-Rongkhang (ST) Assembly constituency has 195 polling stations with a total of 1,00,589 vot-

ers, including third gender voters. The 112-Amri (ST) constituency comprises 164 polling stations with an electorate of 1,32,401 voters.

Officials said a total of 35 election cells have been constituted in the district.

Five zonal officers have been appointed in each constituency, while 22 sector officers have been deployed in Rongkhang and 32 in Amri to ensure effective supervision and coordination.

More than 2,000 polling personnel have been engaged across the district for election duties.

District Election Officer Preeti Kumari appealed to all stakeholders, including political parties, officials and the general public, to extend full cooperation to ensure that the elections are conducted in a peaceful, free, fair and transparent manner.

## AIUDF names candidates for 12 seats in 2<sup>nd</sup> list for Assam polls



**GUWAHATI, March 17:** Opposition All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF) on Tuesday announced its second list of 12 candidates for the Assam Assembly elections, naming party president and former MP Badruddin Ajmal and three sitting MLAs, among others.

With this, the party has named

its nominees for 21 constituencies, with the first list declared for nine seats on March 9.

The elections for the 126-member Assam Assembly will be held on April 9, and votes will be counted on May 4.

The second list named three sitting MLAs - Hafiz Bashir Ahmed (Goalpara East), Nazrul Hoque

(Dhubri) and Ashraf Hussain (Chenga).

Ajmal, also a former MLA himself, will be contesting from the Binnakandi constituency.

Among other candidates named in the second list are Mazibur Rahman (Dalgaon), Abdul Aziz (Samaguri), Musukha Basumatary (Bijni), Mukut Das (Raha) and Anup Krishna Das Talukdar (Ram Krishna Nagar).

The AIUDF had retained three of its incumbent MLAs in the first list - Aminul Islam (senior), Hafiz Rafiqul Islam and Nizanur Rahman from Rupahihat, Mandia and Gauripur constituencies, respectively.

The AIUDF is not part of any opposition alliance, although it had tried to join the Congress-led bloc.

Ajmal had said earlier that the party will contest in 25-30 seats in the coming elections. In the outgoing (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## BJP to contest 89 seats, allies to be given 37 seats

## Himanta indicates finalisation of seat-sharing deal

**Staff Reporter**  
**GUWAHATI, March 17:** Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Tuesday said that the two allies of the BJP in the state--Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) will contest 26 Assembly seats, while its ally Bodoland People's Front (BPF) will field candidates in 11 constituencies in the upcoming polls, leaving the rest 89 seats for the BJP, indicating the finalisation of ongoing seat-sharing negotiations within the alliance.

Speaking after a BJP central election committee meeting in the national capital, Sarma said discussions on seat adjustments are progressing and the alliance will soon finalise its strategy for the elections.

"The AGP will contest 26 seats, while 11 seats will be contested by the BPF. We are working on a co-



ordinated approach to ensure a strong performance," he said.

The Assam assembly has 126 seats and according to the chief minister, the BJP will contest in 89 seats.

The announcement comes amid intensified political activity in Assam, with parties working to finalise alliances and candidate lists ahead of the Assembly elections.

In the 2021 Assam Assembly

elections, the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) had returned to power with a comfortable majority, winning 75 out of 126 seats. The BJP alone secured 60 seats, emerging as the single largest party in the Assembly, while its ally Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) won nine seats.

The seat-sharing arrangement during the 2021 polls had seen the BJP contest 92 seats, leaving 26 seats for the AGP and eight for the United People's Party Liberal (UPPL) as part of the alliance framework.

The NDA's victory in 2021 marked a significant political milestone, as it became the first non-Congress alliance to retain power consecutively in Assam.

The seat-sharing remains a crucial factor in Assam's electoral politics, (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## Karbi Anglong gears up for Assembly polls

**HT Bureau**  
**DIPHU, March 17:** Following the announcement of the election schedule by the Election Commission of India, the district administration of Karbi Anglong has initiated preparations for the forthcoming Assam Legislative Assembly Election 2026, with polling to be held in a single phase on April 9.

District Commissioner and District Election Officer Aranyak Saikia announced the schedule for the 110-Diphu (ST), 109-Howraghat (ST) and 108-Bokajan Assembly constituencies during a press conference at the DC Conference Hall in Diphu.

According to the schedule, the last date for filing nominations is March 23, scrutiny will take place on March 24, and the final date for withdrawal of candidature is March 26.

Counting of votes will be held on May 4.



Saikia informed that a total of 5,30,365 voters are expected to cast their votes across 690 polling stations in the district, of which three have been designated as model polling stations.

Webcasting facilities will be available at all polling stations, while 60 polling stations will be managed entirely by women.

He added that voting percentage

updates will be uploaded in real time on the ECI portal.

To ensure smooth conduct of the elections, micro-observers and general observers have been deployed, while checking of Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) is currently underway.

Both committees will be allowed to set up beyond a 100-metre (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## EC deploys over 1,100 observers for assembly polls

**NEW DELHI, March 17:** The Election Commission (EC) has deployed 1,111 observers for the state assembly elections and assembly bypolls to be held next month.

While West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Assam, Kerala and Puducherry assemblies go to polls, assembly byelections in several states are also slated for April.

The observers will function as the eyes and ears of the EC, and ensure the elections are held in free and fair manner, the poll panel said. The EC has directed that the observers be stationed in their respective assembly constituencies by Thursday.

Upon arrival, the observers will make their contact details public and will specify a fixed time every day for meeting candidates, political parties or their representatives, or any member of the public to hear election-related grievances, EC said. (PTI)

## Essential that children have access to nutritious food, quality education: Prez

**NEW DELHI, March 17:** President Droupadi Murmu on Tuesday said it is essential that children, who are the future of the nation, have ready access to nutritious food and quality education.

She said that a safe and bright future for children is not solely the responsibility of the government, but a shared responsibility of all.

"When teachers, parents, social organisations, the corporate sector, and every segment of society work together, then we lay a strong foundation for the coming generation. We must ensure that every child receives quality education, nutritious food, good health, and a clean and safe environment. These fundamentals enable holistic development of children," Murmu said.

The president was speaking during an event to commemorate the five billion meals of Akshaya Patra



Foundation at Rashtapatri Bhavan Cultural Centre here.

Murmu said that serving five billion meals is a remarkable achievement of the Akshaya Patra Foundation.

The theme of the event, 'From a

well-nourished and well-educated India to a developed India', underscores the significance of a nourished and educated society in realising our national resolve to build 'Viksit Bharat' by the year 2047, she said.

The president said that it is essential that children, who are the future of the nation, have ready access to nutritious food and quality education.

She said that education is the instrument that determines the opportunities available in an individual's life and paves the way for their success.

"It serves as an effective medium for transformation and empowerment. The process of empowerment and capacity-building begins to take shape from the very moment children start attending school. School equips children with the skills and experiences necessary to effectively navigate the challenges of daily life and to become responsible, conscientious citizens," Murmu said. She commended Akshaya Patra Foundation for (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## India, EU discuss energy security amid escalating West Asia conflict

**NEW DELHI, March 17:** The escalating conflict in West Asia and its ripple effects on global energy security figured prominently in External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar's high-level talks with his counterparts from the 27 European Union (EU) member states in Brussels.

A day after the talks, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said on Tuesday that both sides underlined the need for dialogue and diplomacy to resolve the crisis.

Global oil and gas prices have surged after Iran virtually blocked the Strait of Hormuz, a narrow shipping lane between the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, that handles roughly 20 per cent of global oil and LNG (Liquefied Natural Gas).

The West Asia has been a major source of India's energy procurement.

Jaishankar visited the Belgian capital at the invitation of EU foreign and security policy chief Kaja Kallas to join a meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council, which comprises the foreign ministers of the bloc.

It was the first high-level visit from India to the Brussels-headquartered EU after the two sides firmed up a landmark Free Trade Agreement (FTA) following summit talks between Prime Minister Narendra Modi



and the EU leadership in January.

Jaishankar also held separate meetings with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and his counterparts from EU member states such as Germany and Belgium.

The external affairs minister highlighted the strong momentum following the India-EU Summit in January and called for unlocking the full potential of the FTA, besides deepening defence industrial collaboration and maritime co-operation under the security and defence partnership, the (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

# Assam signs MoU with BillMart for salary advance, credit scheme for employees

HT Bureau

**GUWAHATI, March 17:** The Government of Assam has signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with BillMart to implement the Earned Salary Advance (ESA) and Salary-Linked Credit (SLC) scheme for state government employees.

The initiative aims to provide nearly five lakh government employees with timely access to formal credit through a secure digital platform, enabling them to meet short-term financial needs while reducing dependence on informal borrowing.

The MoU was signed on March 15 in the presence of senior officials, including Environment and Forest Minister Chandra Mohan Patowary, Chief Secretary Ravi Kota, and Commissioner and Secretaries of the Finance Department Jayant Narlikar and Virendra Mittal.

The scheme has been introduced in line with the vision of chief minister



ister Himanta Biswa Sarma to strengthen employee welfare through digital financial solutions and improved access to responsible credit.

According to officials, the facility is being delivered through Fi-

nAssam, the state's digital financial platform, enabling fast, paperless and transparent access to credit for government employees.

Soon after its launch, the scheme witnessed encouraging response.

In a social media post, the Chief

Minister stated that within the first 12 hours, around 120 beneficiaries had availed the facility, with nearly ₹90 lakh in credit facilitated.

Under the programme, eligible employees can access a portion of their earned salary before payday through ESA, while the SLC component allows them to avail structured loans with simplified approval processes and repayment linked to payroll systems.

BillMart, along with its financing partner FYNX Capital, will facilitate the financial services under the initiative.

Sandeep Doshi, Co-founder and COO of BillMart, said the company is committed to supporting the government in enabling transparent and technology-driven financial access for employees.

Officials said the launch of the ESA and SLC scheme marks a significant step towards modernising employee financial services and expanding access to formal credit across Assam.

# LPG crunch continues; central govt pushes states to clear city gas projects

**NEW DELHI, March 17:** With the LPG supply squeeze impacting hotels, businesses and household consumers through longer waiting periods and panic bookings, the Centre has asked states to expedite approvals for piped gas projects to enable faster rollout and ease pressure on cooking gas availability.

As the war in West Asia, which blocked India's access to almost 60 per cent of its LPG, continues with no end in sight, the government is now pushing for the use of alternative cooking mediums like induction cookers.

"Situation remains a matter of concern, but we are providing supplies as before to the domestic consumers," said Sujata Sharma, Joint Secretary, Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas. This was made possible as refineries were asked to ramp up domestic output, which was then prioritised for household kitchens. Commercial use of LPG, such as in hotels and restaurants, was initially curtailed, but later restored to a fifth of their normal offtake.

"We have to look at alternatives," she said at a media briefing.

Giving statistics, she said panic bookings for a refill LPG cylinder peaked to 87.7 lakh on March 13, but have since eased, with about 70 lakh bookings being done on Monday. This compares to about 55 lakh bookings in pre-war days.

LPG deliveries have kept pace. "We delivered 62.5 lakh cylinders on March 13, 60 lakh on March 14... this compares to 50 lakh deliveries in pre-conflict times," she said.

There is still panic booking happening despite assurances that there are enough LPG supplies to meet household needs, she said, adding that domestic production of LPG has increased by 38 per cent compared to March 5 levels.

To ease pressure on LPG, the government is promoting commercial and household LPG users to switch to piped

natural gas. City gas companies are offering incentives and faster connections. The government is also expanding the city gas distribution network to ease pressure on LPG demand, Sharma said.

The central government has, on March 16, written to all state governments to expedite approvals for city gas projects. It asked them to issue deemed permission for pending applications for large city gas pipelines, approvals for new city gas projects within 24 hours, waive road restoration charges, and relax working schedules.

"Situation still is worrying, but there is no dry out at any LPG distributorship," she said.

India's LPG supplies came under strain as the Strait of Hormuz - a key route for imports - faces disruptions following the US and Israel attack on Iran and Tehran's sweeping retaliation.

With shipments from major suppliers, such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, affected, India, which imports about 60 per cent of its LPG needs, has moved to ration supplies. The government has curtailed allocation to commercial users and industries to prioritise household consumption and prevent an immediate shortage of cooking gas.

The disruption has begun to ripple through several sectors that rely heavily on LPG. Restaurants have started dropping slow-simmered dishes from their menus because they consume large amounts of cooking gas, while industries, such as brick and tile manufacturing, ceramics and glass kilns, are also facing difficulties in sustaining operations due to gas shortage.

Essential services, including crematoriums, laundries and hospital kitchens, are similarly struggling to maintain regular activity, even as bakeries, street-food vendors and community kitchens report curtailing output amid tighter LPG availability. (PTI)

Contd. from Page 1...

## Himanta indicates finalisation

particularly in regions like Bodoland, where regional parties such as the BPF hold considerable influence. The BJP has been actively engaging with its allies to fine-tune the electoral strategy, while also seeking to expand its footprint across constituencies.

The BJP will also announce candidate list for the upcoming assembly polls on Wednesday as mentioned by the chief minister.

The elections for the 126-member assembly elections will be held on April 9 and the counting of votes will take place on May 4.

## Lurinjoyti questions EC's

the sea in Singapore. The state government alleged that it was a case of murder and arrested seven people. The authorities in the island nation, however, said Garg was severely intoxicated and drowned off Lazarus Island after declining a life jacket.

Gogoi also claimed that the EC wanted to ensure that leaders of opposition parties do not get much time to campaign across the state and remain confined to their own constituencies.

With scrutiny of nominations to be undertaken on March 26, the candidates will practically have a campaigning period of 13 days, he maintained.

"Through its short election notice, it is clear that the EC is working for the benefit of a specific section. And we have to say it on record that such activities are eroding the strong democratic principles, emphasised by our founding fathers," Gogoi claimed.

Party general secretary Jagdish Bhuyan said the short campaign period creates difficulties for regional parties such as the BJP "owing to limited resources".

Bhuyan, who was a ticket contender from Sadiya, said he is now rethinking it, as at least one top party leader would be needed to coordinate the electioneering process.

"But I have to respect the wishes of our local party members also. Tomorrow, I will be discussing the matter of my candidacy with the local chapter and take a decision," he added.

Bhuyan said the BJP was fully committed to ensure unity of opposition parties to defeat the BJP-led ruling regime, with the party president also affirming his support.

"We had sought 28 seats to contest, but have agreed to 10 seats for the sake of the alliance. Of course, we are still in talks for a few more seats where we feel that we have a strong presence," Gogoi said.

Everything will be clear within a couple of days, the BJP president added. (PTI)

## Karbi Anglong gears

radius from polling stations. With the Model Code of Conduct already in force, the District Commissioner directed political parties to remove posters, banners and hoardings from government properties within 48 hours and from private properties within 72 hours.

Flying squads have also been constituted to monitor violations.

Saikia further stated that more than 10,000 first-time voters in the 18-19 age group have been registered in the district.

Four companies of the CRPF have already been deployed in Diphu to ensure peaceful polling.

## BJP may offer

of the upcoming Assembly elections in the state.

While Bordoloi has formally brought the matter to the notice of the party leadership, neither Gogoi nor the Lahorighat MLA has issued any official response to the allegations so far.

## I-T deptt opens

information shared is credible and actionable." The control room will be functional until the completion of the election process, it said. (PTI)

## AIUFD names candidates

Assembly, the ruling BJP's strength is 64, while its allies AGP has nine MLAs, UPPL has seven, and the BPF has three.

In the opposition camp, the Congress has 26 members, AIUFD has 15 members, and the CPI(M) has one MLA. There is one Independent legislator also. (PTI)

## India, EU discuss

MEA said. Jaishankar also underlined the need for transform the India-EU Trade and Technology Council into a more "outcome driven" forum.

"The external affairs minister urged the EU foreign ministers to realise synergies between India's relations with the European Union and with member states -- a sentiment that was fully reciprocated by his EU counterparts," the MEA said.

It said the ministers also exchanged views on pressing global challenges, particularly the situation in West Asia including its effects on energy security and underlined the need for dialogue and diplomacy.

"They also discussed the situation in Ukraine and the Indo-Pacific. EAM stressed on the growing convergence between India and the EU in maintaining a stable international order and strengthening multilateralism," the MEA added.

On the margins of the Foreign Affairs Council, Jaishankar held a bilateral meeting with Kallas.

"Both sides reaffirmed their shared ambition to further elevate India' EU cooperation to a higher strategic level. They also underlined the importance of regular consultations on key global and regional matters including the Indo-Pacific," the MEA said.

Jaishankar also held separate bilateral meetings with his counterparts from Belgium, Cyprus, Germany, Greece and the Netherlands.

"India' EU relations have entered a phase of renewed strategic momentum, with both sides intensifying engagement on implementation of the 'Towards 2030: A Joint India-EU Comprehensive Strategic Agenda'," the MEA said. (PTI)

## Essential that children

working continuously to address the issue of malnutrition among children by delivering mid-day meals to schools for the past 25 years.

Murmu said that the government of India has launched numerous significant initiatives aimed at providing adequate nutrition and improved healthcare services to pregnant mothers and children.

The school lunch programme, implemented under PM POSHAN, has proven to be a significant incentive for parents to send their children to school, the president said, adding that numerous studies substantiate that, as a result of this programme, there has been an increase in children's enrolment, attendance, and retention in schools.

There has also been a remarkable improvement in their learning capabilities and academic performance, she said.

Murmu was happy to note that Akshaya Patra Foundation is playing an important role in furthering the objectives of 'Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan,' which aims to ensure quality and inclusive education for all children by the year 2030.

The president said that children are not merely beneficiaries of the free meal programme. "They are the architects of the nation's bright future. The nutritious food they receive today is an investment in our nation's human capital. The healthy, educated and energetic children will constitute India's workforce and play a pivotal role in achieving 'Viksit Bharat' by 2047," she added. (PTI)

## Stock markets rally for 2<sup>nd</sup> day

Sensex climbs 567 pts on gains in metal, auto shares

**MUMBAI, March 17:** Benchmark Sensex climbed 567 points and Nifty closed near 23,600 in their second consecutive day of gains on Tuesday, boosted by a rally in metal and auto shares and a positive trend in global markets.

The 30-share BSE Sensex jumped 567.99 points or 0.75 per cent to settle at 76,070.84. During the day, it surged 801.41 points or 1.06 per cent to 76,304.26.

The 50-share NSE Nifty climbed 172.35 points or 0.74 per cent to end at 23,581.15.

From the 30-Sensex firms, Eternal surged the most by 5.70 per cent. Tata Steel, Mahindra & Mahindra, Bharat Electronics, Larsen & Toubro, Bharti Airtel and Maruti were also among the major gainers.

Infosys, Bajaj Finance, ITC, Tata Consultancy Services and HCL Tech were among the biggest laggards.

"The market extended its gains, driven largely by bargain hunting by domestic investors. Cyclical sectors such as autos, metals, and financials continued to be leaders rebounding after being among the worst affected during the sell-off. However, it is premature to conclude that this reversal is sustainable in the short term, as war-related uncertainties persist," Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Investments Ltd, said.

The BSE MidCap Select Index jumped 0.86 per cent and SmallCap Select Index climbed 0.67 per cent.

Among sectoral indices, metal surged 2.81 per cent, followed by auto (2.05 per cent), realty (1.79 per cent), commodities (1.69 per cent), consumer discretionary (1.54 per cent), industrials (1.54 per cent), capital goods (1.40 per cent), telecommunication (1.24 per cent) and Bankex (0.90 per cent).

IT, FMCG and BSE Focused IT were the laggards.

A total of 2,362 stocks advanced, while 1,892 declined and 157 remained unchanged on the BSE.

In Asian markets, South Korea's benchmark Kospi jumped 1.63 per cent, while Hong Kong's Hang Seng index ended marginally higher. Japan's Nikkei 225 index



and Shanghai's SSE Composite index settled lower. Markets in Europe were trading higher. The US market ended higher on Monday.

"Indian equities extended their recovery for a second consecutive session, supported by easing volatility and selective sectoral strength, although underlying caution continues to shape market behaviour. A key positive was the sharp decline in India VIX, which dropped 8 per cent to sub-20 levels," Hariprasad K, Research Analyst and Founder, Livelong Wealth, said.

Sectorally, the rebound was led by the automobile space, with the Nifty Auto index gaining 2 per cent, he added.

Brent crude, the global oil benchmark, jumped 2.44 per cent to USD 102.7 per barrel.

Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth ₹9,365.52 crore on Monday, according to exchange data. Domestic Institutional Investors (DIIs), however, bought stocks worth ₹12,593.36 crore.

On Monday, the Sensex jumped 938.93 points or 1.26 per cent to settle at 75,502.85. The Nifty climbed 257.70 points or 1.11 per cent to end at 23,408.80. (PTI)

## Silver jumps ₹6,000, gold rebounds ₹1,050 on safe-haven demand

**NEW DELHI, March 17:** Precious metal prices rebounded by up to 2 per cent, with silver gaining by ₹6,000, or ₹2.62 lakh per kilogram, and gold rose to ₹1.61 lakh per 10 grams in the national capital on Tuesday, according to the All India Sarafa Association.

The white metal increased by ₹6,000, or 2.34 per cent, to ₹2,62,500 per kg (inclusive of all taxes).

Gold of 99.9 per cent purity in the bullion market also snapped its three-day losing streak, rising by ₹1,050, or nearly 1 per cent, to ₹1,61,300 per 10 grams (inclusive of all taxes).

Analysts said the rebound in bullion prices was supported by safe-haven demand amid geopolitical tensions, even as global cues remained subdued.

In the domestic markets, a softening rupee has helped spot gold prices decouple from global weakness, though one can expect further consolidation within a wide range until the Fed provides clear guidance, Dilip Parmar, Senior Research Analyst, HDFC Securities, said.

He added that precious metals are currently caught in a complex macro-trap, where conflicting factors are influencing price movements.

"The escalating conflict in the Gulf region typically triggers a rush to safety, the resulting oil price surge is fuelling inflation fears that may force central banks to stay hawkish for longer," Parmar said.

In the international market, spot gold was trading marginally lower at USD 5,003.68 per ounce, and silver also went lower by 0.35 per cent, to USD 80.46 per ounce.

"Gold traded near USD 5,000 per ounce, but continues to witness range-bound volatility as markets remain cautious ahead of the US Fed policy decision due on Wednesday late evening," Jateen Trivedi, VP Research Analyst of Commodity and Currency, LKP Securities, said. (PTI)

## DRP issues notice to Dharavi residents over pending papers

**MUMBAI, March 17:** Authorities overseeing the Dharavi Redevelopment Project have issued a final notice to residents who are yet to submit documents for the eligibility survey, giving them a last 15-day window to comply. Officials said failure to submit papers within the deadline will result in eligibility being determined based on available records.

The project, being implemented by Dharavi Redevelopment Project (DRP)/Slum Rehabilitation Authority under the Government of Maharashtra, aims to ensure a transparent and inclusive redevelopment process. A door-to-door survey has already covered over 91,000 units, while around 24,000 remain incomplete due to missing documents or absence of

household heads, and nearly 13,000 units are yet to participate. Officials said multiple notices, facilitation camps and outreach efforts have been conducted over the past months to assist residents. Individual notices are now being issued to close communication gaps and expedite the process. Submissions can be made in person, by post or courier at designated offices. The authority said it will proceed with eligibility assessments as per rules if documents are not submitted within the deadline, adding that timelines had already been extended earlier. Work on publishing Final Annexure-II lists, which include scrutiny of eligibility under SRA norms, has also begun to ensure time-bound implementation of the project. (PTI)

## Cargo Matters to invest ₹66 crore to set up over 550 EV charging stations

**MUMBAI, March 17:** Logistics operator Cargo Matters on Tuesday announced its plans to invest ₹66 crore for setting up over 550 smart grid-enabled and solar-integrated electric vehicle charging stations across Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala.

The company said it has collaborated with EV

charging infrastructure provider TRYK Charge Services LLP to execute this project.

Aimed at solving the infrastructure bottleneck for both commercial logistics and passenger mobility, the network will introduce a 360 kW DC fast charger, it said, adding that these facilities will support global standards alongside standard AC charging options.

"The bottleneck to scaling electric logistics in India is no longer the vehicles; it is the absence of reliable, heavy-duty charging infrastructure on our freight corridors. By fully investing ₹66 crore into this network, Cargo Matters is helping secure India's operational future and accelerating the electrification of commercial transport," said Umesh Padala, Founder & Chairman, Cargo Matters.

The infrastructure will be managed via a com-



plete Charge Point Operator (CPO) platform, providing real-time analytics and remote monitoring, among others.

Also, in a move to unify the fragmented charging market, the company said it will onboard existing unmanaged third-party chargers onto its platform, optimising operations and unlocking new revenue streams for independent charger owners.

Besides, the two partners are jointly launching an RFID-based charging

### CONSTRUCTION OF BUILDING & OTHER ANCILLARY WORKS AT LUMDING DIVISION

E-tender Notice No. Sr. DEE/LMG/48 of 2025-26 Dated: 13-03-2026. E-Tenders are invited by the undersigned for the following works:

Tender No. EL/LMG/25-26/45. Name of work: (1) Provision for one nos. of existing building including with OPL, 1 renovation of toilet, Boundary wall and connecting road in OPL 1st

(2) Provision for new administrative block office building double storied 1600 sq.mtr including CO chamber, 04 AC's chamber, meeting hall, Battalion office (8 dealing clerk with separate section for receipt and dispatch section) with record room, IPF office with record room, Quarter Master office with store room, security control room, BN quarter Guard, Armourer shop and 8 nos Room (Kole and Magazine room) for keeping Arms & Ammunition etc. Tender Value: ₹56,61,766.84/- Earnest Money: ₹1,13,200/- E-tender will be closed at 11:00 hrs. and opened at 11:30 hrs. on 06-04-2026. The complete information with the tender document of above e-tender will be available upto 11:00 hrs. on 06-04-2026 on website www.ireps.gov.in

Sr.DEE/G&Chg, Lumding

NORTHEAST FRONTIER RAILWAY

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### LOST

I. Priyanka Biswas, D/O- Palan Biswas, R/O- Vill- 10 No Balimukh (Beradia), P.O. Karatipam, P.S-Mayong, Dist- Morigaon (Assam) have lost my original marks Statement Cum certificate of H.S.L.C of CBSE Board bearing Roll No.- 16136424 of year 2023. If found please contact me at 7099673691.

### PAY AND USE TOILET CONTRACT IN TINSUKIA DIVISION

E-Auction is invited for Pay and Use Toilet Contract at Furkating Railway Station in Tinsukia Division. Auction Catalogue No. Pnu-TSK-Toi-02. Rate Unit: Annual Licensing Fee. Days: 1096. Auction Start Date & Time : At 11:00 hrs. on 31-03-2026.

Seq No.	Lot No./Category	Closing Date & Time
AA/1	Pnu-TSK-FKG-Toi-1-26-1 (Pay and Use - Toilets)	At 11:30 hrs. on 31-03-2026

Successive lots closing interval 10 minutes. Initial cooling off period 30 Minutes. Note: Prospective bidder are requested to visit e-Auction leasing module on IREPS website www.ireps.gov.in for more details.

Sr. DCM, Tinsukia

NORTHEAST FRONTIER RAILWAY

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# West Karbi Anglong issues prohibitory order ahead of Assam polls

Restrictions on gatherings, weapons, rallies and loudspeakers to ensure peaceful elections

**HT Correspondent**

**HAMREN, March 17:** In view of the upcoming Assam Legislative Assembly elections, 2026, scheduled for April 9, the District Administration of West Karbi Anglong has issued a prohibitory order under Section 163 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS) to maintain public peace, law and order and ensure smooth conduct of the electoral process.

The order, promulgated by District Magistrate Preeti Kumari, IAS, comes into force immediately and will remain effective until the declaration of election results.

As per the order, assembly of five or more persons in public places without prior permission is strictly prohibited. Carrying of arms or objects that may be used as weapons is also banned. Ral-



lies, public meetings, demonstrations and processions require prior permission and activities obstructing traffic or disturbing public peace are barred.

Use of loudspeakers without permission, especially between 10:00 PM and 6:00 AM and

near sensitive locations such as hospitals, educational institutions and religious places has been prohibited. The order also bars inflammatory speeches, anti-social or anti-national slogans and dissemination of objectionable messages through

social media or other platforms that may disrupt communal harmony or the election process.

Activities such as bursting firecrackers, using animals or children in campaign activities and defacement of public or private property through posters, banners, or wall writing are also restricted.

The order exempts lawful activities such as voting, routine market activities, educational functions, religious ceremonies and official duties by government personnel, security forces and election officials.

The District Administration has urged all citizens, political parties, and stakeholders to strictly adhere to the guidelines to ensure peaceful, free, and fair elections. Any violation will invite legal action under relevant provisions of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita.

# ATM shortage worsens as failed robbery attempt reported in Udalguri

## Cash shortage hits Darrang ahead of Eid

**HT Correspondent**

**DALGAON, March 17:** A persistent cash shortage in parts of Assam has intensified in Darrang district ahead of Eid-ul-Fitr, leaving residents struggling to access physical currency from banks, ATMs and Customer Service Points (CSPs). This comes amid reports of heightened festive demand, while a related incident in nearby Udalguri district highlights vulnerabilities in cash-handling infrastructure.

In Darrang, including areas like Mangaldoi, Kharupetia, Bechimari, Dalgaon and other major towns, locals have reported widespread empty ATMs and banks unable to dispense cash for several days. Many have been compelled to travel to bordering or neighbouring districts in search of operational machines or cash availability. The crisis has forced a rapid shift to digital alternatives, with widespread use of UPI for market purchases, vendor payments and daily transactions. However, challenges persist for those without reliable smartphone access, internet connectivity or linked accounts, particularly affecting elderly residents and remote rural communities.

The timing coincides with Eid-ul-Fitr preparations, when cash is traditionally needed for shopping, zakat distribution and family celebrations. Similar issues have been noted in other parts of Assam, severely impacting schemes like Orunodoi. While no official Eid-specific statement addresses Darrang directly, the festive surge in demand appears to have compounded



existing replenishment and logistical hurdles in rural banking networks.

Compounding public frustration, an attempted burglary occurred late Saturday night at an SBI branch/ATM in Koupati under Udalguri district, adjacent to Darrang. Thieves broke into the premises and damaged the ATM in an effort to access cash but escaped without any loot after finding the machine empty. Police responded promptly, registering a case and launching a search for the perpetrators, including a forensic examination of the site for clues such as tools or potential CCTV evidence.

Authorities are investigating whether the failed heist is related to the broader cash scarcity, as low or zero cash stocking, possibly due to replenishment delays, may have inadvertently thwarted the attempt. No arrests have been reported yet and SBI officials are assessing the damage and any service disruptions at the branch.

## Youth leadership training begins at RT University

**HT Correspondent**

**NAGAON, March 17:** A three-day residential youth leadership training programme was inaugurated at Rabindranath Tagore University, Hojai on Tuesday. The programme, organised by Mera Yuva Bharat, Hojai in collaboration with the National Service Scheme (NSS) of Rabindranath Tagore University, aims to empower young leaders and equip them with skills necessary for nation-building.

Speaking at the inaugural ceremony, Professor Manabendra Dutta Choudhury, Vice-Chancellor of Rabindranath Tagore University, emphasised the crucial role of youth in shaping India's future. He said that the role of youth in building a developed India is indispensable.

The programme will feature training sessions on personality development, youth leadership, digital literacy, financial literacy, communication skills, artificial intelligence, good governance and government schemes, among others. The training will be imparted by experienced trainers.

The programme is expected to benefit 36 youth participants from various educational institutions in Hojai district. Mahit Rabha, Deputy Director, My Bharat Kendra, delivered the welcome speech and outlined the objectives of the programme. The event was attended by dignitaries, including Professor Rejina Ahmed, Dr Kaushik Chanda, Dr Satyajit Kumar, Dr Abhijit Katoky and Dr Akshya Jyoti Sarma.

Dr Akshya Jyoti Sarma, Coordinator of the NSS Cell, compered the inaugural programme, while Dr Dijamoni Sarma, Coordinator of the NCC Cell, delivered the vote of thanks.

Dhananjay Talukdar, Accounts Officer of Mera Yuva Bharat, Nagaon and Hojai, informed that the programme aims to inspire young minds to contribute to the development of the nation and realise Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision of a developed India by 2047.

## Cong-APHLC announce candidates for four KA seats

**HT Bureau**

**DIPHU, March 17:** The Congress-led opposition alliance in Karbi Anglong on Monday announced candidates for four Assembly constituencies ahead of the 2026 polls, while discussions are ongoing for two others.

At a joint press conference held at Hotel Hempi in Diphu, leaders of the Indian National Congress and All Party Hills Leaders Conference (APHLC) said they would jointly contest the elections to take on the Bharatiya Janata Party.

APHLC president Inges Ingti Kathar announced that he would contest from Diphu (ST), while Karbi Anglong District Congress president Raton Engti will contest from Bokajan. West Karbi Anglong District Congress president Augustin Engti has been named for Rongkhang (ST) and APHLC's Bikram Hanse for Amri (ST). Kathar said that candidates for Howraghat and Haflong constituencies are yet to be finalised and will be announced soon after consultations among alliance partners.

Speaking to the media, Engti criticised the BJP-led government, alleging lack of economic opportunities and unfulfilled promises. He claimed that previous Congress-led administrations in the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council had enabled local participation in development works.

Alliance leaders acknowledged ideological differences between national and regional parties but emphasised unity to challenge the BJP in the upcoming elections.

## 'Karbi Anglong murder mystery solved'

**HT Correspondent**

**HOWRAGHAT, March 17:** The mystery surrounding a body discovered buried in a pond in Karbi Anglong has been resolved. The deceased has been identified as Dilip Nath, a resident of Rongkut Block No 3, who had been missing for several days. The grim discovery was made on March 15 in a shallow pond located in Chabai Kro village, under the jurisdiction of the Uttar Borbil Police Outpost. The incident sparked intense tension and concern throughout the locality.

Upon receiving information, police arrived at the scene to recover the body. Local residents immediately suspected foul play, noting several disturbing details. The body was found buried in the mud of the shallow pond, with the victim's face tied with a cloth, suggesting a pre-planned and cold-blooded murder. While locals initially suspected the body belonged to the missing Dilip Nath, formal identification was confirmed following police procedures. The body was transported to Diphu Medical College for a post-mortem examination. During the process, an Aadhaar card discovered in the victim's pocket confirmed his identity.

Following identification, the body was handed over to grieving family members, who have performed the last rites. The brutal nature of the crime has left the community in shock. Dilip Nath, a married man is believed to have been the victim of a targeted killing. Local residents are calling for a swift and thorough investigation, urging police to track down the perpetrators and ensure they face strict punishment under the law.

## Assam civil society leader joins regional SDG platform

**HT Correspondent**

**JORHAT, March 17:** Tirtha Prasad Saikia, Director of the North-East Affected Area Development Society (NEADS), a local indigenous civil society organisation based in Jorhat, Assam, North-East India, has been appointed as the Constituency Focal Point for the People Affected by Conflict and Disasters of the Asia Pacific Regional CSO Engagement Mechanism (APRCM).

APRCM is a regional platform that brings together civil society organisations across Asia and the Pacific to engage with intergovernmental processes on sustainable development, particularly the implementation and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Through this organisational role, Saikia will represent and delegate NEADS in regional civil society processes. He has also been selected to serve as a Member of the Regional Coordinating Committee (RCC) of APRCEM.

In this role, Saikia will represent the voices, concerns and priorities of communities affected by conflicts, disasters and climate-induced crises across the Asia-Pacific region. As constituency focal point, he will facilitate coordination among civil society organisations, strengthen regional advocacy and contribute to policy engagement processes that advance just, inclusive and locally grounded development pathways.

## ACA reviews fixtures for Nuruddin tournament

**HT Bureau**

**GUWAHATI, March 17:** A joint meeting of the Tour, Fixture & Technical Committee and the Senior Tournament Committee of the Assam Cricket Association (ACA) was held at the ACA Office, Barsapara Cricket Stadium, Guwahati on Tuesday.

The meeting was chaired by ACA Chairman Shankar Dutta Lahakar in the presence of Secretary Sonaton Das, Apex Council member Mukunda Bhattacharya, CEO Pritom Mahanta and Dr Bishnu Ram Nunisa, Member of the Senior Tournament Committee, along with other members. The discussions focused on the finalisation of venues and fixtures for the Nuruddin Ahmed Senior Inter District Cricket Tournament, 2026.

## Licensed arms banned in Jorhat ahead of polls

**HT Correspondent**

**JORHAT, March 17:** In view of the announcement of the Assembly elections in the state by the Election Commission of India (ECI), the Jorhat District Commissioner, Jay Shivani, who is also the District Magistrate has prohibited the carrying of licensed arms in the district.

An order issued by the DC under Section 163 of the BNSS, 2023, stated that, in compliance with ECI directions to ensure peaceful, free and fair polls, the carrying of licensed arms has been banned in Jorhat district. The order comes into force with immediate effect and will remain in effect till the declaration of results.

## Giant python rescued in Sootea

**HT Correspondent**

**BISWANATH CHARIALI, March 17:** 'Sarpa Bandhab' Niranjan Das on Tuesday rescued a giant python from the house of one Pranab Phukan, a resident of Gerekhi under Sootea police station.

According to information, the family members spotted the python in the backyard of the house and immediately informed Niranjan Das, a known snake rescuer of the locality. Niranjan visited the house and rescued the 9-foot-long and approximately 10 kg snake. Later, he handed over the snake to the designated officials of the Biswanath Wildlife Division.

## Kuki Inpi Assam welcomes MoS signatories of extremist SoO groups

Welfare development councils to be set up for Kuki and Hmar communities in Assam

**HT Correspondent**

**HAF LONG, March 17:** The Kuki Inpi Assam (KIA), apex body of Kuki tribe accorded a warm welcome to Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) signatories of Kuki (extremist) Suspension of Operation (SoO) group signed with the Government of Assam at Ngullam Guite Memorial Hall at Sompjang village near Haflong in Dima Hasao on Tuesday.

Two MoS were signed on behalf of the Assam government by Ajay Tewari, Additional Chief Secretary of the Home and Political Department and representatives of the SoO group including the United Kukigam Defence Army (UKDA), Kuki Revolutionary Army (KRA) and the Kuki Liberation Organisation (KLO) which is also known as the Kuki Liberation Army and Hmar group-Hmar People Convention- Democratic (HPC-D) in presence of Assam Minister, Ranaj Pegu at Guwahati on 15th of March.

All members of both the SoO groups had laid down their arms in 2012. As per the MoS, a Kuki Welfare Development Council and a Hmar Welfare Develop-

# Heavy rain and strong winds lash West Karbi Anglong

**HT Correspondent**

**KHERONI, March 17:** A ferocious storm accompanied by heavy rainfall struck the Kheroni Police Station jurisdiction and surrounding villages in West Karbi Anglong district around 2 AM on Tuesday, unleashing widespread destruction on homes, farmlands and infrastructure.

The intense squall, described by locals as unusually fast and powerful compared to previous storms in the region, battered areas including Nawaibil, Lamshakhanj, Hawaipur (Jirim Bazar & Karbi Gaon), Jiribasa, Mailoo Bazar area, Belbari, Watizor, Kheroni Charali, Bagisadubi, Dayangmukh, Gohagoan, Ranaima and other parts of greater Kheroni area.

Gale-force winds uprooted numerous large old trees including area nut (tamul), coconut palms and other valuable species across homesteads and farmlands. Standing crops such as wheat and various vegetables were ripped apart or flattened, inflicting heavy losses on local farmers during this critical growing period.

Electricity infrastructure bore the brunt of the onslaught: multiple poles were toppled and wires snapped, plunging the entire affected region into darkness. Power supply remains completely disrupted, with restoration likely to take several days.

The storm tore away tin roofing sheets and bamboo fencing from numerous houses, leaving many families partially or fully exposed



to the elements. In several instances, the high-velocity gusts caused complete structural collapse of homes or severe damage, impacting multiple households.

Residents described chaotic scenes with fallen trees, scattered debris, damaged structures and blocked roads and pathways. Community members have actively participated in clearing fallen trees and removing obstructions from roads.

Fortunately, no immediate reports of human casualties have surfaced from this event. However, the scale of property damage, agricultural losses and infrastructure disruption is reported to be sub-

stantial. Local authorities have not yet released an official damage assessment, but relief operations including road clearance, emergency power restoration and aid distribution to affected families are anticipated to commence shortly. Residents are urged to exercise caution as unstable weather patterns may continue in the coming days.

This severe pre-monsoon squall underscores the growing vulnerability of Assam's rural hill districts to sudden, high-intensity weather events during transitional periods, prompting calls for enhanced preparedness and resilient infrastructure in such areas.

## Rail capacity to surge in Assam

**HT Bureau**

**GUWAHATI, March 17:** In a major boost to railway infrastructure in the Northeast, Prime Minister laid the foundation stone for the Furkating - New Tinsukia Doubling Project on 13th March, 2026.

Spanning a total length of 194 kilometres and with an estimated cost of approximately ₹ 3634

crores, this important initiative will significantly enhance rail capacity, improve operational efficiency and strengthen connectivity across Upper Assam and adjoining regions. Work on this project is being taken forward in a planned manner.

The Furkating - New Tinsukia section is a vital rail link under

Northeast Frontier Railway, catering to both passenger and freight traffic. Doubling of this section will help decongest the existing line, ensuring faster, smoother and more reliable train operations. The project is expected to benefit several long-distance and intercity services while supporting economic growth in the region. Work on this section is currently in progress.

At the same time, the Lumding - Furkating Double Line Project is also progressing steadily. The Lumding - Furkating section, spanning approximately 140 km is a crucial rail corridor under Northeast Frontier Railway. Sanctioned during 2024-25 with an estimated cost of ₹ 2123.70 crore, the project aims to decongest one of the busiest sin-

gle-line sections in the region. Once completed, the doubling work will significantly improve train operations, reduce delays and enable seamless movement of both passenger and freight traffic. Work on this project is currently underway.

The project is being executed in multiple phases with a target completion by January 2028. Key milestones include phased commissioning starting from May 2026, covering important stretches such as Naogjan - Sarupathar, Dhanisiri - Rangapar and Dimapur connectivity sections. The project includes construction of 19 major bridges, 161 minor bridges and development across 20 stations, reflecting the scale and complexity of the initiative.

## Young cricketer injured in group attack in Nagaon

**HT Correspondent**

**NAGAON, March 17:** A shocking incident unfolded in the Islam-patty area of Nagaon town on Monday, leaving young cricketer Sahil Ali seriously injured. The attack, allegedly sparked by a dispute over a goat has sent shockwaves across the town.

According to reports, a group of around 50 people, including Shahrukh Sheikh, Bilaluddin, Rakib and their family members, attacked Sahil, his parents and several others. The mob used sharp objects and sticks, leaving several people injured.

Sahil, a talented young cricketer who represented the U-16 team in the 2023 Bangladesh Exposure was seriously injured. The victim's family had previously filed a complaint against 11 members of the accused family at the Haibargaon police outpost.

The incident has sparked widespread outrage, with the police yet to take concrete action. The victim's family has filed another complaint and the authorities are expected to take stern measures soon.

## Expenditure observers appointed for Jorhat polls

**HT Correspondent**

**JORHAT, March 17:** In preparation for the upcoming Assam Legislative Assembly Elections 2026, the Election Commission of India has appointed two Expenditure Observers for the Jorhat election district to ensure the smooth and transparent conduct of the polls.

According to official sources, Nikhil Agarwala (IRAS) has been assigned as the Expenditure Observer for the Mariani and Titabor Assembly constituencies, while B Jyoti Kiran (IRS) will oversee expenditure monitoring for the Jorhat and Teok Assembly constituencies. Both observers arrived on Tuesday at the Jorhat Circuit House.

Agarwala chaired a review meeting at the old conference hall of the Circuit House earlier in the day. The meeting was attended by Co-District Commissioners and Assistant Commissioners of Mariani and Titabor, nodal officers from the Expenditure Monitoring Cell, and Model Code of Conduct Cell, as well as Assistant Expenditure Observers, members of the Accounting Team and officials from the Video Surveillance Team, among others.



ment Council will be formed in Kuki and Hmar -dominated areas of Assam (mainly Karbi Anglong, Dima Hasao and Cachar dis-

trict) with its headquarters at Guwahati and their budgets will be prepared according to their requirements and submitted to the

## QUOTE OF THE DAY

Be true to your work, your word, and your friend  
—John Boyle O'Reilly

## Threat of oil price hike

With the outbreak of combined USA-Israel war against Iran, threats loomed large on oil price hike. It turns double whammy, combined with Trump's tariff war. It raised a new era of global political and economic conflict, which is unlikely to decelerate in near future. This war does not connote bilateral conflicts only. With Iran retaliating on American bases in Middle East countries and restricting the Strait of Hormuz for movement of oil and LNG cargoes, oil and gas shortages hover over the whole world widely. Oil prices surged to US\$ 90 to 110 per barrel from US\$ 70 per barrel within a week. It is first time that oil prices rose above US\$100 per barrel since Russia-Ukraine war in 2022. For India, oil is the second biggest energy source. Unfortunately, unlike other major sources of energy (coal, hydro), oil energy depends largely on imports. Nearly 90 per cent of oil requirement is met by import. None the less, the state of oil import dependency in India is different from other countries. Unlike other major importing nations, oil import dependency of India does not lead major impact on economic parameters, like manufacturing, trade balances, current account deficit in the country. There are two reasons which accrue cushion to the global price hike and current account deficit. First, India diversified oil imports largely from Russia, which offered discounted price (US\$ 10 to US\$ 13 per barrel for Brent crude), owing to EU and USA sanctions and second, a big sum of imports is offset by exports of oil refinery products of the country. Nearly 35 per cent of imports of crude oil and petroleum products was offset by exports of oil refinery products in 2024-25.

With the outbreak of Russian-Ukraine war, followed by sanctions on Russian oil, global landscape of oil imports underwent dramatic changes. It gave a new lease of life to oil hungry nations to shift oil imports from Arab nations and diversify imports from other nations. Imports by world bigger importers, like China and India, are the cases in point. Both China and India diversified oil imports from Arab nations to Russia. Eventually, Russia emerged the biggest supplier of crude oil to India. It accounted for 35.8 per cent of India's total import of crude oil in 2024-25, against 4.3 per cent in 2021-22 (prior to the outbreak of Russia-Ukraine war). This left India with a big success in overriding the oil price gambling by the Arab world and OPEC.

However, the current major problem of oil and gas supply, due to USA-Israel combined war against Iran, relies more on the blockage of Strait of Hormuz. It is the world's critical chokepoint for movement of oil and gas. It is stretching over 21 miles wide artery, giving 100 vessels move with oil and LNG daily. Nearly, 20-25 per cent of global oil and gas (LNG) are transported through Strait of Hormuz. Hitherto, in any oil war or conflict Hormuz strait was never closed.

## Rural youth unemployment in February 2026 rose to 13.1 per cent

By: Dr Gyan Pathak

Rural youth unemployment in February 2026 rose four months high to 13.1 per cent in Current Weekly Status (CWS), while for urban youths it remained even higher at 18.3 per cent, shows the latest data of the monthly bulletin of Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) for the month of February 2026.

It shows that unemployment among youth of age group 15-29 years in rural areas has been continuously on the rise since November 2025 when it was 12.4 per cent. It rose to 12.6 per cent in December 2025 and 12.8 per cent in January 2026. The trend is quite disconcerting because youth unemployment rose during the reaping of the Kharif and sowing of the Rabi crops, when agricultural activities usually rise.

Unemployment for both the rural male and female youth rose in February. Female youth unemployment in the rural areas was worse than male youth unemployment in the last five months for which the bulletin has provided data. Female youth unemployment in rural areas rose to 14.6 per cent in February from 14.2 per cent in January. It was 13.2 per cent in October 2025, which improved a little during November and December 2025, when it was 12.5 and 12.7 per cent respectively. Male youth unemployment in the rural areas rose from 12.3 per cent in January 2026 to 12.5 per cent in February 2026.

For all age, there was no improvement in the unemployment rate in the rural areas which remained at 4.2 per cent in February as in January. There was little improvement for rural female unemployment which came down to 4 per cent in February from 4.3 per cent in January. However, rural male unemployment worsened to 4.3 per cent in February from 4.1 per cent in January.

Urban youth unemployment improved a little and came down from 18.6 per cent in January to 18.3 per cent in February. It was because female youth unemployment improved from 26.4 per cent in January to 24.9 per cent in February. Nevertheless, male youth unemployment in urban areas rose to 16.1 per cent in February, which was five months high since October 2025. In these five months lowest urban male youth unemployment was in November 2025 when it was 15.3 per cent. For all age group urban unemployment has registered little improvement, which was 7 per cent in January and came down to 6.6 per cent in February. Urban female unemployment came down to 8.7 per cent in February from 9.8 per cent in January. Urban male unemployment also registered a little improvement which came down from 6 per cent in January to 5.9 per cent in February.

All India youth unemployment rate has risen to four months high to 14.8 per cent in February from 14.1 per cent in October 2025. Male youth unemployment rose to 13.7 per cent in February from 13.6 per cent in January. Female youth unemployment came down to 17.6 per cent in February from 17.8 per cent in January. All India unemployment rate improved a little from 5 per cent in January to 4.9 per cent in February. Female unemployment improved to 5.1 per cent in February from 5.6 per cent in January. Male unemployment remained stagnant at 4.8 per cent in January and February. As for Worker Population Ratio (WPR) in CWS, that is the number of persons who worked for at least 1 hour on any day during the 7 days preceding the date of survey, there was little improvement, which rose to 40.3 per cent in February from 40.1 per cent in January. Female WPR during rose from 25.4 per cent in January to 25.7 per cent in February. However male WPR registered a decline to 55 per cent in February, from 55.1 per cent in January.

WPR for youth was very low at 35.9 per cent in February, a marginal decline from 36 per cent in January. WPR for female youth declined from 19.1 per cent in January to 19 per cent in February, while WPR for male youth declined from 53 per cent in January to 52.8 per cent in February. WPR for urban areas in February was 37.2 per cent, 18.6 per cent for female, and 55.2 per cent for male. Low female WPR in urban areas is a serious concern, which is even less at 15.8 per cent for female youth. WPR in rural areas in February was at 41.7 per cent, 29 per cent for female and 54.9 per cent for male. For youth it was 37 per cent, 20.5 per cent for female and 54.1 per cent for male.

Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) in CWS, that the number of persons either employed or unemployed on an average in a week of 7 days preceding the day of survey, was stagnant at 42.3 per cent in January and February. It was 27.1 per cent for female and 57.7 per cent for male in February.

LFPR for youth declined from 42.3 per cent in January to 42.1 per cent in February. Female youth LFPR declined to 23.1 per cent from 23.2 per cent, and male youth LFPR declined from 61.3 per cent to 61.2 per cent.

Urban LFPR remains stagnant at 39.8 per cent since December 2025. Urban female LFPR is stagnant at 20.4 per cent in January and February, while for male it declined from 58.7 per cent 58.6 per cent. (IPA Service)

## The Strategic Arithmetic of Assam's Political Future

As the northeastern sentinel of Assam approaches another decisive electoral moment, the air is thick with the inevitable arithmetic of speculation. However, in the high-stakes theater of Indian politics, numbers are never mere cold statistics; they are the fundamental DNA that determines the tone, texture, and long-term trajectory of governance. In the context of a 126-member Legislative Assembly, the gulf between a 70-seat victory and a 110-seat landslide for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) represents far more than a simple difference in scale. While 70 seats provide a comfortable majority of six above the halfway mark, a 110-seat verdict would signal a transformative consolidation of political authority, effectively redefining the relationship between the executive, the legislature, and the citizenry for decades to come. The distinction is subtle in pure mathematics but profound in its consequence, as it shifts the psychology of the state from one of negotiation and consultation to one of near-total execution and momentum.

A 70-seat victory represents a mandate of strength tempered by the presence of a viable opposition, preserving the essential competitiveness of the democratic system. Under such a scenario, the government can function with confidence while remaining acutely aware that nearly half the electorate stands elsewhere, demanding that the treasury benches govern firmly but remain attentive to dissenting voices. This numerical balance ensures that the opposition, currently led by the Indian National Congress and regional entities like the Asom Jatiya Parishad, would command enough presence to influence debates, scrutinize policy, and hold the executive accountable. In a state as so-

cially layered as Assam—characterized by a complex mosaic of ethnic identities, linguistic anxieties, and historical memories—this moderate majority acts as a form of democratic insurance. It compels a dialogue that is not merely a political luxury but a necessity for maintaining social cohesion amidst a diverse population.

Conversely, a 110-seat landslide would be a transformative event, marking a near-total consolidation of political authority where the opposition shrinks to a largely symbolic presence. In such a legislative environment, the momentum of the ruling party becomes unassailable; legislation moves with unprecedented swiftness, and policy debates are significantly shortened. The Chief Minister's Office, currently headed by Himanta Biswa Sarma, would become the unquestioned nerve center of all decision-making processes. This emboldened executive would have the political capital to pursue structural reforms that weaker governments often hesitate to touch, such as administrative restructuring, land policy changes, and fiscal consolidation. From an economic perspective, investors often interpret such overwhelming mandates as a sign of long-term political stability, potentially accelerating the development of industrial corridors and infrastructure projects that require predictable governance.

There is a compelling economic logic to overwhelming mandates, as they allow a government to pursue a long-term development vision without the constant need to glance over its shoulder at shifting political winds. A 110-seat government could potentially tackle unresolved structural challenges such as recurrent floods, urban congestion in Guwahati, and the in-

dustrial under-diversification that has long hindered the state's growth. With such a massive majority, sensitive reforms in subsidy design, public sector rationalization, and the digitization of service delivery become politically feasible. However, the history of Indian states suggests that such dominance can be a double-edged sword. Paradoxically, when the external opposition is weakened, the theater of contest often moves inside the ruling party itself. Landslides can breed internal rivalries, factional alignments, and leadership positioning that are sometimes more intense and destabilizing than any challenge posed by a traditional opposition party.

In contrast, a 70-seat government operates in an environment where political energy is directed outward toward the opposition rather than inward toward internal dissent. The presence of a competitive equilibrium keeps the ruling party cohesive and its legislators attentive to their specific constituencies. In this model, legislative committees retain their relevance, and opposition amendments, even if ultimately defeated, serve to influence the drafting and tone of new laws. This competitive environment ensures that bureaucrats feel the weight of scrutiny and that media engagement remains vibrant.

While a 110-seat government might move faster, a 70-seat government moves perhaps more sustainably, negotiating reforms rather than imposing them through sheer numerical force. This deliberation has its own inherent democratic virtue, ensuring that policy is reflective of a broader consensus rather than the impulses of a centralized core.

The generational dimension of Assam's electorate further complicates this numerical debate, as a young, aspirational, and

digitally connected population grows increasingly impatient with stagnation. These voters desire rapid employment generation, entrepreneurship opportunities, and the trappings of urban modernity, which a 110-seat government might attempt to deliver through dramatic, large-scale shifts in policy. Yet, the risk of political overconfidence is ever-present in a landslide victory, where loyalty can begin to outweigh competence in candidate selection and the sense of electoral accountability starts to feel distant. Assam's electorate has historically been decisive but never sentimental, having moved through phases of Congress dominance and regional assertion before the rise of the BJP. They have consistently rewarded performance but punished complacency, suggesting that even an overwhelming mandate is a form of conditional trust rather than an unconditional endorsement.

Ultimately, the health of democracy in the Assam frontier will depend less on the specific arithmetic of victory and more on the institutional behavior of the winners in the aftermath of the polls. Whether the government secures 70 seats or 110, the critical questions remain: Will cabinet governance function collectively or be subsumed by a single office? Will civil society voices be heard in the halls of power? If a massive majority produces humility, consultation, and inclusive growth, the state could witness a decade of truly accelerated transformation. However, if it leads to insulation and an impatience with dissent, the seeds of future political backlash may quietly germinate beneath the surface. Numbers confer the authority to rule, but only wisdom and a respect for the democratic space can determine a lasting and positive legacy for the people of Assam. (The writer can be reached at dipakkurmigpltd@gmail.com)

## DEGREE OF THOUGHT

By: Dipak Kurmi

## Agrarian Economy and the Self-Reliance of the Assamese

By: Himangshu Ranjan Bhuyan

The vast abundance of land and water in Assam inherently contains the fundamental basis of our economic self-reliance, yet in reality we have still not been able to transform this immense potential into a strong commercial force. In the present time, instead of considering agriculture merely as a simple means of cultivation, it has become extremely necessary to develop the mindset of accepting it as a large and profitable enterprise. Despite the fact that the economy of our state largely depends on agriculture, it is a profound irony that for daily necessities such as vegetables, fish, meat, and eggs we must constantly depend on other states. This dependence proves that within our society there exists not only a reluctance toward labour, but also a deep systemic weakness in managing the entire agricultural structure in a scientific and rational manner. When the local youth chase the mirage of government jobs and waste their valuable time and labour, people coming from other states lease our fertile fields and earn enormous wealth from them, exposing the poverty of our commercial outlook. There is no scarcity of resources in our land, yet a lack of strategy and patience in converting those resources into economic value through proper technology and planning is evident at every step. Continuing to cultivate the same crops year after year using purely traditional methods makes it completely impossible to survive in today's intensely competitive market, and therefore a radical and realistic transformation is required in which soil testing, the application of modern machinery, and well-planned market management are included. In the modern economic order, any nation or region that cannot produce its own essential food grains can never secure its economic independence, and Assamese society must now deeply realise this harsh truth. We must analyse our agricultural sector not merely through emotion or tradition but through a completely professional and profit-oriented perspective. Economic progress requires hard work and a close commercial relationship with the soil. There is no alternative to modernising agriculture if we wish to improve the standard of our daily lives. The field must not be treated merely as a factory for producing rice; rather it must be developed into a multifaceted economic centre where crops are selected in accordance with market demand in every season, abandoning outdated assumptions entirely.

For the Assamese youth who are struggling amidst the severe crisis of unemployment, the only stable and dignified solution lies in agriculture-based enterprises and the widespread application of modern agricultural practices. Within our social system, a person who cultivates the land is still given far less respect than a government employee who receives even a modest salary, and as a result highly educated young men and women feel deep embarrassment and inferiority in entering the fields and working with their hands. This irrational and baseless social mindset stands as the greatest and strongest obstacle in the path of our overall economic progress. If a young person can travel to another state and perform strenuous work such as that of a security guard for a small wage, then why should he feel hesitation in scientifically engaging in fish farming, poultry farming, or other agricultural activities in his own courtyard or fertile land? This is a crucial question whose answer lies within our own social outlook. The fundamental strength of an agrarian economy is continuous productivity, and for that we require a healthy, strong, and hardworking culture of labour. While farmers in other states have been able to feed the entire nation through modern technology and relentless effort, a rigorous and rational analysis is necessary to understand why we have failed to do so despite our fertile land. No community can ever become self-reliant merely by depending on government subsidies, grants, or the generosity of others; it is essential that every farmer possesses an independent entrepreneurial spirit and a farsighted commercial vision. If we continue to leave our valuable land idle for half of the year under the name of traditional cultivation, economic development will never be possible. Only through crop diversification according to the seasons and the adoption of multi-dimensional agricultural practices will real wealth flow into Assamese hands, and our vast market will be liberated from the monopoly of traders from other states. Such a transformation requires an intellectual awakening in which the dignity of labour is placed above all else and agriculture is recognised as an honourable profession. When educated youth apply their knowledge and technology in the agricultural fields,

only then will our economy gain new momentum and the unemployment crisis find a lasting remedy.

Another extremely distressing and disappointing aspect of Assam's agrarian economy lies in the overwhelming dominance and control of middlemen within the market system. The simple farmers who toil day and night and produce crops through backbreaking labour rarely receive the rightful price for their produce, because the entire process through which goods move from the production site to the consumer remains captured by a group of clever traders. A farmer who is forced to sell his products at a minimal price in the field sees those same products being sold to consumers in the market at several times the price, clearly demonstrating the severe failure of our defective market management system. For a lasting solution to this deep problem, farmers must unite rather than operate individually, forming strong groups or cooperatives through which their produce can be delivered directly to consumers through well-planned systems. In this rapidly advancing age of digital technology, the enormous potential of online markets can be utilised by our educated and technology-friendly society to establish direct connections between rural farmers and urban consumers with purchasing power, thereby eliminating the influence of middlemen entirely. Furthermore, due to the acute shortage of modern cold storage facilities, tons of valuable vegetables and fruits rot in the fields every year, causing irreparable economic loss to our state. At the governmental level, such essential infrastructure must be constructed rapidly, and the private sector should also be encouraged to make large investments in this area. Unless hardworking farmers receive absolute assurance that they will obtain fair prices for their produce, attracting a new and educated generation toward agriculture will remain nearly impossible. Therefore, for true economic self-reliance, emphasis must be placed not only on increasing production but also on building a healthy, transparent, competitive, and farmer-friendly market system alongside it. Only by overcoming this major challenge will our economy find its proper direction.

Rather than restricting themselves solely to traditional cultivation, Assamese farmers must now pay close attention to cash crops and horticultural crops that provide higher value addition, as this has become a pressing demand of the time. The unique climate and soil quality of our state are extremely suitable for a variety of indigenous spices, fruits, and medicinal plants that enjoy enormous demand across the country and even in international markets. Yet it is deeply unfortunate that we still lag far behind in producing these valuable resources scientifically and on a large commercial scale. To strengthen the agrarian economy, we must not stop merely at producing raw materials; instead, we must place maximum emphasis on value addition through processing. If raw products are processed into various high-quality consumer goods before reaching the market, the profits of farmers will undoubtedly increase dramatically. For this purpose, a broad and well-planned system must be adopted to establish small and medium-scale agro-processing units throughout the villages of the state. When our locally produced goods become available in major national and international markets under reliable brand names with scientific packaging, only then will the dream of genuine economic self-reliance for the Assamese people be realised. Throughout this entire process, government departments and related institutions must not confine themselves to office files; rather, they must go directly to the fields, assist farmers practically, and provide hands-on knowledge about new technologies. The true professional responsibility of officials in the agriculture department is not to sit inside air-conditioned rooms but to identify real problems in the field, find immediate solutions, and constantly encourage farmers to increase productivity.

The significant role played by livestock and fisheries within the overall economic history and present context of Assam cannot be ignored under any circumstances, although today this entire sector has become almost completely dependent on the control and goodwill of traders from outside the state. Every day fish, meat, and eggs worth crores of rupees enter our state from outside, while our own local water resources, natural wetlands, thousands of ponds, and fields remain unproductive due to poor management. In the traditional rural economy of the past, almost every household had its own sources of production from which people obtained their daily nutritional needs and sustained their livelihoods. But in the name of modernity and convenience, we gradually lost that invaluable self-reliance and transformed ourselves into a purely

consumer class. Now even ordinary villagers must purchase chemically treated vegetables and artificially preserved fish from the market, which represents a grave misfortune within our economic structure. This dependence not only harms our physical health but also continuously drains enormous sums of hard-earned money out of the state, making us poorer every day. If our youth collectively begin scientific and professional fish farming, dairy production, and other livestock activities, it will not take long for us to become self-sufficient in these sectors and stop the outflow of wealth from the state. If we can build a reliable network for collecting and marketing milk and other products through strong cooperative systems, the entire rural economy will acquire a new dimension. The true meaning of economic self-reliance lies in standing firmly on one's own feet, and the best path before us is the optimal and sustainable utilisation of the natural resources surrounding us.

Natural disasters, particularly floods and river erosion, remain major challenges for agriculture in Assam, yet using them merely as excuses to remain inactive can never be justified. Many developed nations around the world have achieved remarkable and globally recognised agricultural success despite harsh environmental conditions and natural adversities through scientific innovation; therefore, the question naturally arises—why can we not do the same? Our agricultural methods and cropping calendar must be strategically adjusted according to the seasonal patterns of flooding so that losses can be minimised. During the long periods when floods are absent, we must master effective strategies such as extensive cultivation of rabi crops through modern irrigation systems in order to compensate for monsoon losses. Rapid improvement of irrigation facilities is essential so that cultivation can continue even during dry periods, and providing farmers with necessary modern equipment and technology in this regard is a major responsibility of the government. In the age of modern science, the widespread adoption of advanced techniques capable of producing higher yields with minimal water is essential. Moreover, the fresh alluvial soil brought by annual floods actually acts as a natural fertiliser for the next cultivation cycle, and we must learn how to use it effectively. The real problem does not lie within nature itself; it lies within our mentality and our severe lack of long-term planning. If we can utilise our available water resources properly and systematically, overcoming natural obstacles will not be impossible for us. Overall economic development demands far-sighted thinking, immense patience, and an indomitable spirit of hard work in all circumstances. Simply blaming nature or circumstances while avoiding our responsibilities will only push us further toward economic decline, and therefore we must accept reality and strengthen our economic foundation through modern agriculture while time still remains.

Transforming the overall economic structure of Assamese society also requires a comprehensive and profound reform of our current education system, where practical life skills are given equal importance alongside theoretical knowledge. The present system of education has largely turned us into machines that search for jobs, whereas what we truly need is a generation capable of creating employment and standing independently on its own feet. From childhood, students must be made aware of the qualities of soil, the basic knowledge of agriculture, and the dignity of labour so that they do not view farming as an inferior profession in the future. Until an educated young person can proudly and confidently declare before society that he is a progressive farmer, we cannot claim that the economic mindset of our society has genuinely changed. To transform the immense natural potential that lies before our eyes into reality requires hard work, honesty, perseverance, and a thoroughly scientific outlook that must become an integral part of our collective national character. If the Assamese people wish to live with dignity and establish themselves as a strong economic force in the competitive global arena, we must once again return to our roots—our golden fields. In this challenging yet promising journey toward economic self-reliance, every Assamese individual must participate actively and sincerely. If we continue to remain asleep and fail to respond to the urgency of time, future generations will never forgive us, and we may ultimately be forced to live like refugees in our own fertile homeland. Therefore, abandoning hesitation and social inertia, we must unite and resolve to transform our fertile soil into an economic power and continuously strive to build a truly prosperous, strong, and self-reliant Assam.

Pak targets Taliban installations

Afghan govt says 400 killed in attack on hospital

ISLAMABAD, March 17: Pakistan overnight carried out "precision airstrikes" targeting what it described as terrorists and their support infrastructure locations across Afghanistan...

Monday night's bombardment by Pakistan targeted a drug rehabilitation centre in the Afghan capital, resulting in the death of at least 400 people.

In a post on X, Fitrat said the strike destroyed large sections of the hospital and rescue teams were trying to recover the bodies from the rubble.

Citing health officials at the hospital, TOLOnews Tuesday reported that more than 50 bodies are still believed to be trapped under the debris as rescue operations continue.

The airstrike destroyed five blocks of the rehabilitation compound, where up to 3,000 patients were receiving treatment, it said.

Deputy Interior Minister Muhammad Nabi Omari, who visited the site, said that Pakistan "has undertaken a project to kill Afghans."

Zabihullah Mujahid, the spokesperson for the Afghan government, said his country will respond forcefully to Pakistan's aggression.

Tarar, however, claimed that Pakistan "precisely targeted military installations and terrorist support infrastructure", including technical equipment storage and ammunition storage of Afghan Taliban and Fitna al-Khawarij in Kabul and Nangarhar that were being used against innocent Pakistani civilians.

Fitna al-Khawarij is a term the state uses to refer to the banned Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).

"False claims made by the propagandists of the Taliban regime cannot fool the Afghans and the World from their heinous actions supporting and



sponsoring terrorism in the region," he said.

According to the data shared by Tarar, 684 Afghan Taliban operatives have been killed and another 912 injured so far.

He said their 252 posts had been destroyed, while 44 were captured and then destroyed. He added that 229 tanks, armoured vehicles, and artillery guns of the Taliban regime had been destroyed.

Nearly 73 "terrorists and their support infrastruc-

ture locations across Afghanistan have been effectively targeted", he added.

In a statement, Pakistan's information ministry said that the post-strike detonation of stored ammunition being used by the master terror proxy fully contradicted the Afghan Taliban's claim.

The ministry also rejected the Taliban statement that Pakistan strikes hit civilians, adding that Pakistan's targeting is "precise and carefully undertaken" to ensure no collateral damage is inflicted.

"This misreporting of facts as a drug rehabilitation facility seeks to stir sentiments, covering illegitimate support to cross-border terrorism," the ministry said.

Separately, security sources said that in the Afghan province of Nangarhar, Pakistani forces targeted the Afghan Taliban's military installations at four spots. Logistics, ammunition and technical infrastructure adjacent to these installations were also destroyed, the sources added.

They further said a drone assembly workshop, "headquarters from where drones were sent," and weapon stocks were also destroyed in Nangarhar and Kabul.

According to the sources, drones were prepared at those workshops using parts made in Israel.

Six targets had been successfully targeted in Kabul and Nangarhar, they said, adding that there were also reports of several terrorists having been killed.

Earlier, the armed forces in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Kurram sector targeted and destroyed important Afghan Taliban and Fitna al-Khawarij hideouts, security sources said.

"During these operations, several khawarij were killed while the rest managed to escape," a security source said.

The armed forces also destroyed Afghan Taliban posts across the Pak-Afghan border in KP's Bajaur sector, security sources said, adding that the forces targeted Afghan Taliban posts with "guided missiles". (PTI)

Judge blocks US govt from slimming down vaccine recommendations

WASHINGTON, March 17: A federal judge on Monday temporarily blocked federal health officials from cutting the number of vaccines recommended for every child, and said U.S. Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. likely violated federal procedures in revamping a key vaccine advisory committee.

The decision halted an order by Kennedy — announced in January — to end broad recommendations for all children to be vaccinated against flu, rotavirus, hepatitis A, hepatitis B, some forms of meningitis and RSV.

It also stopped a meeting of a Kennedy-appointed vaccine advisory committee, which was set to convene this week in Atlanta.

The judge's order, however, is not the final word. The blocks are temporary, pending either a trial or a decision for summary judgment.

Federal health officials indicated they planned to appeal.

"HHS looks forward to this judge's decision being overturned just like his other attempts to keep the Trump administration from governing," said Department of Health and Human Services spokesman Andrew Nixon.

The order issued Monday is the latest development in a lawsuit filed last July by the American Academy of Pediatrics and some other medical groups. The lawsuit in federal court in Boston originally focused on Kennedy's decision to stop recommending COVID-19 vaccinations for most children and pregnant women.

The lawsuit was updated as Kennedy took more steps that alarmed medical societies, causing the plaintiffs to ask Judge Brian E. Murphy to take steps to address those policy changes too.

For example, the plaintiffs amended the lawsuit to stop the scaling back of the nation's childhood vaccination schedule. They also asked the court to look at Kennedy's actions concerning the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices, which advises public health officials on what vaccines to recommend to doctors and patients.

Kennedy, a leading anti-vaccine

activist before becoming the nation's top health official, fired the entire 17-member panel last year and replaced it with a group that includes several anti-vaccine voices.

Murphy, who was nominated to the bench by President Joe Biden, said Kennedy's reconstitution of ACIP likely violated federal law. He ordered the appointments — and all decisions made by the reformed committee — put on hold.

The ACIP was scheduled to meet this week to discuss COVID-19 vaccine safety, among other issues, but that gathering was postponed, officials said.

"ACIP as currently constituted cannot meet," said Richard Hughes IV, an attorney representing the AAP. "How can a committee meet without nearly the entirety of its membership?"

Jason Schwartz, a Yale University vaccine policy expert who has studied the committee, called the halting of an ACIP meeting for legal reasons "unprecedented" in its 62-year existence.

Hughes called the judge's order "a momentous step toward restoring science-based vaccine policy," and he was echoed by leaders of several doctors' groups and public health organizations.

When Trump administration officials overhauled the childhood vaccine schedule, they said it wouldn't result in families losing access to them or cause insurers to stop covering them. But it left many Americans confused, as doctors' groups, public health organizations and many states continued to recommend licensed vaccines, said Dr. Andrew Racine, president of the American Academy of Pediatrics.

Several doctors' groups said the changes were not based on good evidence, and advised doctors and patients to follow guidance that was previously in place. Health officials in 30 states have rejected at least some of the new recommendations.

The judge's order should bring clarity, Racine said.

"If anyone has any questions about what's the appropriate vaccine schedule for their children, the best thing to do is to talk to their pediatricians," he said. (AP)

Brazilian police release 3 Israeli tourists. Flags and chants against Israel's campaign against Hamas in Gaza

SAO PAULO, March 17: Brazilian police released on Monday three Israeli tourists who this weekend were involved in a disturbance with pro-Palestine residents of a beachfront city in the country's tropical northeast.

Bahia state police said in a statement that three men between ages 21 and 22 insulted officers and resisted arrest after they "conflicted with a group of people during a pro-Palestine demonstration" in Itacare, a city of 30,000 residents that has become a travel spot for former Israeli soldiers.

Itacare lies 1,340 kilometers (832 miles) north of Rio de Janeiro.

The protest on Saturday went viral on Brazilian social media and showed the Israeli tourists clashing with residents who questioned their presence in the city.

Another demonstration that showed locals being favorable to the foreign visitors took place the same day, police said.

Several people involved in the protest against the Israeli tourists featured Palestinian flags and chants against Israel's campaign against Hamas in Gaza, which killed more than 72,000 Palestinians since its start. (AP)

India hits out at Pak over Ahmadiyya persecution, air-bombings against Afghan in UNGA

UNITED NATIONS, March 17: India called out Pakistan for its habit of "fabricating imaginative" tales of Islamophobia in neighbouring countries, questioning how Islamabad's own brutal repression of Ahmadiyyas or air-bombing campaigns during Ramadan against Afghanistan can be characterised as...

"India's western neighbour is an excellent example of fabricating imaginative tales of Islamophobia in their neighbourhood," India's Permanent Representative to the UN Ambassador Parvathaneni Harish said.

"One wonders what would brutal repression of Ahmadiyyas in this country be termed, or the large-scale rolefoulement of the helpless Afghans or air-bombing campaigns in this Holy Month of Ramadan?" Harish said.

Harish was addressing the UN General Assembly commemoration of the International Day to Combat Islamophobia on Monday.

In a strong retort, he also said that the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, which "our western neighbour has systematically attempted to weaponise against India", has repeatedly made false and baseless allegations against my country.

He stressed that it is important for the UN to take note of the rising



discrimination. "The philosophy of 'Sarva Dharma Sambhava' implying equal respect for all religions has been the civilisational way of life for India and one that inspired the secular ethos of the Indian Constitution," he said.

Harish noted that the United Nations' greatest contribution to peace and human dignity lies in its efforts to maintain international peace and security, bringing everlasting peace in conflict situations, its development work and humanitarian action, and its promotion of universal human rights - work that is conducted without regard to the faith of those it serves.

"Global public goods, like sunshine, should be available to one and all, irrespective of affiliations. The UN has built its credibility through tireless work on conflict resolution, poverty alleviation, and protection of civilians. We urge the UN to remain anchored to this founding spirit," he said.

India reaffirmed its commitment to a world free from religious hatred and violence in all its forms. "We urge the UN to channel its time and limited resources towards building inclusive societies grounded in equality, dignity, and the rule of law - for every individual of every faith," Harish said. (PTI)

sation of religion does not solve and resolve grievances; however well-intentioned, they risk lending legitimacy to precisely this kind of selective, polarising narratives that breed further division.

"The United Nations was conceived as an institution that transcends religion, culture, and politics. Its credibility rests on universality and impartiality. We, therefore, urge caution against frameworks that exclusively focus on one faith, without addressing the broader phenomenon of religio-phobia in all its manifestations," he said.

India noted that the 1981 Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief remains a very balanced and enduring instrument that enshrines the rights of all religious followers without privileging any.

India also strongly condemned violence and hatred in the name of religion, regardless of the religion in question. As a nation where followers of virtually every major world religion coexist peacefully and a nation that has given birth to four major world religions, namely Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism, India, more than any other country, is acutely aware of the need for a world free from religious

Last protester in immigration detention after Trump's campus crackdown released

NEW YORK, March 17: A Palestinian woman who was the last person still in immigration detention after the Trump administration's 2025 crackdown on pro-Palestinian activists was released Monday after a year in custody, according to her lawyers.

Leqaa Kordia, a 33-year-old from the West Bank who has lived in New Jersey since 2016, had been held in a U.S. immigration detention center in Texas since last March. Kordia was among roughly 100 people arrested outside Columbia University during protests at the school in 2024.

An immigration judge had ordered her released on bond three times. The government challenged the first two rulings, but Kordia was freed Monday after it did not challenge the third.

She was recently hospitalized for three days following a seizure after fainting and hitting her head at the privately run detention facility. Kordia said she joined the 2024 demonstration after Israel killed scores of her relatives in Gaza, where she maintains deep personal ties. "My way of helping my family and my people was to go to the streets," she told The Associated Press in October.

The charges against her for the protest were dismissed and sealed. Information about her arrest was later given to the Trump administration by the New York City Police Department, which said it was told the records were needed as part of a money laundering investigation.

Kordia was arrested during a March 13, 2025, check-in with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement in New Jersey. She was detained immediately and flown to Prairieland Detention Center, south of Dallas. She was among a number of people arrested after the Trump administration began using its immigration enforcement powers on noncitizens who had criticized or protested Israel's military actions in Gaza, many students and scholars at American universities.

Also among them was Mahmoud Khalil, a former Columbia University graduate student who was arrested last March and spent three months detained in a Louisiana immigration jail before being freed.

But while arrests of campus activists like Khalil drew condemnation from elected officials and advocates, Kordia was not a student or part of a group that might have provided support, so her case remained largely out of the public eye.

Federal officials have accused Kordia of overstaying her visa, while scrutinizing payments she sent to relatives in the Middle East. Kordia said the money was meant to help family members suffering during the war.

An immigration judge found "overwhelming evidence" that Kordia was telling the truth about the payments. (AP)

problems continue to deepen. The deputy prime minister of the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Foreign Investment, Oscar Pérez-Oliva Fraga, told reporters Monday that Cuba is open to trading with U.S. companies while noting the embargo's limitations.

He said he's also implementing new measures aimed at boosting the island's economy. Among those is the possibility of allowing Cubans residing abroad to be partners or owners of private companies in the country and to be involved in large-scale projects, including those related to infrastructure, according to state media.

He said those Cubans will be allowed to partner with Cuban private companies and establish ties with both state-owned and private Cuban entities.

Pérez-Oliva added that the government also will grant land usufruct for the development of certain projects.

He said Cubans residing abroad also will be able to open foreign currency bank accounts in Cuban banks, which will facilitate transactions. (AP)

Islandwide blackout hits Cuba as island struggles with deepening energy crisis

HAVANA, March 17: Officials in Cuba reported an islandwide blackout Monday in the country of some 11 million people as its energy and economic crises deepen and its power grid continues to crumble.

The Ministry of Energy and Mines on X noted a "complete disconnection" of the country's electrical system and said it was investigating, noting there were no failures in the units that were operating when the grid collapsed.

It was the third major blackout in Cuba over the past four months.

Tomás David Velázquez Felipe, a 61-year-old resident of Havana, said the relentless outages make him think that Cubans who can should just pack up and leave the island. "What little we have to eat spoils," he said. "Our people are too old to keep suffering."

By Monday evening, state-owned media reported that crews had restored power to 2% of Havana's residents, representing some 18,000 customers, as well as a handful of hospitals across the island. Officials said they would prioritize the communications sector next, all while warning that the

small circuits restored so far could fail again.

Cuba's aging grid has drastically eroded in recent years, leading to an increase in daily outages and island-wide blackouts. But the government also has blamed its woes on a U.S. energy blockade after U.S. President Donald Trump in January warned of tariffs on any country that sells or provides oil to Cuba. The Trump administration is demanding that Cuba release political prisoners and move toward political and economic liberalization in return for a lifting of sanctions. Trump also has raised the possibility of a "friendly takeover of Cuba."

On Monday, he said he believes he'll have the "honor of taking Cuba."

"I mean, whether I free it, take it. I think I could do anything I want with it," Trump said about Cuba, calling it a "very weakened nation."

The U.S. Embassy in Cuba wrote on X on Monday that "there is no information on when power would be restored."

"Cuba's national electrical grid is increasingly unstable and prolonged scheduled and unscheduled



power outages are a daily occurrence across the country," it wrote. "Take precautions by conserving fuel, water, food, and mobile phone charge, and be prepared for significant disruption."

Grinding blackouts: William LeoGrande, a professor at American University who has tracked Cuba for years, said the country's energy grid hasn't been maintained properly and its infrastructure is "way past its normal useful life."

"The technicians working on the grid are magicians to keep it running at all given the shape that it's in," LeoGrande said.

LeoGrande said that if the island drastically reduces consumption and expands renewables, it can struggle along for a while without oil shipments. "But it would be constant misery for the general popula-

tion, and eventually, the economy could collapse just completely and then you would have social chaos and probably mass migration," he said.

To ramp up solar power even faster than Cuba did last year, LeoGrande said other countries, principally China, would have to be willing to double or more their provision of such equipment.

Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel on Friday said the island had not received oil shipments in three months and was operating on solar power, natural gas and thermoelectric plants, and that the government has had to postpone surgeries for tens of thousands of people.

Yaimisel Sánchez Peña, 48, said she was upset that the food she buys with money that her son in the U.S. sends keeps spoiling, adding that the outages also affect her 72-year-old mother: "Every day, she suffers."

Mercedes Velázquez, a 71-year-old Cuban resident, lamented yet another blackout. "We're here waiting to see what happens," she said, adding that she recently gave away part of a soup she made while it was

still fresh so as not to throw it out. "Everything goes bad."

"A perfect storm of collapse": A massive outage over a week ago affected the island's west, leaving millions without power. Another major blackout affected western Cuba in early December.

Critical oil shipments from Venezuela were halted after the U.S. attacked the South American country in early January and arrested its then-president, Nicolás Maduro.

While Cuba produces 40% of its petroleum and has been generating its own power, it hasn't been sufficient to meet demand as its electric grid continues to crumble.

"And on top of all that, the Cuban government doesn't have the hard currency to import spare parts or upgrade the plant or grid itself. It's just a perfect storm of collapse," LeoGrande said.

He noted that the thermoelectric plants also have been using heavy oil, whose sulfur content is corroding the equipment.

On Friday, Díaz-Canel confirmed that Cuba was holding talks with the U.S. government as the

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# Five Congress MLAs 'cross-vote'

## BJP's Bhatia, Cong's Boudh win as counting goes past midnight

**CHANDIGARH, March 17:** BJP's Sanjay Bhatia and Karamvir Singh Boudh of the Congress were elected to the Rajya Sabha from Haryana after the counting for the keenly-watched twin seats went past midnight following allegations of violation of vote secrecy by both sides, officials said on Tuesday.

It was a narrow win for Boudh over Independent candidate Satish Nandal (63), as cross-voting dented the otherwise comfortable position of the Congress for securing an easy victory.

While BJP's Bhatia (58) is a former Lok Sabha MP from Karnal, Boudh (61) is a retired Haryana government employee and a prominent Dalit activist, currently serving as the coordinator of the National Scheduled Castes Department of the Congress.

The two legislators of the Indian National Lok Dal (INLD) abstained from voting, reducing the number of valid votes to 88 in the 90-member Haryana Assembly at the beginning of polling.

Five votes were later declared invalid — four of the Congress and one of the BJP, the officials said.

INLD leaders Abhay Singh Chautala and Aditya Devi Lal said the party decided to abstain keeping people's sentiments in view.

After both the Congress and the BJP approached the Election Commission alleging violation of vote secrecy, the poll panel declared Congress MLA Paramvir Singh's vote as invalid.

Bhatia won the first seat comfortably, polling 39 first-preference votes.

In the fight for the second seat, Boudh polled 28 votes, while Independent candidate Nandal got 16.

As per the formula devised for Rajya Sabha polls, the quota required to win one seat was 2,767 (vote value), and both Bhatia and Boudh crossed that limit, leaving no room for any further transfer of votes.

However, with five Congress MLAs allegedly cross-voting, Nandal could have secured Bhatia's 11 second preference votes,

reaching 28, had one more Congress legislator cross-voted in the Independent candidate's favour, sources said.

Taking strict note of the matter, Congress general secretary in charge of Haryana, B K Hariprasad, told PTI over the phone that the party will issue show-cause notices to its MLAs who allegedly cross-voted.

In the Rajya Sabha polls held in Haryana in 2016 and 2022, two BJP-backed Independents had won despite the Congress nominee and the candidate backed by it having the required numbers.

In 2022, Congress candidate Ajay Maken lost to Independent candidate Kartikeya Sharma, backed by the BJP and the JJP, despite the Congress having the required strength of 31 to win the seat.

However, the results went in the Independent candidate's favour after then-Congress legislator Kuldeep Bishnoi, who is now with the BJP, cross-voted, while another vote was declared invalid.

In 2016, the votes of 14 Congress MLAs were declared invalid, leading to the defeat of a party-backed Independent candidate, who was expected to win.

Congratulating the winning candidates in a late-night press conference, Chief Minister Saini said, "Nandal lost by just one vote (referring to the narrow difference). Five Congress MLAs cross-voted. Four of their votes were rejected."

Nandal's candidature was proposed by three Independent MLAs, with the BJP backing him for the second seat. He had unsuccessfully contested the 2019 Assembly polls as a BJP nominee.

Asked about 'cross-voting' by five of his party MLAs, state Congress chief Rao Narendra Singh told reporters, "Those who betrayed the Congress will face strict action."

The leader of opposition in the Haryana Assembly, Bhupinder Singh Hooda, told reporters that while he will not take names (of those who cross-voted), "people have un-



**HARYANA RS POLLS**

derstood". Attacking the BJP, Hooda said, "They tried all tactics. But Congress passed the 'Agni Pariksha' (to win one seat)."

"Pratyantra" (democracy) has won, and 'vote chori' has lost. Right from the beginning, one seat each belonged to the Congress and the BJP. But the BJP tried to steal votes for the third candidate," Hooda alleged.

The Congress veteran also alleged that the conduct of the returning officer was partisan.

Boudh thanked the party's central leadership, Hooda and other state leaders for his victory.

Chief Minister Saini, on his part, accused the Congress of holding its MLAs captive and transferring them to different places, referring to the shifting of Congress legislators to Himachal Pradesh just a few days before the Rajya Sabha polls.

The Congress MLAs returned to Chandigarh on Monday morning, hours before the elections got underway.

"For the first time, I saw the Congress not trusting its own MLAs. The Congress is finished, it has no future," Saini said.

The chief minister also lashed out at the INLD for abstaining from voting, saying it acted as a B team of the Congress.

The INLD indirectly supported the Congress, Saini claimed, adding that if it did not want to support the BJP, it could have voted for the Independent candidate.

The counting of votes, which was to take place at 5 pm on Monday after voting ended at 4 pm, began after a delay of more than five hours, with the Congress and the BJP lodging complaints of violation of vote secrecy.

Earlier, state minister Krishan Kumar Bedi told reporters that the BJP had complained to the Election Commission, flag-

ging "violation" of vote secrecy by two Congress MLAs — Bharat Singh Beniwal and Paramvir Singh.

"Two Congress MLAs did not have their ballots folded as per the rules, in violation of the secrecy of their votes. We have raised the issue with the Election Commission," Bedi said.

However, Congress leader Ashok Arora said no objections were raised when the two legislators voted, claiming that the complaint was deliberately filed after 4 pm.

He also said the Congress has filed a complaint against senior BJP leader and state minister Anil Vij, accusing him of violating vote secrecy.

Congress candidate Boudh, meanwhile, has filed a complaint with the poll panel against the returning officer for alleged partisan conduct.

On Monday night, Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge wrote to Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar, alleging an attempt to interfere with the integrity of the Rajya Sabha elections and seeking time for a party delegation to meet Kumar.

Kharge also attached a copy of the representation submitted to the EC by Boudh.

"There is a clear attempt to interfere with the integrity of the election, and it must be stopped/redressed by the EC immediately. Furthermore, no disqualification of our legitimate voters/votes can be allowed in what is clearly a transparent attempt to taint/derail the process," the letter read.

"Given the time-sensitive nature of the matter, we request time for a delegation led by Abhishek Manu Singhvi, along with senior party leaders, to meet your good self before the declaration of results," it added.

In the 90-member Haryana Assembly, the BJP has 48 MLAs, the Congress 37, the INLD two, while three legislators are Independents.

The two Rajya Sabha seats fell vacant with BJP members Kiran Choudhry and Ram Chander Jangra set to complete their terms on April 9. (PTI)

## Parl panel tells govt to prepare formal strategic document that articulates foreign policy objectives

**NEW DELHI, March 17:** A parliamentary panel on external affairs has strongly recommended the government to take up on priority the preparation of a formal strategic document that clearly articulates India's foreign policy objectives, and flagged that its absence is a "significant gap" for a country with such global stature, ambitions and expanding international engagement.

The committee, in its report presented in Parliament on Tuesday, also noted that the introduction of Overseas Mobility (Facilitation and Welfare) Bill, 2025 has "remained pending" despite the completion of the panel's feedback, and recommended that the Centre treat the introduction of the new emigration Bill as a "legislative priority" and introduce it in Parliament at the earliest opportunity.

The Committee of External Affairs is headed by Congress MP Shashi Tharoor.

The 'Twelfth Report of the Committee on External Affairs (2025-26) on Demands for Grants (2026-27)' of the Ministry of External Affairs, contains 62 recommendations, ranging from budgetary allocation to passport facilities.

One of the key recommendations is that the MEA "must articulate a formal foreign policy document" or a grand strategy.

"The Committee note that with regard to formulating a grand strategy or a comprehensive foreign policy document that clearly articulates India's foreign policy objectives, goals, and long-term strategic approach, the Ministry submitted that no single overarching and formalised strategic document currently exists, and that India's diplomatic principles and priorities are expressed through various platforms," the report says.

The panel in its report also furnished a list of 36 countries which have such a strategic document.

These include major powers such as the US, the UK, Germany, Japan, and Russia, as well as smaller nations such as Estonia, New Zealand, Slovenia, and Bhutan, and they have published formal foreign policy or national security strategy documents laying out their international objectives, priorities, and approaches in a single accessible document, it says.

"The Committee are of the considered view that the absence of a formal, publicly available foreign policy document is a significant gap for a country of India's global stature, ambitions, and expanding international engagement," it flagged.

The panel said the MEA's Annual Report, while comprehensive and valuable, as a record of the previous year's diplomatic activities, is "inherently a retrospective document".

"It is not a forward-looking strategic document that articulates where India seeks to go in the world, what its priorities are, and how it intends to pursue them over the medium to long term," the report adds. The MEA's Planning Policy & Research Division (PP&R Division) is in charge of the publication of the Annual Report of the ministry that continues to be its "most comprehensive policy publication" in the public domain. (PTI)

## Panel submits report on Uniform Civil Code to Gujarat CM

Govt may table draft bill in assembly soon

**GANDHINAGAR, March 17:** A five-member committee constituted by the Gujarat government to draft the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) for the state submitted its detailed and final report to Chief Minister Bhupendra Patel on Tuesday.

The state government is likely to table a draft bill on the UCC in the legislative assembly during the ongoing budget session.

The committee, chaired by retired Supreme Court judge Justice Ranjana Prakash Desai, made a presentation while submitting its report to the CM.

The government had formed the panel in February last year to explore various aspects related to the implementation of the UCC in the state and prepare a draft bill for the same.

During the presentation, the panel's chairperson said it has suggested a common legal framework for all religions and communities on issues like marriage, divorce, inheritance and adoption in the report, a government release stated.

In particular, equal rights and protection of women have been given priority, it said.

Retired senior IAS officer C L



Meena, senior advocate R C Kodekar, former Vice Chancellor of Veer Narmad South Gujarat University Dr Dakshesh Thakar, and social worker Gita Shroff are other members of the committee. Sources said the state government may bring the draft bill on the UCC in the legislative assembly on March 25, the last day of the ongoing budget session.

At the time of the formation of the committee, the CM had said the state government was committed to fulfill Prime Minister Narendra Modi's resolve of implementing UCC across the country.

CM Patel had also said the five-

member committee would examine various aspects related to UCC and take into account views of people from different walks of life to prepare its report.

Initially, the panel was expected to submit its report in 45 days after examining various aspects. Later, the committee was given extensions. In August last year, the state government had said the panel held meetings with 38 Muslim organisations to understand their point of view on this proposed legislation.

The committee members travelled to all the districts of Gujarat and collected feedback from political and religious leaders, the state government had said.

People also expressed their opinions regarding UCC on a website created specifically for this reason and nearly 19 lakh suggestions were received by the panel, according to the government.

Despite the government's assurance, people from the Muslim community had registered their protest against the proposed UCC by forming human chains in Ahmedabad and Vadodara city of Gujarat in April 2025.

In December last year, the Gujarat High Court had rejected a plea challenging the constitution of a committee by the state government to assess the need for a UCC in the state.

While rejecting the appeal filed by Surat-based petitioner Abdul Vahab Sopariwala, the HC had held that the court cannot interfere into the executive functions as laid down under Article 162 of the Constitution.

"Under Article 162 of the Constitution, the government holds such power. So, the separation of power principle has to apply. We do not have any power of judicial review in such functions which are purely in the domain of the state," the bench said. (PTI)

## TMC to contest 291 of 294 seats in Bengal polls, confident of winning over 226: Mamata

**KOLKATA, March 17:** The ruling TMC on Tuesday announced its list of candidates for the upcoming West Bengal assembly elections, with party supremo and Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee declaring that the party will contest 291 of the 294 seats in the state.

Addressing a press conference in Kolkata, Banerjee said the remaining three seats in the Darjeeling hills will be contested by Anit Thapa-led Bharatiya Gorkha Prajatantrik Morcha (BGPM).

"We will contest 291 of the 294 seats. The remaining three seats will be contested by our ally, Anit Thapa-led BGPM, in the Darjeeling hills,"

Banerjee said, while announcing the names of candidates, flanked by the party's national general secretary Abhishek Banerjee and state president Subrata Bakshi. Banerjee expressed confidence that the TMC would retain power with a comfortable majority in the 2026 assembly elections.

"We will win more than 226 seats in the 2026 assembly polls," she asserted.

The chief minister also sought to reassure party leaders and workers who could not find a place in the candidate list, saying they would be accommodated in the organisation. "All those who could not be accommodated in the candidate list will be accommodated in the organisation," she said.

Targeting the opposition Bharatiya Janata Party, Banerjee said the saffron party would see its numbers decline in the upcoming polls.

"The BJP's tally will decrease in this election. They will receive a befitting reply for their anti-people policies," she said.

The announcement of the candidates sets the stage for an intense electoral contest in West Bengal, where the TMC is seeking to return to power for a fourth consecutive term. (PTI)



## West Asia crisis: India's second LPG carrier 'Nanda Devi' arrives at Gujarat port

**AHMEDABAD, March 17:** India's second LPG carrier 'Nanda Devi' arrived safely at Vadinar port in Gujarat on Tuesday, carrying 46,500 metric tonnes of gas after navigating the Strait of Hormuz amid the West Asia conflict, an official said.

The first ship, 'Shivalik', reached Mundra Port in Gujarat on Monday.

'Nanda Devi' has docked at Vadinar port in Devbhumi Dwarka district, and preparations were being made to shift the LPG (liquefied petroleum gas) to the daughter ship, Deendayal Port Authority Chairman Sushil Kumar Singh told reporters. "A consignment of 46,500 metric tonnes of LPG has been brought in; this cargo will be transferred to a vessel named BW Birch, which will subsequently proceed to discharge portions of the consignment at the ports of Ennore (Tamil Nadu) and Haldia (West Bengal) along the eastern coast," he said.

"The transfer process takes place at a rate of 1,000 tonnes per hour; consequently, the entire operation is expected to take two days to complete," he added. The port authority at Vadinar is tasked with ensuring that these operations are executed with maximum efficiency, as per the directive of the Ministry of Ports, Singh said.

"This constitutes a standard operational procedure that we have consistently carried out here at Vadinar. However, the current directive issued by the ministry mandates that incoming LPG vessels be accorded top priority; we must ensure that their transfer and discharge processes are completed as expeditiously as possible," he said.

All relevant operational parameters are to be monitored rigorously, with multiple agencies involved in the process, the official noted.

"We visited the vessel and met with its crew members. The 'daughter vessel' is currently en route; upon its arrival, it will berth alongside the 'mother vessel' Nanda Devi, at which point the ship-to-ship transfer operation will commence," he said.

Singh said the ministry has issued a clear directive stipulating that all future incoming LPG vessels must also be handled on a priority basis, strictly adhering to all safety protocols and avoiding the adoption of any shortcuts. "Our objective is to eliminate any procedural bottlenecks and ensure that the cargo is discharged as quickly as possible," he added.

Gujarat minister Jitu Vaghani on Monday said that LPG carrier Shivalik safely reached Mundra port from Strait of Hormuz amid the West Asia crisis due to the strong diplomatic relations of Prime Minister Narendra Modi with world leaders. (PTI)

## KC Tyagi quits JD(U), says will decide further course of action soon

**NEW DELHI, March 17:** Senior JD(U) leader K C Tyagi on Tuesday said that he has left the party and will decide his further course of action soon.

Tyagi was associated with the JD(U) since it came into existence in October 2003 with the merger of the Samata Party and the Janata Dal.

He served the JD(U) in various capacities including its chief general secretary, chief spokesperson and political adviser.

"Yes, I have left the party," Tyagi told PTI, when asked.

In a statement, the former Rajya Sabha member said, "The membership campaign of the party has ended. This time I've not renewed the membership of the party."

He, however, asserted that his commitment to the "larger and wider ideological points" concerning the interests of downtrodden, peasants and agriculturalists including the deprived sections of society "remains as firm as ever".

"My personal respect for Nitish Kumar who remained my comrade for close to half a century also remains unchanged," he added. Tyagi said that his "further course of action" will be decided soon in consultation with "all required people".

"Few of my friends political friends, sympathisers and activists are organising a meet of like minded persons on 22nd March 2026 to discuss the political situation of the country at Mavlankar Hall, Rafi Marg," he said in the statement. (PTI)

## Forest dept plans 70.82 lakh plantations across capital under 2026-27 Green Action Plan

**NEW DELHI, March 17:** The Delhi forest department is planning a plantation target of 70.82 lakh for 2026-27 under its Green Action Plan (GAP), with officials saying activities are underway in this regard with pruning of canopies of older foliage to create conditions for sapling growth.

"There appears to be agreement on adopting the canopy opening method, following which plantation work can proceed," an official said, indicating that the approach is still under consideration.

The official said discussion in this regard took place during a meeting held in February.

Explaining the plantation method, the official said canopy opening involves selectively pruning dense tree cover to create gaps that allow sunlight to reach the ground, thereby improving conditions for planting new saplings and enhancing their survival rate by reducing competition for light, water and nutrients.

The approach is expected to be complemented by a three-layered plantation model, the official said, adding that it comprises tall native trees in the top canopy, smaller trees and shrubs in the middle canopy to trap dust and pollutants, and grasses and low-lying vegetation in the ground layer to prevent soil erosion and retain moisture.

"Together, the multi-tiered system is aimed at improving air quality, enhancing carbon absorption and supporting urban biodiversity. It also helps reduce pollutants such as particulate matter (PM10 and PM2.5), nitrogen oxides, sulphur dioxide, ozone and carbon dioxide by trapping and absorbing them at different vegetation levels," the official added.



The plantation target for 2026-27, the layered plantation model in view of limited land availability, and organising a training workshop for planting agencies were also discussed during the

February meeting, according to the minutes.

The proposed target follows a review of the 2025-26 Green Action Plan, under which a target of 75 lakh plantations was set, against which an achievement of more than 67.98 lakh has been recorded so far, the minutes said.

Data presented by the Tree Authority showed that under the 2025-26 plan, 4.81 lakh trees, 41.82 lakh shrubs and 2.03 lakh bamboo saplings were planted, while 5.03 saplings were distributed free of cost.

During the meeting, the chair-

man directed the remaining plantation target for 2025-26 be completed by March 2026 and asked all planting agencies to upload detailed plantation data on the GAP portal. Officials said the portal is proposed to be modified to incorporate these requirements for better monitoring.

The chairman also directed that a third-party audit of plantations carried out in the capital be undertaken, initially through satellite-based assessment followed by ground verification, with the forest department tasked to identify a suitable agency. (PTI)

Budget, polygamy ban and land law among key legislations cleared

## 10 govt Bills passed during 28-day Mizoram assembly session

**AIZAWL, March 17:** A total of 10 government Bills, including one that sought to ban polygamy and increase women's rights, were passed during the 28-day Budget session of the Mizoram Legislative Assembly.

The Budget session was adjourned sine die late on Monday.

Speaker Lalbiakzama, while announcing the sine die adjournment, gave a brief report on the proceedings of the session, which began on February 17.

During the session, the assembly passed the state's annual Budget for the financial year 2026-27 amounting to ₹ 17,469.91 crore and supplementary demands for grants for the fiscal 2025-26 amounting to ₹ 3,724.25 crore.

The assembly also unanimously passed 10 government Bills, in-



cluding 'The Mizo Marriage and Inheritance of Property (Amendment) Bill, 2026,' which sought to ban polygamy and increase women's property rights, 'The Mizoram (Prevention of Public Land Encroachment) Bill, 2026,' and 'The Mizoram State University

(Amendment) Bill, 2026', which sought to shift the base of the proposed state university from Aizawl to Lunglei.

According to the Speaker, the assembly received 1,248 starred questions and 396 unstarred questions for the session.

Of the 1,248 starred questions, 1,231 were admitted while 27 questions were rejected, seven withdrawn by members and 300 placed in the business list, he said.

Among the unstarred questions, 376 were admitted, 17 rejected and three withdrawn by members.

The assembly also adopted a resolution seeking inclusion of Mizo language in the Eighth Schedule of Constitution. Lalbiakzama lauded the members for maintaining a friendly environment and decorum in the House. (PTI)

### Five insurgents arrested near India-Myanmar border in Manipur

**IMPHAL, March 17:** Five insurgents were arrested near the India-Myanmar border in Manipur's Tengnoupal district, police said on Tuesday. The insurgents belonged to PREPAK, Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup (KYKL) and Kangleipak Communist Party (MFL), they said.

The arrests were made on Sunday from a stretch between Border Pillars 73 and 75 in the Moreh police station area, they added.

In a separate operation, security forces recovered a cache of explosives and small arms from the Boljang Hill Range of the district.

The seized items included eight improvised explosive devices (IEDs), a pistol, one pistol magazine, an improvised mortar, two radio sets and nine live rounds of different calibres, police said. The recovered IEDs were destroyed at the site in accordance with safety protocols and standard operating procedures, they said. (PTI)

### Aizawl municipal poll scheduled today

**AIZAWL, March 17:** The Mizoram State Election Commission is likely to announce the poll schedule for the 19-member Aizawl Municipal Corporation (AMC) on Wednesday, an official said.

State Election Commissioner H Lalhlangliana will address a press conference on Wednesday to declare the polling date, the EC official said.

While the municipality's current term ended on March 1, the poll panel had deferred the elections due to administrative priorities, including the budget session of the assembly that concluded on Monday and the ongoing board examinations.

The ruling Zoram People's Movement (ZPM) is yet to announce its nominees. The main opposition party, the Mizo National Front (MNF), has released its full list of candidates, while the Congress has named 13 candidates. (PTI)

### Wokha gym provides fitness training to rehab centre inmates to recover

**HT Correspondent**  
**DIMAPUR, March 17:** A gym in Wokha is providing fitness training to the inmates of a rehab centre at Yikhum village, reflecting the growing recognition of the role of fitness during rehabilitation.

Pro Fitness Gym, Wokha, extended its support to Ekhumrhong Rehab Centre, Yikhum village by organising a physical fitness programme for the inmates of the centre on March 16. The initiative is planned to be conducted for 30 days as part of the centre's recovery schedule.

The programme is designed for individuals undergoing a 45-day rehabilitation stay. After 30 days of treatment, fitness exercises are introduced to provide an alternative means of engagement, helping the inmates prevent relapse and avoid returning to old habits.

During recovery, physical fitness is considered vital for confidence building and for overcoming social stigmas, making such training an important component of rehabilitation.

Currently, 11 inmates are staying at the centre, with some expected to be released soon.

The fitness session was led by the director of Ekhumrhong Rehab Centre, Mhabemo Odyuo, who guided the group through exercises aimed at strengthening both physical and mental resilience.

## NSF takes out rally against MHA directive on Vande Mataram

**HT Correspondent**  
**DIMAPUR, March 17:** The Naga Students Federation (NSF) organised a mass rally in Kohima on Monday to express its opposition to the singing or playing of Vande Mataram in government functions and educational institutions in 'Naga homeland'.

Students, church members and civil society representatives came together at Old MLA Junction to express opposition to the MHA notification issued on January 28 for compulsory singing or playing of the national song.

After the rally, the rallyists marched to Lok Bhavan to submit a memorandum to President Droupadi Murmu through Nagaland Governor Nand Kishore Yadav.

The memorandum, signed by NSF, NPMHR and Nagaland Joint Christian Forum leaders, urged the government of India to nullify or withdraw the directive mandating the singing or playing of Vande Mataram during official functions and in educational institutions in the Naga homeland.

According to the signatories, the compulsory observance of the national song raises concerns relating to freedom of conscience and religious sensitivities even as the Naga people hold no hostility toward national symbols or patriotic expressions.

The memo said the revised Vande Mataram contains devotional imagery associated with the worship of a particular deity.



"For communities such as the Nagas, whose cultural and religious traditions are diverse and whose society places immense importance on freedom of conscience, the compulsory singing or observation of such a composition is viewed as an infringement upon deeply held beliefs and cultural sensitivities," it added.

Addressing the rally, NSF president Mteisuding Heraang said the identity and beliefs of the Naga people cannot be dictated by administrative directives or imposed symbols.

Nagaland Joint Christian Forum vice-presi-

dent Rev Vevo Phesao said certain elements in the national song are contrary to Christian faith and principles.

Naga Peoples Movement for Human Rights (NPMHR) secretary general Neingulo Krome called the directive an intrusion into the conscience and identity of the Naga people.

Demanding respect for the beliefs, identity and dignity of the Naga people, similar rallies were also held in educational institutions and federating units of the NSF throughout the Naga homeland.

## Nagaland MP highlights NCC's role in shaping youth



**HT Correspondent**  
**DIMAPUR, March 17:** Nagaland's Lok Sabha MP S Supongmeren Jamir on Tuesday highlighted the significant role of the NCC in shaping the youth by instilling discipline, leadership and a strong sense of responsibility.

Addressing the NCC festival and alumni meet Nagaland as the chief guest at the Regional Centre of Excellence for Music and Performing Arts in Kohima, Jamir said the organisation goes beyond drills and uniforms, serving as a platform that nurtures character, teamwork and commitment among young cadets.

Emphasising the importance of unity and discipline, he noted that these values are essential in building responsible citizens in a diverse country like India.

The MP also encouraged cadets to carry forward the lessons learned through NCC training into all aspects of life, stating that qualities such as courage, respect and

dedication would help them succeed in any field they choose.

He pointed out that leadership is rooted in responsibility, humility and service, urging the youth to contribute positively to society and nation-building.

Referring to the alumni meet, Jamir noted that the former cadets stand as examples of how NCC training shapes individuals into capable professionals and leaders, inspiring the younger generation.

He also acknowledged the efforts of officers, instructors and teachers for their continued dedication to mentoring cadets.

The festival featured a series of engaging activities, including live podcast sessions with L Lanuwabang, director, National Institute of Electronics & Information Technology, Kohima and Lichan Humtsoe, founder & CEO, Eté Coffee.

The event also showcased cultural performances by cadets and hosted various games and competitions.

## Mizoram CM lays foundation stone for Aizawl beautification project

### Lalduhoma lays foundation stone for former Assam Rifles base

**AIZAWL, March 17:** Mizoram Chief Minister Lalduhoma on Tuesday laid the foundation stone for the Aizawl city beautification project at a vacated Assam Rifles' base, in a move to modernise the state capital.

The project aims to beautify around 17 hectares of the city's central core, with a strategic focus on public utility.

Lalduhoma said use of the land was a collective public choice adopted by an advisory committee involving various stakeholders.

"We aim to transform the heart of Aizawl into a beautiful space, a pleasant area for children, a great spot for the youth and a convenient place for the elderly to enjoy the outdoors.

"As this project is for all of us,



I urge everyone to cooperate. I also hope the contractors work with a sense of patriotism, looking beyond mere profit," the chief minister said.

The state government has already sanctioned funding to start

## Veterans, Veer Naris living symbols of nation's strength: Guv Yadav

**HT Correspondent**  
**DIMAPUR, March 17:** Newly appointed Nagaland Governor Nand Kishore Yadav on Tuesday called the veterans and Veer Naris living symbols of the nation's strength and resilience, emphasising the significance of recognising the sacrifices of the armed forces.

Addressing the ex-servicemen rally at Kisama Heritage Village in Kohima, Yadav noted that their stories of courage and sacrifice serve as a source of inspiration for all citizens. He stressed that it is the collective responsibility of society to honour and support them with dignity. Paying rich tributes to the veterans, Veer Naris and the families of brave soldiers for their immense contribution to the nation, he said the occasion was a momentous one to honour those who have served the nation with courage and dedication.

Yadav lauded the Indian Army for upholding the highest standards of professionalism, discipline and



compassion and for its continued commitment towards the welfare of ex-servicemen, Veer Naris and their families. He said such rallies reflect the Army's enduring traditions of camaraderie and lifelong support, reassuring every soldier that the nation remains grateful for their service.

Yadav further appreciated the Indian Army, particularly the Spear Corps, for organising the rally and acknowledged the contributions of various organisations and institu-

tional representatives who participated in the event.

He also commended the state administration for its continued efforts toward the welfare of veterans and their families, highlighting the importance of collaboration between civil and military institutions.

He asserted that the people of Nagaland, along with the Indian Army and the nation at large will always honour and cherish their legacy with pride and gratitude.

## Delegation of Nagaland ex-MLAs call on Arunachal Assembly Speaker

**ITANAGAR, March 17:** A delegation of ex-MLAs of Nagaland called on Arunachal Pradesh Assembly Speaker Tesam Pongte at his office here on Tuesday.

Led by former Nagaland Assembly Speaker Neiba Nding, the delegation included ex-minister V Kashiho Sangtam and former MLAs R Tohanba, Azheto and Ishak Konyak, who are on a study tour of Arunachal Pradesh.

The visit aimed at exchanging experiences on legislative practices, strengthening inter-state cooperation and gaining insights into Arunachal Pradesh's Assembly's functioning, an official report said.

Pongte extended a warm welcome and interacted with them on various aspects of legislative functioning and governance.

The discussions covered matters of mutual interest concerning the eight Northeastern states, including welfare issues of people from the region.

The delegation also shared perspectives on former legislators' concerns like pension provisions, security arrangements, ex-gratia benefits and other welfare measures.

The meeting provided an opportunity for cordial exchange of views on legislative practices and strengthening mutual understanding and cooperation among Northeastern states, the report added. (PTI)



## Arunachal Guv emphasises making administration citizen-friendly

**ITANAGAR, March 17:** Arunachal Pradesh Governor KT Parnaik on Tuesday emphasised the need to make the administration more efficient, transparent and citizen-friendly.

Discussing key administrative reforms aimed at accelerating development and strengthening governance in the state with Arunachal Pradesh Administrative Reforms Commission (APARC) Chairman, Pramod Jain, the governor advised the Commission to

recommend institutional and procedural reforms that would promote digital transformation and e-governance, according to an official report.

Moving towards 100 per cent online government payments, e-Office systems and paperless transactions, he said, would speed up service delivery, improve transparency and help curb corruption.

Highlighting the importance of merit-based personnel manage-

ment, Parnaik stressed the need for transparent systems in transfers, postings and recruitment.

He said that merit, integrity and competence must remain the guiding principles in public service.

Earlier, Jain assured the governor that the Commission would recommend wider use of technology, simplified administrative procedures and effective grievance-redressal mechanisms to further strengthen governance in the frontier state. (PTI)

### Important Clarification Regarding News Reports Circulating About 'Rakesh Kumar Singh'

#### PUBLIC NOTICE / CLARIFICATION

It has come to our notice that certain media reports circulating in recent days mention a person named Rakesh Kumar Singh of Guwahati in connection with an alleged fraud case involving a woman from Arunachal Pradesh.

In this regard, we wish to clearly clarify that Mr. Rakesh Kumar Singh, MD of our business group, is not connected in any manner with the said incident or with the individual referred to in those reports.

Due to the similarity of names, some confusion has unfortunately arisen among members of the public.

For clarity, it may kindly be noted that our organisation is engaged only in:

- \* Authorised vehicle dealership
- \* Educational and health institutions
- \* Government contracting as a registered First Class Contractor under the Government of Assam

We also place on record that our organisation has no involvement in any wine bar, bar, or liquor-related business.

The individual referred to in the reports is a different person and has no association whatsoever with our organisation or its proprietor.

This clarification is issued in the interest of transparency and to avoid any misunderstanding.

We request everyone to kindly take note of this.

PRO  
For and on behalf of  
Mr. Rakesh Kumar Singh  
MD- Swayam Priority Group

# New Zealand beats South Africa by 68 runs in 2<sup>nd</sup> T20 and series level

**HAMILTON, March 17:** Devon Conway topped all scorers with 60 as New Zealand beat South Africa by 68 runs in the second Twenty20 to level their five-match series at 1-1 on Tuesday.

New Zealand made 175-6 after being sent in on a pitch which became trickier as the evening wore on.

South Africa was bowled out for 107 in 15.3 overs as pacers Ben Sears and Lockie Ferguson shared six wickets. Batters struggled for timing on a pitch which provided variable pace and bounce and all 10 South Africa wickets fell to catches.

South Africa lost its last six wickets for 40 runs and only George Linde stood against the collapse, scoring 33 from 12 balls with three fours and three sixes.

Sears was New Zealand's traveling reserve at the recent T20 World Cup and took 3-14. Ferguson took 3-16, dismissing Linde to end the innings.

"I thought we bowled really well up to a point and then lost our way with the bat," South Africa captain Keshav Maharaj said. "We thought the dew was going to play a large factor in terms of changing the wicket."

"There was dew in the outfield but the wicket got a little bit worse and I'll take it on my chin. We know dew is a factor back home which makes the wicket better but I think the way New Zealand bowled really



stifled us up front and forced us to make a play on a very tricky wicket." New Zealand began its inning strongly

with Conway scoring square of the wicket and Tom Latham using ramp shots for a six and a four over fine leg.

They were 43-0 after the powerplay and 81-2 after 10 overs, including Latham (11) picking out Otneil Baartman at third man with a reverse sweep.

But New Zealand wasn't able to accelerate early in the second part of its innings as the dew settled and the pitch at Seddon Park became more two-paced.

Nick Kelly had 21 from 12 balls then played and missed at a ball from Wiaan Mulder and was bowled, and Mitchell Santner made 20 from 14 before being beaten by a ball from Baartman which cut back between bat and pad.

They were 123-4 after 15 and soon after lost Conway, who had held up one end for three quarters of the innings. He top-edged a pull shot to wicketkeeper Connor Esterhuizen.

"It's been a pretty quiet couple of months for me, going over to India and not playing and not featuring at the World Cup," Conway said. "It was a nice opportunity for me to have my feet up and watch the boys do their thing. Getting the opportunity to play, it's been nice to be able to contribute and be with the boys."

Josh Clarkson came off with 26 from nine balls and he and Cole McConchie helped themselves to 24 runs from the last over bowled by Maharaj.

The third international will be in Auckland on Friday. (AP)

## The more Tests we play, the better it will be for us: Pratika Rawal



**NEW DELHI, March 17:** India's

top-order batter Pratika Rawal, who scored a fighting half-century on her Test debut in Australia earlier this month, has advocated for more women's Tests, saying the traditional format remains the "most beautiful" and the ultimate test of a cricketer's character.

Pratika played a crucial role in helping India avoid an innings defeat in the one-off day-night Test on the Australia tour earlier this month, scoring a 137-ball 63 runs in the second innings.

Speaking on the sidelines of the Sports Journalists Federation of India conference hosted by the Delhi Sports Journalists Association here on Monday, the 25-year-old said Test cricket holds a special place for her.

"Test cricket is the most beautiful format. Since childhood my father and coach have told me that performing well in this format is very important. When you are groomed in that manner, it naturally becomes your favourite format," she told PTI.

Pratika added that she prepared herself for the format by watching videos of great Test batters such as Viv Richards, Sachin Tendulkar, Brian Lara and Ricky Ponting.

"I have watched many videos of these great batters. The way they used to play in Test cricket has always inspired me," she said.

Urging for more women's Tests, Pratika said increasing the number of games would greatly benefit players.

"The more Test matches we play,

the better it will be. The experience of playing Test cricket not only improves you as a cricketer but also helps you grow as an individual," she said.

At the closing ceremony of the four-day golden jubilee national convention of the SJFI held at Arun Jaitley Stadium, Rohan Jaitley, president of the Delhi and District Cricket Association presented Pratika with a cash award of ₹ 51 lakh.

Uddhav Mohan, a member of India's Under-19 men's World Cup-winning team, was also honoured with a cash prize of ₹ 11 lakh.

Pratika further said the recognition motivates players to perform better.

"I'm extremely happy. It is wonderful when players receive recognition from time to time. I have played a lot of cricket in Delhi and to come here and receive an award from Rohan Sir is a proud moment for me," she said.

Before being ruled out of last year's Women's World Cup due to injury, Pratika had scored 308 runs in six innings from seven matches, including a century, finishing fourth on the tournament's list of leading run-scorers.

Having scored 1,189 runs in 27 ODIs with help of two centuries and eight half-centuries, Pratika described the BCCI Naman Awards 2026 as a special experience.

BCCI Naman Awards 2026 will be held in New Delhi on Sunday to felicitate best performers and celebrated India's five ICC World Cup-winning teams.

"It was my first award ceremony with the BCCI and the entire evening was wonderful. Such recognition motivates players. The way the BCCI is honouring champions is a big step for Indian cricket. Various Indian teams won five global trophies last season and that shows how well cricket is doing in the country," she said.

Calling the World Cup triumph the most memorable moment of her career, Pratika said the feeling still hasn't faded.

"That feeling has not gone away yet and I don't think it should. It should remain memorable forever," she said.

This year is another important one for the Indian women's team with major events such as the ICC Women's T20 World Cup and the Asian Games (T20 format) on the calendar.

Awaiting for her international debut in T20Is, Pratika said her focus remains on the immediate task.

"My aim is to perform well for the country and contribute to the team. I like to focus on one match at a time and I don't think too much about the future," she said. (PTI)

## Harshit Rana set to miss most of IPL due to knee injury: Report

**KOLKATA, March 17:** Kolkata Knight Riders pacer Harshit Rana is likely to miss a significant part of the upcoming IPL as he continues to recover from a knee surgery he underwent last month.

According to a report by ESPN-Cricinfo, the BCCI is yet to fix a timeline for his return.

Rana, who sustained a ligament strain in his right knee injury during India's T20 World Cup warm-up match against South Africa, is currently undergoing rehabilitation, with "no firm date of return earmarked by the BCCI medical team yet".

The pacer had pulled up after delivering just one over in that game and was subsequently ruled out of the T20 World Cup following surgery. He was replaced by Mohammed Siraj, who played one match (against the USA) during India's title-winning campaign.

Rana was on Sunday awarded the Best International Debutant award at the BCCI Naman Awards.

His absence would come as a major setback for three-time IPL champions KKR, who are already grappling with multiple fitness concerns.

Sri Lanka pacer Matheesha Pathirana has been nursing a calf strain sustained during the T20 World Cup, which had initially not been expected to affect his IPL availability.

KKR are also without left-arm seamer Mustafizur Rahman after the BCCI instructed it to release the Bangladeshi player amid strained geopolitical relations between India and Bangladesh earlier this year.

The franchise has since signed Zimbabwe quick Blessing Muzarabani as a replacement. Muzarabani opted out of his Pakistan Super League stint with Islamabad United as he is set to join the squad here Tuesday. The KKR will begin their pre-season training here from Wednesday. (PTI)

## Dhoni must bat no lower than number six, or step aside: AB de Villiers

**NEW DELHI, March 17:** In a blunt assessment, South African batting legend AB de Villiers stated on Tuesday that MS Dhoni must bat no lower than number six in the upcoming IPL, as coming in at eight or nine does not do justice to his presence.

Dhoni, 44, will turn out for his franchise Chennai Super Kings in the IPL starting March 28, and De Villiers urged the talisman to change his trend of batting way down the order in recent years.

Touching upon Dhoni's role in the CSK setup this IPL season, De Villiers told JioHotstar, "It's very tricky and not straightforward. Brands are built over years, and CSK have built this empire over many years with this MS Dhoni figure that's always been there. When you mention CSK, you immediately think of Dhoni."

"I feel that in the last few years, his role has purely been about keeping that brand as strong as possible. That's why I don't see a role for him batting at eight or nine and not really doing enough, like last season."

"We know he can be impactful with the bat, but if he's batting that low and not captaining, it feels like he's almost just making up for a spot for the wrong reasons. There's still a place for him, but he needs to bat higher, at least at six, maybe even at five or four at times."

De Villiers added, "It's a tricky situation, but Sanju Samson is the right guy to take over, and credit to Dhoni because he's hung around, waiting for the right person to come. If MS plays, I want him to put himself under more pressure and be the guy to handle those big moments."

CSK decided to trade in Sanju Samson ahead of the IPL 2026 auction as part of their succession plans, and the multi-faceted South African star, along with Indian spin legend Anil Kumble, backed the in-from-keeper-batter to seamlessly step into the leadership group.

Sharing his thoughts on CSK's decision to bring in Samson, Kumble said, "Icons from one generation to another, the baton has passed on in Indian cricket, from Sunil Gavaskar to Sachin, then to Virat, with MS Dhoni also part of that era."

"You had the likes of Rahul Dravid and Sourav Ganguly before the shift to MS Dhoni and Virat Kohli, who still carry that aura and continue to perform. "In that sense, Sanju coming in is a great move for CSK. The icing on the cake is his fantastic form leading into the IPL and winning the World Cup for India with three back-to-back knocks."

Kumble also believed the CSK fans will connect with Samson.

"I'm sure that will certainly contribute to the franchise's fan following. From a Chennai perspective, he fits their need, being Kerala-born, speaks Tamil, so there's a connect, a wicketkeeper-batter, so in a similar mould to MS, and his experience will be valuable for CSK."



On Samson's role as unofficial vice-captain," Kumble said, "I think that's the perfect role for Sanju, handling those responsibilities almost like a vice-captain. "He has captained Rajasthan for a long period of time, so that leadership role comes naturally to him, and that's something CSK will be looking for."

Ruturaj Gaikwad led the CSK team last year.

"Last year, when Ruturaj was injured, MS had to take over, and previously, when Ravindra Jadeja was also captain, MS Dhoni came back in as captain midway through the season. So there have been some challenges in identifying who the next captain would be for MS."

"Ruturaj was identified, and it is good that he continues as captain despite Sanju coming into the scheme of things. I wouldn't be surprised if MS Dhoni gives Sanju the keeping role at some point during the season."

"He will be part of the leadership group, and in case if Ruturaj is unavailable due to injury or otherwise, Sanju would probably take over rather than MS," Kumble said.

Asked about CSK's dilemma of sustaining Dhoni's legacy while also having one eye on the future, Kumble said, "Legacy will always be there, but you have to move on at some point. He has contributed a lot to the franchise, and the brand is now synonymous with the individual."

"... The legacy of MS Dhoni for CSK and Indian cricket will remain forever, and that is not going to change." (PTI)

## Ridhima, Tvesa and Jasmine ready for battle in 6<sup>th</sup> leg of Hero WPG Tour

**NOIDA, March 17:** Ridhima Dilawari, Tvesa Malik and Jasmine Shekar, who have won four of the five events held so far this season on Hero Women's Pro Golf Tour, will lead a big field of 53 players in the sixth leg.

Jasmine won the first leg this season, while Ridhima won the second and the fourth and Tvesa Malik took the top honours in the third leg.

The strong field at the Jaypee Wishtown Golf Course will also see strong contenders like Aman-deep Drall, a former Indian Open runner-up, Anvitha Narendar, Seher Atwal, Neha Tripathi, Heena Kang, Jahanvi Bakshi, Vidhatri Urs and Saanvi Somu.

The event will also feature seven amateurs in the field. The presence of amateurs has become significant as they have regularly been in contention in recent years.

In fact, the fifth leg was won by an amateur Lavanya Gupta, who is not playing this week. The field includes amateur Mahreen Bhatia, who is the defending champion and won the last leg of the 2025 season at the same venue.

Apart from Mahreen, the other amateurs to watch out for will include Ceerat Kang, whose sister Heena is a pro. Shambhavi Chaturvedi, Anuradha Chaudhuri, Aradhana Manikandan, Alysha Dutt and the talented Guntas Kaur Sandhu. (PTI)

## Experienced enthusiasm worked for us in 2024, 'garam khoon' took over in 2026: Surya

**NEW DELHI, March 17:** The 2024 batch had "experienced enthusiasm" to push for a drought-ending ICC trophy while it was "fiery passion of youth" that fuelled India's unprecedented title defence of the T20 World Cup this year, skipper Suryakumar Yadav said comparing the two champion squads. In a wide-ranging podcast interview with PTI, Suryakumar spoke on the subtle difference between the two trophy-winning squads. In 2024, he played under Rohit Sharma and the squad also had the towering presence of Virat Kohli and Ravindra Jadeja.

Those three stalwarts retired from the shortest format following the triumph in Barbados, handing over the baton to the uninhibited Suryakumar and Co., who took India's T20 game to the next level.

"There was just a 'unniss bess ka farak' (minor difference) between the two teams. Woh experience wala josh tha, Idhar ekdum khoon garam tha ladkon ka (That was experienced enthusiasm in 2024), this was fiery passion," that was how Suryakumar compared the two squads. (PTI)

## WADA is weighing a rule to bar Trump and US officials from major events. Can it really do that?

**NEW YORK, March 17:** The idea sounds outlandish, if not downright impossible. Leaders at the World Anti-Doping Agency are considering adopting a rule that could bar President Donald Trump and all U.S. government officials from attending major international events — even if they take place on American soil.

A few coming up are as big as they get: this summer's World Cup; the LA Olympics in 2028; the Winter Games in Utah in 2034.

This is not a fight of Trump's choosing, but rather one being pursued by WADA itself, which has been the subject of bipartisan and virtually universal disapproval in Congress, in the Trump and Biden administrations and in the offices of the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency for most of this decade.

The proposal, on the agenda for Tuesday's meeting of the WADA executive committee, is the latest and most extreme maneuver in a yearslong exchange of rhetoric, threats and fighting between all parties. It stems from the U.S. government's refusal to pay its annual WADA dues.

The U.S. has held back a total of \$7.3 million over 2024 and 2025 in protest of WADA's handling of a number of issues

over the years, most recently, a case involving Chinese swimmers who were allowed to compete despite testing positive for a banned substance. WADA took Chinese regulators' word that the athletes had been accidentally contaminated.

WADA spokesman James Fitzgerald said the rule, if passed, would "not (be) applied retroactively so World Cup, LA and SLC Games would not be covered." However, the proposal, a copy of which was obtained by The Associated Press, does not include language to that effect.

Fitzgerald did not respond to a series of follow-up questions sent Monday, including one asking how a rule being considered for passage this year would not be applied retroactively to events that have not taken place. Fitzgerald did say last week that the final decision wasn't due until November, after the World Cup, though correspondence between WADA and European officials indicated that decision could come sooner.

**What gives WADA the power to ban Trump?**

Part of sending teams to major international events, such as the Olympics and the World Cup, requires everyone involved to pledge to follow WADA's



rules, whether they're directly related to doping or to administrative issues, the likes of which the latest proposal covers. Sports organizations — for instance the IOC and the governing bodies of individual sports — are considered "signatories" to the WADA code.

Governments are tethered to WADA as part of an agreement they sign with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

Like sports organizations, the UNESCO arrangement includes the governments agreeing to pay dues and follow WADA's rules.

Could WADA really prevent Trump from attending an event in his own country? It's hard to see how. Rahul Gupta — the drug czar during the Biden Administration who was every bit as critical of WADA as is his successor, Sara Carter — called the idea "ludicrous."

"That's the responsibility of the government, not so much WADA," Gupta said. "It's clear that WADA attempting to propagate any rules-based system that interferes with a government, especially a host government — that would be a concern to any government."

While Trump has not weighed in on this specifically, Carter, his drug czar, said the U.S. government "will continue to stand firm in our demand for accountability and transparency from WADA to ensure fair competition in sport."

After the latest news, Sen. Marsha Blackburn, R-Tenn., said on social media that the proposal was "Further proof we're doing the right thing by demanding accountability and defunding WADA."

What is WADA's reason for proposing such a rule?

WADA runs on a budget of around \$57.5 million and the U.S. chunk is significant, though hardly the only payment that has gone missing over the years. One analysis of dues payments, obtained by the AP, showed that only 49% of African countries had paid their WADA dues for 2025.

But no country has been more critical of WADA than the United States, which has floated the idea of holding back dues

since 2020 and finally followed through two years ago.

WADA says this idea is nothing new. What does that mean?

That's true. WADA has been examining this idea since 2020 — around the time the threats from the U.S. started getting louder. In 2024, the idea actually came to the executive committee. Gupta was on that panel back then and led the move to reject it. The U.S. no longer has a representative on the executive committee.

So why is it coming up now? WADA hasn't provided answers to this one, other than to say the rule wouldn't apply "retroactively" and that the World Cup, LA and Utah Olympics would not be impacted.

WADA says the next meeting of its foundation board — the group that would have to formally adopt any recommendation approved by the executive committee — isn't until November, four months after the World Cup ends.

But in a Q&A with European officials about the rule, a copy of which was obtained by AP, WADA told the officials that such a rule "could be implemented without due delay." (AP)