

Iran's Attacks on Arabian Gas Fields: Oil Prices Skyrocket

Oil fields in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, and Abu Dhabi come under attack

Dubai, March 19: On Thursday, Iran intensified its attacks on oil and natural gas facilities located across the Gulf region. In a conflict that is already shaking the global economy, this move has further escalated tensions and heightened the risks involved. Launched in retaliation for an Israeli strike on one of Iran's key gas fields, these attacks have not only sent fuel prices skyrocketing but have also created the dangerous possibility of directly dragging Iran's neighboring Arab nations into the conflict. These Iranian strikes have severely disrupted global energy supplies—which were already under strain—particularly given Iran's dominance over the 'Strait of Hormuz,' a vital waterway through which one-fifth of the world's oil trade passes. 'Brent crude'—considered the international benchmark for oil prices—briefly surged to over \$119 per barrel; since Israel and the United States initiated the war, its price has risen by more than 60 percent. The European benchmark for natural gas prices also saw a sharp increase, nearly doubling in value over



the past month. Iran has shown no signs of halting its attacks. Saudi Arabia announced that its 'SAMREF' oil refinery, located in the Red Sea port city of Yanbu, had come under attack. In an effort to bypass the Strait of Hormuz, Saudi Arabia had begun rerouting a significant portion of its oil exports westward—towards the Red Sea. Qatar, a major source of natural gas for global markets, reported

that its Ras Laffan Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) facility sustained extensive damage following a missile attack launched by Iran. It is noteworthy that gas production at the facility had already been halted due to earlier attacks. Consequently, the damage inflicted upon the facility could delay Qatar's resumption of gas supplies to the market, even after the war has concluded.



Local officials also reported that two oil refineries in Kuwait and gas production facilities in Abu Dhabi were targeted and struck by Iran. In Israel, attacks launched by Iran—targeting large swathes of the country—unfolded in more than six waves, prompting hundreds of thousands of people to seek refuge in shelters. Although these attacks caused structural damage to

buildings, no significant casualties were reported. Since the commencement of hostilities between the United States and Israel on February 28, several of Iran's top-ranking leaders have been killed in airstrikes, and the nation's military capabilities have been severely compromised. Nevertheless, Iran—now led by the son of the "Supreme Leader" who was killed in the early

stages of the conflict—still retains the capacity to launch missile and drone attacks capable of destabilizing its Gulf Arab neighbors as well as the global economy, which relies heavily on the energy produced by these nations. Underscoring the risks faced by vessels navigating the region, a ship was set ablaze off the coast of the United Arab Emirates, while another vessel

sustained damage off the coast of Qatar. Efforts to bypass the Strait of Hormuz also faced setbacks: an Iranian drone launched an attack on a Saudi oil refinery located in the Red Sea region—the very facility Saudi Arabia had planned to utilize as an alternative export route. Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates strongly condemned these attacks by Iran. Ahmed Aboul Gheit, Secretary-General of the Arab League, characterized the attacks as a "dangerous escalation of tensions." Speaking in the wake of Iran's recent wave of attacks, Israeli Minister of Energy Eli Cohen reported that the electricity grid in northern Israel had sustained some damage. He stated that power had already been restored in certain areas, while efforts to reinstate electricity in other regions were currently underway. Israeli media broadcast footage showing plumes of black smoke billowing from an oil refinery situated in the northern city of Haifa; however, Minister Cohen noted that the damage sustained by the refinery was minimal.

Attacks Are Unacceptable: Ministry of External Affairs; Crisis in LPG Supply

India Strongly Condemns Iranian Attacks on Oil and Gas Infrastructure in the Gulf Region

New Delhi, March 19: Following an Israeli attack on Iran's 'South Pars' natural gas field, Iran launched a retaliatory strike on the 'Ras Laffan' natural gas field located in Qatar. Against this backdrop, India on Thursday evening described the recent attacks on energy infrastructure at various locations across the region as "deeply concerning." Furthermore,

India asserted that "such attacks are unacceptable and must cease immediately." However, New Delhi did not directly name or explicitly blame either Israel or Iran in its statement. Randhir Jaiswal, the spokesperson for the Ministry of External Affairs, stated that the prevailing conflict situation in West Asia has led to a "shortage" in LPG supplies, describing this as

a "matter of concern." At the same time, he noted that India is actively diversifying its procurement sources and is "making efforts to secure LPG supplies from other parts of the world as well." He further added that two LPG cargo vessels, which recently arrived in India after transiting through the Strait of Hormuz, have "provided us with additional LPG supplies." Responding

to a query regarding whether India would approach Russia for LPG supplies, the Ministry spokesperson indicated that India is reaching out to several nations, subtly suggesting that Russia could potentially be included in that list. In a statement issued in this regard, New Delhi stated: "India had previously emphasized that attacks on civilian infrastructure—i-

ncluding energy infrastructure—across this entire region must be avoided. Therefore, the recent attacks targeting energy infrastructure in various parts of the region are a matter of grave concern; they serve to further destabilize an already precarious global energy landscape. Such attacks are unacceptable and must cease immediately."

NIA probes foreign plot in N-E, sends seized phones for analysis

NEW DELHI, MARCH 19: Alarmed by the international conspiracy to foment trouble in India's Northeast, security agencies are seeking to unravel the insidious agenda to exploit ethnic groups to threaten national security by ensuring a complete forensic study of the mobile phones of the seven arrested foreigners, a self-styled US mercenary and six Ukrainian nationals, for data extraction. Social media accounts of the arrested accused are also being scanned to trace the source of funding, the mastermind of the conspiracy and possible other accomplices, officials said. Security agencies have now sent seized mobile phones of these seven accused persons to

Indian Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT-In), a specialised cyber arm of the government for data extraction and its analysis, they said. "It is very important to analyse the data of their mobile phones to unearth the conspiracy which was being hatched by accused persons to use local ethnic groups of India to hamper national security of India," the National Investigation Agency's FIR stated. Expanding the extent of its probe, the security agencies are questioning the accused about the route opted by them and to apprehend close unknown associates, who are still at large. The agencies are also looking at the accused's social media activities to

identify their unknown accomplices, the officials said. The accused are also alleged to have imported huge consignments of drones from Europe to Myanmar through India for use of the EAGs, they said, adding that the source of their funding and "mastermind" were also being ascertained. All the seven were held by the anti-terror probe agency NIA and on March 16 special court sent them to 11 days custody of the probe agency. All of them have been charged for engaging in unlawful activities for allegedly helping armed militia in Myanmar, which work closely with anti-India insurgent groups, the officials said.

42 illegal resorts inside STR sealed, TN tells HC

Chennai: THE Tamil Nadu government has informed the Madras High Court that 42 illegal resorts operating in the ecologically sensitive zone of Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserve (STR) have been locked and sealed after they were found to be functioning without any valid permissions. The submission was made by special government pleader (SGP) T Seenivasan, representing the Principal Chief Conservator of Forests and Chief Wildlife Warden, before the first division bench of Chief Justice Sushrut Arvind Dharmadhikari and Justice G Arul Murugan when a petition filed by Dr R Karpagam of Coimbatore came up for hearing recently. The SGP told the court that the authorities concerned had conducted inspection in the STR areas and found 53 resorts/farmhouses located within the eco-sensitive zone; 11 of them have been operating with valid permission; and 42 without permission and that were locked and sealed. Advocate S P Chokkalingam, appearing for the petitioner, stated that action has not been taken so far against certain other resorts and an affidavit, in this regard, was filed in the court. The SGP said that steps have been taken for cracking the whip on the remaining resorts and a fresh report on the action taken against the illegal resorts would be placed in the court. The bench granted three weeks' time to the respondent authorities to take further action against the remaining resorts and file the status report. Meanwhile, the bench said that the appellate authority concerned shall consider the appeals of the resorts, which were closed, if they file appeals against the lock and seal.

India Strongly Condemns Pakistan Over Attacks on Afghanistan

New Delhi, March 19: On Thursday, India once again strongly condemned Pakistan for the airstrikes it conducted against civilians in Afghanistan. Furthermore, India also severely criticized Pakistan's activities regarding nuclear proliferation. When asked about media reports citing Tulsi Gabbard—the U.S. Director of National Intelligence—who warned that Pakistan's expanding missile program could eventually bring the United States within its strike range, Ministry of Exter-

nal Affairs Spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal stated the following during his weekly media briefing on Thursday evening: "As far as Pakistan is concerned, they have a history of clandestinely proliferating nuclear weapons. Such reports once again clearly underscore to the world the nature of the danger they pose and the threats engendered by their covert nuclear activities." Reiterating that India has already condemned the recent airstrikes conducted by Pakistan against its neighbor, Afghanistan,

the Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson further stated: "Pakistan targeted (Afghan) civilians and inflicted suffering upon the people... This serves to vitiate the regional environment and is entirely unhelpful." On Tuesday, India "unequivocally and strongly condemned" the airstrike carried out by Pakistan on Monday night against the 'Omid' drug rehabilitation center in the Afghan capital, Kabul; it further characterized the attack as a "cowardly and unconscionable act of violence."

India-Pak ties remain at risk of N-conflict, says US report

Chandigarh: INDIA-PAKISTAN relations continue to pose a risk of nuclear conflict despite neither side seeking open confrontation, the US Intelligence Community has warned in its Annual Threat Assessment presented to the US Senate. The 34-page report noted that while both countries aim to avoid escalation, the presence of terrorist actors keeps the region vulnerable to sudden crises. "During the past year, South Asia remained a source of enduring security challenges for the US. India-Pakistan relations remain a risk for nuclear conflict given past conflicts where these two nuclear states squared off, creating the danger of escalation," the report said. "President Donald Trump's intervention de-escalated the most recent nuclear tensions, and we assess that neither country seeks to return to open conflict, but that conditions exist for terrorist actors to continue to create catalysts for crises," it said. On South Asia more broadly, the report highlighted



the continued presence of ISIS-K (Islamic State Khorasan Province), which retains ambitions to carry out external attacks, even as the Taliban has stepped up countermeasures. The assessment also raised concerns over Pakistan's advancing missile capabilities, noting that its military is developing increasingly sophisticated systems that could extend strike capabilities beyond South Asia, potentially including intercontinental ballistic missiles that may threaten the US. The report noted that while there had been noticeable improvement on the use of chemical drugs, China

and India remained the primary source countries for illicit fentanyl precursor chemicals and pillpressing equipment. "Following a meeting in October 2025 between Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping in Busan, South Korea, Beijing agreed to halt the flow of fentanyl precursor chemicals to North America," it stated. "India has increased counternarcotics efforts during the last year. In January this year, Prime Minister Modi and other Indian officials signalled a willingness to deepen engagement with the US authorities on counternarcotics."

TN panel on centre-state relations to file report in three parts

Chennai: THE three-member committee headed by former Supreme Court Judge Kurian Joseph appointed by Tamil Nadu government to examine centre-state relations has decided to file its report in three volumes instead of two parts as decided earlier by incorporating contemporary issues such as digital governance. The tenure of the panel may also be extended by six to seven months, sources

said. Speaking to TNIF, retired IAS officer and former Vice-Chancellor of Maritime University, Ashok Vardhan Shetty, one of the members of the panel, said that it has been decided to expand the report from the initially planned 24 chapters to 30. "We decided that the earlier terminology of interim and final report was not appropriate. Instead, we will bring out a trilogy, like three parts

with 10 chapters each," Shetty said. Part One of the report, published in February, according to Shetty, deals with the controversial issues in the federal framework including the role of governors, language policy, education, healthcare and the GST. "The remaining two volumes will cover emerging areas such as climate change, digital governance, and local government

structures, which the earlier commissions did not fully address. The three-part report will be the most comprehensive contemporary review of India's federal architecture," Shetty said. The committee, which was scheduled to submit its findings within two years by May 2027, has informed the Tamil Nadu government that its work is likely to continue until December 2027. The committee has

decided to go beyond the suggestions and findings of the previous commissions on centre-state relations including the Sarkaria Commission and the Punchhi Commission. While the previous commissions took three to five years to complete fewer chapters, the current panel aims to explore more subjects but deliver the report in three parts within a tight deadline of less than three years.

Today horoscope



Conflicts between husband and wife will be removed and happiness will increase. Relatives will come looking for the house. Solve old problems. You will visit holy places. There is sudden profit in business. You will finish work quickly at work. A day of renewal.

Anxiety will increase before completing the work. Talk to children gently. Do not over speed the vehicle. Handle expensive items with care. Problems will arise due to employees in business. Implicit objections will come and go at work. A profitable day with flurries.



First stop doubting because Moon is in Rasi. Ego problems with family will come and go. Cross the roads carefully. You will have to work extra hard at work. Do not disclose business secrets. A day to let go.

You will complete challenging tasks with ease. Fraternal assistance is available. You will buy expensive jewelry. There is good news on the way of the wife. Officer will respect you in office. Unexpected profits will come in business. A day where talent emerges.



Conflicts between husband and wife will be removed and happiness will increase. Relatives will come looking for the house. Solve old problems. You will visit holy places. There is sudden profit in business. You will finish work quickly at work. A day of renewal.

You will attend auspicious events with family. The government has an advantage. A favorable verdict will be obtained in the case. You will get the friendship of those in positions of authority. You will adopt new strategies in business. At work, you will behave like a superior. A day of progress through effort.

You will take some important decisions boldly. Siblings are compatible. You will participate in auspicious events. The government has an advantage. You will profit by taking a different approach to business. Support for your opinion at work will increase. Discussions will be successful.

You will meet a childhood friend. You will complete some important tasks with the help of government officials. Vain arguments with mother will come and go. Don't tarnish your reputation by seeking justice for others. Partners will cooperate in business. There will be job satisfaction. A day where expectations are fulfilled.

Since the Moon is in the sign, four or five jobs will have to be done in one day. Expenses will be borne by friends and relatives. By pointing out the mistakes of others, you will get into arguments. Be moderate with officials at work. A deal in business will be delayed. A day that requires patience.

Love support will increase between husband and wife. There will be a happy atmosphere in the family. Half-finished works will be completed. Expected money will come in hand. New ventures in business will be strengthened. You will finish work quickly at work. Good day.

You will meet a childhood friend. You will complete some important tasks with the help of government officials. Vain arguments with mother will come and go. Don't tarnish your reputation by seeking justice for others. Partners will cooperate in business. There will be job satisfaction. A day where expectations are fulfilled.

The government has an advantage. You will benefit from others. There is an unexpected cash flow. Old relatives will visit and talk to friends. Debts in business will increase. You will behave in a manner that will impress the superiors at work. A day of sudden yoga.

Postal Ballot Facility for Media Personnel and Election Staff

Chennai, March 19: The Election Commission of India has extended the postal ballot facility to media personnel, election staff, and service voters engaged in election duties. According to the Election Commission's notification, media personnel who possess official authorization to collect news on election day will be categorized as 'absentee voters on essential services'; consequently, they will be eligible to cast their votes via postal ballots. Similarly, voters deployed for election duties may collect their ballot papers at special centers designated exclusively for them. At these centers—where an environment ensuring complete confidentiality is maintained—they may cast their votes and submit them. The Election Commission has reiterated that service voters—including members of the armed forces—will be issued ballot papers through the 'Electronically

Transmitted Postal Ballot System' (ETPBS). This system facilitates the swift distribution of ballot papers immediately following the publication of the final list of contesting candidates; this not only eliminates delays associated with postal transit but also enhances voter participation. Significantly, these categories of voters are not required to pay any postal charges. Officials stated that these measures constitute part of the broader initiatives undertaken by the Election Commission to render the electoral process more inclusive and accessible. In particular, this facility will be of immense assistance to individuals who, due to their official duties, are unable to visit polling stations in person to cast their votes. Furthermore, the Election Commission has directed officials to strictly adhere to the prescribed regulations to safeguard the integrity and confidentiality of the voting process.

Woman Convicted in Murder Case Acquitted Due to Failure to Conduct DNA Testing

Madurai: The Madurai Bench of the Madras High Court recently acquitted a woman who had been sentenced to life imprisonment by a Sessions Court in Pudukkottai on charges of murdering her husband in 2021. A division bench comprising Justices N. Anand Venkatesh and P. Dhanabal delivered this verdict. The judges issued this order, pointing out the failure of both the Pudukkottai police and the trial court to conduct a DNA test to identify the body recovered from a well located near the couple's residence. While hearing an

appeal petition filed by the woman in 2022 challenging her conviction, the judges observed that in a murder case, establishing the identity of the deceased is the primary fact that the prosecution must prove. They further stated that the court could examine other aspects of the case only if the identity of the deceased is firmly established. However, in this specific case, the deceased's mother had identified the body—which was recovered in a highly decomposed and severely disfigured state—based solely on a pair of footwear and

a mobile phone found lying nearby. The judges severely criticized the investigating officer for failing to send DNA samples collected from the body for forensic analysis. The judges further noted that the trial court bore equal responsibility for proceeding with the case based merely on conjectures, without insisting on a DNA test and the corresponding report to confirm the identity of the deceased. "Proceeding with a case based on the mere assumption that an identified body is indeed that of the deceased, and

basing the verdict of a case solely upon such an assumption, is an extremely perilous course of action. Instances where such assumptions were ultimately proven to be erroneous have occurred within this very Court; specifically, there have been incidents where the individual presumed to be dead caused shock by appearing in person before the Court during the course of the trial proceedings," the Judges observed. On this very basis, they set aside the order of conviction issued by the trial court.

'Only the Valor of Freedom Fighters Should Be Remembered, Not Their Caste'

Madurai: Expressing its displeasure over attempts by the public to cast a casteist hue upon freedom fighters—rather than remembering them for their valor—the Madurai Bench of the Madras High Court recently upheld an order issued by the District Collector of Ramanathapuram. This order had rejected an application submitted by an individual seeking permission to erect a bronze statue of the freedom fighter Veerapandiya Kattabomman on his own private land located

in Udaikulam village, Ramanathapuram district. While hearing a petition filed by S. Kumarasamy challenging the rejection order issued on November 7, 2025, Justice T. Bharatha Chakravarthy observed that the District Collector had denied permission precisely because he perceived that the petitioner—along with members of his caste—was attempting to give a casteist color to Kattabomman by putting forward the aforementioned request. The Judge pointed out that, in their rejection order, the officials had

noted with anguish how the construction of statues and memorials for certain leaders who fought for our independence has currently evolved into a means for caste consolidation. The Judge opined that officials are compelled to issue such orders when the public forgets the valor with which freedom fighters fought to protect our nation, and instead chooses to remember them based on imaginary concepts—such as 'caste'—that exist solely within the human mind. He further ruled that the constitutional mandate

to create a casteless, egalitarian society cannot be overlooked; consequently, there were no grounds to interfere with the aforementioned order. Pointing out that the government has already established a memorial for Kattabomman in the village of Panchalankurichi in the Thoothukudi district, the Judge observed that there was no impediment preventing the petitioner or others from visiting that site to pay homage to the great freedom fighter, and accordingly disposed of the petition.

HC junks plea, says can't bar political parties from forming pre-poll alliance

Chennai: THE Madras High Court has dismissed a public interest litigation (PIL) seeking a direction to the Election Commission of India (ECI) to bar political parties from forming pre-poll alliances. The first bench of Chief Justice Sushrut Arvind Dharmadhikari and Justice G Arul Murugan on Wednesday rejected the plea filed by R Viswanathan, stating that such a relief cannot be granted. The court also observed that the

petitioner cannot approach the ECI with a representation in this regard. Grilling the petitioner's counsel as to what provision of the law he wanted to amend, the bench noted that a similar petition was dismissed by the Madurai Bench. Viswanathan, founder of MGR Makkal Katchi, had contended that pre-poll alliances lack principled policies and are merely "alliances of convenience" that undermine stable

democracy. Meanwhile, the bench posed certain questions to another PIL petitioner including if the vires of a Central Act can be challenged in a PIL. The queries were raised when the PIL filed by advocate T Sivagnanasambandan challenging eight sections of the Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) Act came up for hearing on Wednesday. The petition alleged

that the provisions of these eight sections are unconstitutional and go against the principles of basic structure theory and federalism. Noting that VB-G- RAM G is a Central Act, the bench asked the counsel for the petitioner ML Ravi how the petitioner was affected by it. When it said it would impose costs for filing the petition without substantial grounds, the petitioner withdrew the petition.

Farmer murdered over power dispute; 3 held

Dindigul: THREE persons were arrested on Thursday in connection with the murder of a 46-year-old farmer, allegedly over a dispute near Palani in Dindigul. The incident occurred after the victim, V Vadivelu, a resident of Melkaraipatti village in Palani taluk, exposed the misuse of free electricity on another farmland. According to sources, Vadivelu owned

several acres of farmland in the area. He had recently raised a complaint against his neighbour, P Mahalingam (63), accusing him of misusing a free agriculture power connection to draw water from a borewell and sell it to private tanker operators for the past few months. Acting on Vadivelu's complaint, officials from Tangedco's Dindigul office conducted

an inspection and imposed a fine of ₹2.5 lakh on Mahalingam. Police said that the fine is believed to have triggered animosity. Following this, Mahalingam, along with his son Arunkumar (25) and neighbour Muthu Kumar (48), allegedly conspired to attack Vadivelu. On Wednesday evening, while Vadivelu was walking through his farmland, the trio allegedly

intercepted and assaulted him using sticks and iron rods. He sustained severe injuries and was initially taken to the Dharapuram Government Hospital. Due to his critical condition, he was referred to a hospital in Coimbatore, but he died on the way. Based on a complaint, the Keeranur police registered a case. All three suspects were arrested on Thursday. Further probe is underway

Non-tribals' plea seeking forest land rights binned

Chennai: THE Madras High Court has dismissed the appeals filed by non-tribals claiming rights over forest land while stating that those who claim such rights should prove they have been staying on forest land for three generations and are eking out a livelihood by cultivation said land, apart from having their residences built on it. The appeals were filed by 21 persons, including A C Murugesan, P Kandaswamy and Amudha of Salem district, against the dismissal of their writ petition regarding forest land rights by a single judge in 2022. They had stated that their ancestors were in possession and enjoyment of 291.60 acres of land at Suriyur village in Panamarathupatti panchayat union in Salem district and had put up residences on the land, besides doing cultivation of agricultural produce there for more than 75 years. When the area was declared as a reserved forest, they sought the collector to declare their rights under the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, but their plea was rejected and so they filed the writ petitions. The single judge dismissed the writ petition, and so, they preferred the appeal. A division bench of justices S M Subramaniam and K Surender dismissed the writ appeals finding the appellants failing to prove their claim of rights with substantial evidence. The bench noted that Section 2 (o) of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act defines 'other traditional forest dwellers' as those who have primarily been residing in and depend upon forest land for bonafide livelihood needs at least for three generations prior to December 13, 2005. "The appellants are not eligible to claim any right under the Act without establishing the fact that they solely depend on the forest or forest land for bona fide livelihood needs," the bench said in the order. Stating that the very spirit of the Act is to protect the livelihood of the forest dwellers, it said, therefore, it must be established beyond any pale of doubt that they are residing in forest areas and doing cultivation for their livelihood. In the absence of any proof to establish the essential ingredients and the spirit under the provisions of the Act, the appellants are not entitled for any relief as such sought for in their application.

'History-Sheeteer' Arrested in Case of Sexual Assault and Murder of Schoolgirl

Thoothukudi, March 19: The Thoothukudi district police on Thursday arrested a 'history-sheeteer' (a habitual offender with a criminal record) in connection with an incident involving the sexual assault and murder of a 12th-grade student in Vedanatham, near Vilathikulam in Thoothukudi district. The accused in this case has been identified as Dharma Muneeswaran, alias 'Maaveeran' (37), a native of Sayalkudi in Ramanathapuram district. It has come to light that he is a convict who had previously served a sentence for the sexual assault and murder of a 65-year-old elderly woman in the Keezheerall area, near Ettayapuram, and was currently out on conditional bail. Police officials stated that, in accordance with the bail

conditions imposed by the Madurai Bench of the High Court, he had been appearing daily at the Mahila Court in Thoothukudi to sign the attendance register. He was arrested when he arrived at the court for his scheduled appearance. Investigating officers revealed that the accused committed the crime on the evening of March 10, while he was returning after signing the attendance register at the court. A total of approximately 24 criminal cases, including 17 cases of theft, are currently pending against him. This arrest was effected following an intensive investigation conducted from multiple angles and over a sustained period. Upon analyzing CCTV footage captured by cameras installed at a wind farm located

near the crime scene, investigators discovered that on March 10, a man was recorded traveling on a two-wheeler towards the forest area. It was subsequently established that the vehicle in question was linked to a theft case registered in Parthibanur, Ramanathapuram district. Based on this information, the perpetrator was identified. Superintendent of Police C. Madan informed reporters that the accused was arrested following a scientific and systematic investigation conducted from multiple angles. The investigative teams involved in this operation comprised four Deputy Superintendents of Police, six Inspectors, and approximately 150 constables; they were assisted by fingerprint

experts, forensic specialists, and a sniffer dog squad. The police analyzed the Call Detail Records (CDRs) of 2,579 phone calls registered in the areas surrounding the crime scene. Furthermore, a total of 461 'history-sheet criminals'—including known offenders and former inmates—were interrogated. During the course of this investigation, approximately 800 men from the areas of Vedanatham, Veppalodai, and Duraisamyapuram were also questioned. The Superintendent of Police ruled out the involvement of five individuals—whose samples had previously been sent for DNA testing in connection with this case—in the crime.

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31 Upper House MPs billionaires, says repor

THE Rajya Sabha includes as many as 31 members, around 14 percent of the total strength, who have declared assets worth billions of rupees. Among them, the ruling BJP has six MPs, the Congress has five, the YSR Congress Party (YSRCP) has four, while both the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) and Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS) have two each. In addition, three MPs from the Nationalist Congress Party have reported assets exceeding ₹100 crore. According to a recent report by the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR), approximately 32 per cent of sitting Rajya Sabha MPs have declared criminal cases against themselves, while 14 per cent are billionaires. The report is based on an analysis of affidavits submitted by 229 out of 233 MPs, including 37 newly elected members. Of the 229 MPs analysed, 73 (32 percent) have declared criminal cases, with 36 (16 percent) facing serious charges. These include one MP charged with murder, four with attempted murder, and three with offences related to crimes against women. Party-wise, 27 out of 99 BJP MPs, 12 out of 28 Congress MPs, four out of 13 Trinamool Congress MPs, and four out of 10 AAP MPs have declared criminal cases. Additionally, three MPs each from the CPI(M) and BRS have also disclosed criminal cases. The report further notes that 31 MPs (14 percent) have assets worth billions of rupees. The average declared assets of a Rajya Sabha MP stand at ₹120.69 crore. Among major parties, the average assets per MP are ₹28.29 crore for the BJP, ₹28.61 crore for Congress, ₹7.70 crore for the TMC, and ₹74.09 crore for the AAP. Other parties include YSRCP (₹522.63 crore), Samajwadi Party (₹399.71 crore), Biju Janata Dal (₹105.63 crore), and DMK (₹11.90 crore). BRS MP Bandi Partha Saradhi has declared the highest assets at over ₹5,300 crore, followed by AAP's Rajinder Gupta with more than ₹5,053 crore, and YSRCP's Alla Ayodhya Rami Reddy with over ₹2,577 crore. At the other end, AAP MP Sant Balbir Singh is the least wealthy, with assets of around a mere ₹3 lakh. He is followed by Maharaaja Sanajaoba Leishemba of Manipur with approximately ₹5 lakh, and TMC MP Prakash Chik Baraik with about ₹9 lakh.

Media personnel, poll staff to get postal ballot facility

CHENNAI, MARCH 19: The Election Commission of India has extended postal ballot facilities to media personnel on poll duty, election staff, and service voters. According to the Commission, media persons authorized for poll day coverage will be treated as absentee voters on essential services and will be eligible to cast their votes through postal ballots. Similarly, voters deployed on election duty will receive their ballots at designated facilitation centers, where they can record and return their votes under conditions that ensure complete confidentiality. The ECI has also reiterated that Service voters, including members of the ar-

med forces, will be provided their ballots electronically through the Transmitted Postal Ballot System. This system enables Swift delivery of ballot papers once the list of contesting candidates is finalized, eliminating postal delays and ensuring wider participation. Importantly, such voters will not bear any postal charges. Officials stated that the measures are part of a broader effort by the Commission to make the Electoral process more inclusive and accessible, particularly for those unable to be physically present at polling stations due to official duties. The ECI has also directed officials to strictly adhere to protocols to maintain the integrity and secrecy of the voting process.

Palaniswami meets Shah in Delhi, NDA likely to seal seat deal today

Chennai: THE seat-sharing deal between the AIADMK, BJP, and other NDA parties in Tamil Nadu is expected to be finalised by Friday with AIADMK general secretary Edappadi K Palaniswami flying to New Delhi on Thursday to meet with Union Home Minister Amit Shah. On arrival in Delhi, when asked about the purpose of his visit, Palaniswami told media that he

would explain to them about it on Friday. Late on Thursday night, he visited Shah's residence for talks. AMMK general secretary TTV Dhinakaran is also leaving for New Delhi on Friday. Sources said that the PMK president Anbumani Ramadoss may also reach the capital on the same day, besides BJP president Nainar Nagenthiran to finalise the agreement. The BJP is keen on securing

at least 29 seats, to ensure that it is not contesting in fewer number of seats than the Congress in the DMK-led alliance. The likely allocations for other parties are expected to be around 18 for the PMK, eight for the AMMK, and four for the TMC. The IJK, New Justice Party, and Thamizhaga Makkal Munnetra Kazhagam may each secure two seats. Two other outfits may get one seat

each. Sources said the AIADMK is keen on contesting in 166 to 174 constituencies, and the Puratchi Bharatham party may contest in the AIADMK symbol, while the IJK and NJP may contest in the BJP symbol. The deal could not be finalised through the talks between Union Minister Piyush Goyal and Palaniswami, which necessitated the latter's visit to Delhi for the same, sources said.

HC, state officials meet ahead of release of list after adjudication

Kolkata: CALCUTTA High Court Chief Justice Sujoy Paul on Thursday held a meeting with West Bengal Home Secretary Sanghamitra Ghosh, DGP Siddh Nath Gupta and Kolkata Police Commissioner Ajay Kumar Nand at 10 am. The meeting came a day before the Election Commission is set to publish the first supplementary list of voters marked as "under adjudication", whose eligibility has been cleared by judicial officers. EC sources

described the meeting as "significant ahead of the publication of the first supplementary list of adjudicated voters in the state". On February 28, the EC had published the final electoral rolls after the Special Intensive Revision, listing over 6.44 crore eligible voters. Alongside, the EC had identified over 60.6 lakh voters under categories of logical discrepancies and unmapped details. Following Supreme Court orders, these voters were

classified as "under adjudication". Sources said around 23 lakh cases under 'under adjudication' have been disposed of so far. Approximately 700 judicial officers, including 200 from Bihar and Jharkhand, are engaged in the scrutiny process. A source suggested law and order may have been a key discussion point in the meeting, as there could be unrest if a large number of names do not appear in the supplementary list. Observers said the

adjudicated voters could influence outcomes in around 100 seats dominated by minorities and the Matua community in districts, including Jalpaiguri, North and South Dinajpur, Malda, Murshidabad, Nadia, and parts of 24-Parganas and East Bardhaman. Analyst Subhomoy Moitra said, "It's statistically significant considering the huge number of adjudicated voters. Neither Trinamool nor BJP seek proper clarifications from the EC for the exact figure."

Doctors Concerned Over Delay in Government Appointments

Chennai, March 19: Doctors have expressed concern regarding the delay in issuing appointment orders to those selected for government service through an examination conducted by the Tamil Nadu Medical Services Recruitment Board (TNMRB). They have warned that this delay could result in the loss of an entire academic year for many selected doctors and could also adversely affect the state's healthcare system.

Medical Officers. The examination, held on January 25, was taken by 20,867 candidates, of whom 16,986 qualified. Following certificate verification and reservation procedures, 1,071 doctors were finalized for appointment. Among them, appointment orders were issued by the Minister of Health to those who secured the top 100 ranks; orders were issued the following day to those ranked between 101 and 320. However, the remaining candidates have neither been invited for counseling nor allotted postings to date. This delay has created a sense of uncertainty among the selected doctors, who had anticipated a swift induction into government service immediately upon qualifying in the competitive examination. The Legal Coordination Committee has pointed out that the initially announced 1,100 vacancies were subsequently reduced

to 1,071, and that even these reduced positions have not yet been fully filled. In a statement issued regarding this matter, Dr. S. Perumal Pillai, Chairman of the Legal Coordination Committee, stated that this situation has caused "immense shock and mental distress" among young doctors who have spent over five years pursuing medical education and were relying solely on government employment. He further warned that this delay could have severe repercussions on their academic and professional careers. The committee highlighted that, generally, two years of government service experience is a prerequisite for eligibility to appear for the 'NEET-PG' entrance examination for postgraduate medical studies. "With March 31st set as the deadline, if candidates fail to join duty by that date, they stand to lose an entire academic year," he stated. The LCC also warned that prolonged delays in appointments could have

long-term consequences for the delivery of public healthcare services. "If appointments are not made in a timely manner, it will eventually lead to a shortage of specialist and super-specialist doctors in government hospitals," the statement noted. Health Department officials stated that the appointment process is currently underway, and that the delays encountered are primarily due to administrative procedural complexities. "The recruitment process involves several stages, including document verification, job allocation, and administrative approvals. We are expediting this process; all necessary measures are currently being taken to ensure that the remaining candidates receive their appointment orders as soon as possible," an official said. The Health Department indicated that it is exploring the feasibility of completing this recruitment process

entirely within the stipulated deadline, thereby ensuring that eligible candidates do not miss out on their academic opportunities. Highlighting the increasing workload on public health institutions, the LCC pointed to recent remarks made by the Health Minister, noting that the number of patients visiting government hospitals has nearly tripled. Despite the presence of approximately 1.5 lakh registered doctors in Tamil Nadu, fewer than 20,000 doctors are currently serving in government hospitals and health centers to cater to the healthcare needs of a population of nearly eight crore people. The group further alleged that while the Tamil Nadu government has been focusing solely on establishing new medical colleges and hospitals, there has been no significant increase in the number of sanctioned posts for doctors and nurses over the past 15 years.



► To ensure that election-related activities for the 2026 Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly General Elections are conducted in a smooth, free, and fair manner, a review meeting with election officials in charge was held at the Control Room Conference Hall of the District Collector's Office. The meeting was presided over by the General Observers appointed by the Election Commission of India for the Nilgiris District—namely, Ms. Tanvi Sundriyal (108 Udhamandalam Assembly Constituency), Mr. S. Harish (109 Gudalur Assembly Constituency), and Mr. Suhas (110 Coonoor Assembly Constituency)—along with Police Observer Ms. Latha Manoj, IPS, and Expenditure Observers Mr. Gajendra Singh, IRS (108 Udhamandalam), Mr. Vaibhav Madhav Rao, IRS (109 Gudalur), and Mr. Ajit Dan, IRS (110 Coonoor). The meeting took place in the presence of the District Election Officer / District Collector, Ms. Lakshmi Bhavaya Tanneeru. Also present were District Superintendent of Police Ms. Nisha, Additional District Election Officer / Additional Collector (Development) Ms. Abhilasha Gaur, Additional District Election Officer / District Revenue Officer Mr. Narayanan, among others.

NIA probes foreign plot in N-E, sends seized phones for analysis

NEW DELHI, MARCH 19: Alarmed by the international conspiracy to foment trouble in India's Northeast, security agencies are seeking to unravel the insidious agenda to exploit ethnic groups to threaten national security by ensuring a complete forensic study of the mobile phones of the seven arrested foreigners, a self-styled US mercenary and six Ukrainian nationals, for data extraction. Social media accounts of the arrested accused are also being scanned to trace the source of funding, the mastermind of the conspiracy and possible other accomplices, officials said. Security agencies have now sent seized mobile phones of these seven accused persons to Indian

Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT-In), a specialised cyber arm of the government for data extraction and its analysis, they said. "It is very important to analyse the data of their mobile phones to unearth the conspiracy which was being hatched by accused persons to use local ethnic groups of India to hamper national security of India," the National Investigation Agency's FIR stated. Expanding the extent of its probe, the security agencies are questioning the accused about the route opted by them and to apprehend close unknown associates, who are still at large. The agencies are also looking at the accused's

social media activities to identify their unknown accomplices, the officials said. The accused are also alleged to have imported huge consignments of drones from Europe to Myanmar through India for use of the EAGs, they said, adding that the source of their funding and "mastermind" were also being ascertained. All the seven were held by the anti-terror probe agency NIA and on March 16 special court sent them to 11 days custody of the probe agency. All of them have been charged for engaging in unlawful activities for allegedly helping armed militia in Myanmar, which work closely with anti-India insurgent groups, the officials said.

Farmer murdered over power dispute; 3 held

Dindigul: THREE persons were arrested on Thursday in connection with the murder of a 46-year-old farmer, allegedly over a dispute near Palani in Dindigul. The incident occurred after the victim, V Vadivelu, a resident of Melkaraipatti village in Palani taluk, exposed the misuse of free electricity

to private tanker operators for the past few months. Acting on Vadivelu's complaint, officials from Tangedco's Dindigul office conducted an inspection and imposed a fine of '2.5 lakh on Mahalingam. Police said that the fine is believed to have triggered animosity. Following

this, Mahalingam, along with his son Arunkumar (25) and neighbour Muthu Kumar (48), allegedly conspired to attack Vadivelu. On Wednesday evening, while Vadivelu was walking through his farmland, the trio allegedly intercepted and assaulted him using sticks and iron rods. He sustained severe

injuries and was initially taken to the Dharapuram Government Hospital. Due to his critical condition, he was referred to a hospital in Coimbatore, but he died on the way. Based on a complaint, the Keeranur police registered a case. All three suspects were arrested on Thursday. Further probe is underway

Bihar plans '81K-cr push to boost power infrastructure

State focuses on generation, transmission & renewables

NEW DELHI, MARCH 19: In its bid to ramp up energy infrastructure, Bihar has plans to invest '81,000 crore for power generation, transmission and distribution network upgrade. The total outlay of '81,000 crore under the Tariff Based Competitive Bidding (TBCB) mode will include '38,950 crore for power generation, '16,194 crore for transmission reform and '22,951 crore for distribution improvements besides '3,346 crore for maintenance of existing infrastructure. As focus state at India Electricity Summit 2026 at Yashobhoomi in New Delhi, Bihar highlighted its achievements, policy direction and future-ready energy ecosystem while engaging actively with investors and industry leaders. The state government noted

that a project is coming up in Pirpainti with an investment of around '30,000 crore, and solar and battery storage project also proposed in the Kajra. "Under the pumped storage policy, investment proposals worth '13,000 crore have already been received within a short span, indicating growing investor confidence," the state government said in a statement. Under the Renewable Energy Policy 2025, Bihar has set a target of developing 24 GW of renewable energy capacity and 6.1 GW of energy storage by 2030. "Investor-friendly provisions such as transmission charge exemptions, energy banking, single-window clearances and carbon credit mechanisms are expected to further enhance the state's attractiveness as an investment destination," the Bihar government

said. Bihar's energy minister Bijendra Prasad Yadav inaugurated state pavilion at the summit. "The state is positioning itself as a forward-looking energy hub, committed to driving investment, innovation and sustainable growth in the sector," the Bihar government added. The state has witnessed sustained transformation over the past two decades from a power availability of less than 700 MW in 2005, now meets a demand exceeding 8,700 MW. "Reliable, near round-the-clock electricity supply has been extended across urban and rural areas, with over 22 million consumers connected to the grid. Universal electrification has enabled new avenues for economic growth and development," the state government said.

New Delhi, March 19: Ahead of the Kerala Assembly elections, senior Congress leader Shashi Tharoor shared his views on Thursday. He stated that since he is not contesting as a candidate in this election, he does not figure in the list of potential candidates for the Chief Minister's post; furthermore, he expressed his belief that, as a matter of principle, the Chief Minister should be selected from among the elected Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs). In an exclusive interview with the news agency PTI, Mr. Tharoor noted that since he is not a candidate, he does not need to concern himself with any specific Assembly constituency alone; instead, his role in the state elections would be a "mixed bag"—one with various dimensions. He further added that

he is eagerly looking forward to traveling "across the length and breadth of the state" (to every nook and corner) for the election campaign. Mr. Tharoor also drew attention to the advice recently offered by former Congress President Rahul Gandhi to the leaders of the United Democratic Front (UDF). In that instance, Rahul Gandhi had metaphorically urged all the leaders to "dance together"; Mr. Tharoor remarked that this was a "great message" and observed that, currently, "everyone has indeed started dancing together." While stating that he would be delighted if the Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF) simply secures a majority of seats in the 140-member Kerala Assembly, Mr. Tharoor added that achieving

a tally between 85 and 100 seats would be highly advantageous for the party. Citing a metaphor from the game of cricket, the Congress Member of Parliament remarked, "The UDF team is currently bowling 'googlies'; specifically, we are employing this strategy against the CPI(M)-led Left Democratic Front (LDF). This is because they currently find themselves on a 'sticky wicket'—a precarious situation—and by capitalizing on that context, we can bring them down." Mr. Tharoor, the Member of Parliament for the Thiruvananthapuram constituency, further stated that given the trend of modern elections shifting towards a "presidential style," he personally prefers the practice of projecting a Chief Ministerial

candidate prior to the election itself. However, he noted that in the specific context of Kerala, the Congress party possesses the inherent strength to secure electoral victory by centering its campaign on a policy agenda, a vision, and the party symbol—rather than relying solely on the face or name of a single individual. When asked whether the absence of a specific "face" in its campaign—in contrast to the LDF alliance, which features the distinct and recognizable figure of incumbent Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan—might adversely affect the Congress party's prospects of victory, Mr. Tharoor responded as follows: "Personally, I concur with the sentiment you have expressed; that is to say, I feel that we, too, could have adopted such

an approach. However—as the party leadership pointed out to me—the Congress party has never, in its history, employed such a strategy before. They have opted for an approach premised on the principle that an election is contested on behalf of the party as an entity, and that the party selects its leader only *after* it has secured a victory. The practical implication of this is that the party's 'High Command' will select the leader following consultations with the newly elected Members of the Legislative Assembly," he said. "The Congress party possesses a vast and expansive presence across the entire state; it wields deep influence in every nook and cranny of Kerala. The Congress party has a presence in every street, every village, and every ward," he stated.

'The System Failed Us': Man Who Lost 9 Family Members Revisits Palam Fire Site

New Delhi, March 19: On Thursday—the day after a horrific fire claimed nine lives in the Palam area of Southwest Delhi—a grief-stricken father returned to the charred ruins of his home. He alleged that the negligence of "the system" was what had robbed him of everything he held dear. Rajender Kashyap, who lost nine members of his family in the blaze, entered the burnt-out building located near Ram Chowk Market as part of the ongoing investigation, accompanied by teams from the police and the Forensic Science Laboratory (FSL). Upon emerging from the building, overwhelmed by unbearable grief, he broke down in tears and leveled accusations against the authorities. "This is a failure of the system. Had rescue operations been initiated in time, my family members would still be alive," Kashyap stated in anguish. Situated in a narrow lane near the Palam Metro Station, the four-story building housed a shop selling textiles and cosmetic products across its basement, ground, and first floors, while the family resided on the upper

floors of the structure. The fire broke out around 6:15 AM on Wednesday. As the flames rapidly engulfed the entire building, nine people—including a 70-year-old woman and three young girls (one of whom was just three years old)—lost their lives. Three others sustained injuries while attempting to flee the blaze. Eyewitnesses had previously alleged that there were delays in the rescue operations. They stated that the hydraulic crane initially brought to the scene malfunctioned, and it took approximately one hour for a second crane to arrive; consequently, crucial time required for rescue operations was wasted. On Thursday, amidst questions regarding the cause of the fire and the efficiency of emergency rescue services, neighbors gathered outside the building to hold a vigil and pay tribute to the deceased. Some residents suspected that a short circuit might have been the cause of the fire; they pointed out that an electrical panel located near the staircase on the ground floor could have been the point where the

fire originated. However, the exact cause of the fire has not yet been officially confirmed. "Rescue efforts arrived far too late. Had help arrived on time, the situation would certainly have turned out differently," remarked a neighbor standing beside a grieving father. Another local resident alleged, "Had they acted just a little faster, at least four to five lives could have been saved." "The hydraulic system of the first fire engine to arrive was non-functional. That delay was what ultimately led to the loss of lives," he added. While the residents of the area remain in shock, struggling to come to terms with the gravity of this tragic incident, the building itself now stands as a charred shell—its interiors completely destroyed by the fire. A case has been registered in connection with this incident, and a judicial inquiry has been ordered; meanwhile, further investigations are ongoing to determine the precise cause of the fire and to ascertain whether there were any lapses in the rescue operations.

No 'Pawar vs. Pawar' Clash; But... Congress to Field a Candidate

Sharad Pawar's Party Decides Not to Contest Against Sunetra in Baramati

Mumbai: Following the death of Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar's husband in a plane crash, a by-election was necessitated in the Baramati constituency. The Congress party has severely criticized the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP - SP faction) for its decision not to field a candidate against Sunetra Pawar in this election. Speaking on the matter, Vijay Wadetiwar, Leader of the Congress Legislature Party in Maharashtra, stated, "If the NCP (SP) faction does not field a candidate against Pawar in the Baramati constituency, the Congress party itself will field a candidate." Furthermore, he announced that the Congress party would also field a candidate in the Rahuri constituency, which fell vacant following the demise of BJP MLA Shivajirao Kardile. Voting for these two constituencies is scheduled to take place on April 24, and the counting of votes will be held on May 4. Earlier, Supriya Sule—the incumbent Member of Parliament for Baramati and a member of the NCP

(SP) faction—had stated, "Neither my party nor the 'Maha Vikas Aghadi' (MVA) alliance—of which the Congress party is also a constituent—will field a candidate against Sunetra Pawar." Notably, in the preceding Lok Sabha election in Baramati, Sunetra—contesting on behalf of the NCP—had challenged Supriya Sule but was defeated by a margin of over 150,000 votes. However, commenting on the issue, Maharashtra Congress leader Harshvardhan Sapkal remarked, "Elections are one thing; sympathy is another. Therefore, my party is prepared to contest the elections in both the Baramati and Rahuri constituencies." He stated: "In past by-elections, the BJP has fielded candidates; given this, why should the Congress alone refrain from doing so?" Sapkal held a meeting with Mahadev Jankar, the leader of the Rashtriya Samaj Paksha—a party that wields significant influence in the Baramati constituency. Another senior Congress

leader remarked, "The Baramati and Rahuri assembly constituencies were previously held by the NCP(SP); therefore, that party should have been the one to field candidates in those segments. However, the stance the party has currently adopted appears to favor the BJP." Speaking on condition of anonymity, he further added, "As an ally of the NCP(SP) within the MVA coalition, we seek clarity. Specifically, we require a clear indication as to whether the NCP(SP) continues to remain an integral part of the Maha Vikas Aghadi alliance, or if it has instead shifted to become a constituent of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA)." During the 2024 assembly elections, the Sharad Pawar-led NCP(SP) had fielded Yugendra Pawar as its candidate against Ajit Pawar. However, in the ongoing by-elections, there is no direct "Pawar-versus-Pawar" contest—the likes of which were witnessed during the Lok Sabha elections.

Anti-conversion bill tabled in House amid Cong protest

Raipur: THE Chhattisgarh Assembly witnessed a political showdown on Thursday following the introduction of the Chhattisgarh Freedom of Religion Bill, 2026. Deputy Chief Minister Vijay Sharma, who also holds the home portfolio, tabled the bill in the House, sparking immediate and sharp resistance from the opposition benches. The BJP government moved the bill to overhaul the provisions of the decades-old anti-conversion law of the state. The bill provides a more robust legal framework to prevent religious conversions carried out through "force, fraud, allurement, or misrepresentation." The bill makes provision for imprisonment of seven to 10 years and a fine of ₹5 Lakh. "Allurement in the modern age isn't just physical. It can

take digital and economic forms," Sharma said, adding, "Similarly, threats are no longer just direct physical confrontations, but can be subtle and indirect." However, the opposition offered a strong counter. Leading the charge in the House, Leader of Opposition Charandas Mahant raised a formal objection to an immediate discussion on the bill. He argued that similar legislations from 11 other states were currently pending before various courts across the country. The stated goal of the bill is to provide justice to the victims of conversion and penalise those found guilty of unlawful conversion activities. The proposed law intends to introduce stringent measures, like illegal conversion has been classified as a cognisable and non-bailable offence, allowing law enforcement agencies to make arrests

without a warrant and making it harder for accused individuals to secure immediate bail. Similarly, convicted individuals will be required to provide compensation to victims. The bill makes provision for establishment of special courts in every district of the state and appointment of special public prosecutors to handle cases of conversion. Importantly, the legislation explicitly states that returning to one's original or ancestral religion will not be considered "conversion" under this law. The most severe penalties are reserved for mass conversion events. Those found guilty of organising or facilitating large-scale conversions will face imprisonment from 10 years to life and a minimum fine of ₹25 lakh. The Chhattisgarh cabinet has approved the draft of the bill on March 10.

20 more foreign mercenaries fled

In 2024, intelligence agencies flagged a sudden surge in 'unusual Western visitors' in Mizoram

New Delhi: RED flags were raised as early as 2024 when intelligence officials in Mizoram noticed a surge of "unusual Western visitors" moving through the region without any clear tourism purpose. India's intelligence agencies reported that more than 20 suspected mercenaries had already left Indian territory undetected after crossing from Myanmar. "At the time, the pattern was considered anomalous, and the probe started in the matter, and eventually

the pattern shows a much larger picture," said a senior official. The National Investigation Agency (NIA) is investigating a suspected foreign mercenary network linked to insurgent activity in Myanmar. Seven foreign nationals—six Ukrainians and one American—have been taken into custody following coordinated operations at various airports in India. Matthew Aaron VanDyke, a US citizen and international security analyst, was detained at Kolkata airport. He is the

founder of "Sons of Liberty International (SOLI)" and a self-described veteran of the "Libyan Revolution." The six Ukrainians—Hurba Petro, Sliyviak Taras, Ivan Sukmanovskiy, Stefankiv Marian, Honcharuk Maksim, and Kaminskyi Viktor—were detained at Delhi and Lucknow airports. Intelligence sources indicate that the arrested individuals were part of a wider network providing combat training, tactical support, and drone warfare assistance to anti-

jointa armed formations in Myanmar, including the People's Defence Force (PDF) and various Ethnic Armed Groups (EAGs). Agencies are also examining whether VanDyke coordinated with another individual, identified as Daniel Stephen Corney. Between February and May 2024, approximately 1,240 foreign nationals passed through the Mizoram route, an official said, describing the pattern as "anomalous" for the region. "At least four separate batches of

foreign fighters may have trained insurgent groups before exiting through the Indian cities." Two other US nationals linked to Kuki-Chin networks spanning Northeast India, Myanmar's Chin State, and Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracts are also under investigation. Officials said VanDyke may have diverted charitable donations collected from Christian organisations and faith-based groups abroad to fund rebel activities along the India-Myanmar border.

Cong issues notices to Haryana, Bihar MLAs for cross-voting in RS polls

Patna/Chandigarh: THE Congress has issued show-cause notices to its MLAs in Bihar and Haryana who cross-voted or abstained during the March 16 Rajya Sabha elections, prompting disciplinary action in both states. In Bihar, the party served notices to three MLAs—Manoj Biswas, Surendra Kushwaha, and Manohar Prasad—for abstaining from voting in favour of Mahagathbandhan candidate A D Singh. The state disciplinary committee, headed by Kapil Deo Singh Yadav, has asked them to respond within three days. The disciplinary committee will recommend action if the MLAs' reply is found unsatisfactory, the party said. Their absence, along with that of one RJD MLA, allowed the NDA to win all five seats in the state. Despite support from AIMIM and a BSP legislator, RJD candidate Amrendra Dhari Singh failed to secure re-election. RJD spokesperson Mritunjay Tiwari said, "We had to bite the dust due to non-cooperation of Congress's legislators," and alleged BJP involvement in

"horse trading." In Haryana, the Congress issued notices to four MLAs—Shalley Chaudhary, Mohammad Ilyas, Mohammad Israel, and Renu Bala—for cross-voting in favour of BJP-backed Independent candidate Satish Nandal. The party termed their conduct a "deliberate deviation intended to defeat the Party's official position" and a "serious breach of party discipline". It has given them seven days to reply, failing which it may proceed with action. Senior Congress leader Bhupinder Singh Hooda stated, "They did not betray the party or me, but the people who elected them." Despite this, Congress candidate Karamvir Singh Boudh won the seat. Haryana Congress also submitted a memorandum to Governor Asim Ghosh alleging "serious irregularities" in the election process. The party accused the authorities of rejecting valid votes, accepting invalid ones of rival candidates, and ignoring objections raised by its polling agents.

Cong flags high no. of vacant posts in regulatory bodies like UGC, AICTE

New Delhi: CONGRESS on Thursday raised serious concerns over the new Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishtan (VBSA) Bill, listing seven key issues, including constitutional overreach, absence of a funding council, lack of consultation with state governments, bureaucratisation of higher education, and dilution of the University Grants Commission's (UGC) consultative requirements. In a statement, Congress general secretary Jairam Ramesh said the Bill seeks to "restructure" the architecture of higher education. The legislation is currently under consideration by the Joint Committee of Parliament. He referred to the Committee on Education's annual Demand for Grants report, presented on Wednesday, which revealed a high number of vacancies in key regulatory bodies, such as the UGC and the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE). "This comes at a time when there is already a move to

restructure higher education regulation through the VBSA Bill, 2025," he said. Ramesh claimed the ministry did not consult states while drafting the Bill, despite education being part of the Concurrent List. The legislation directly impacts state universities. He noted that the Bill is being introduced under the Union List, which allows Parliament to coordinate and determine standards in higher education and research institutions. However, he argued that other constitutional provisions limit Parliament's power. Entry 44 of the Union List prohibits the House from making laws on the incorporation, regulation, and winding up of universities. Entry 32 of the State List gives this power to state legislatures. "The Bill, therefore, violates the federal structure of the Constitution," Ramesh said. He criticised the Bill for departing from NEP 2020, which envisioned a Higher Education Council of India with

four verticals. The VBSA Bill proposes only three councils and leaves out a separate grant-giving council. He said this centralises grant powers, taking them away from autonomous bodies like UGC and AICTE, which are governed by academics placing them under a ministry. Currently, the UGC, AICTE, and National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) are administered by academics. The Bill proposes that the councils be run by member secretaries appointed by the ministry. "The administration of education should be done by academics, not bureaucrats," he said. The VBSA Bill also includes Institutes of National Importance (INIs), such as the IITs, IIMs, NITs, IIITs, and IISERs, which have historically enjoyed autonomy. Under the IIT Act, 1961, these institutions can create their own academic programmes without additional approvals. Ramesh expressed concern that the Bill could undermine this autonomy.

Europe doubles down on staying out of war, flags worsening energy crisis



BRUSSELS: EUROPEAN leaders doubled down Thursday on refusing to join the United States and Israel military campaigns in the Middle East as they met in Brussels to grapple with rising oil and gas prices caused by the war. European leaders have deflected entreaties from Donald Trump to send military assets to secure the Strait of Hormuz, a key waterway for the global flow of oil, gas and fertilizer. However, rising energy prices because of the war and fears in Europe of a new refugee crisis have pushed leaders to make the West Asia a priority at the summit. "We are very worried about the energy crisis," said Belgian Prime Minister Bart De Wever ahead of the summit. He said that energy prices were too high before the war, but that the conflict "created another spike." "If that becomes structural, we're in deep trouble," he said. The summit was initially expected to center on overcoming Hungary's

opposition to a massive loan for Ukraine, but the conflicts in Iran and Lebanon reset the agenda. European leaders have been deeply critical of the Iranian government, but none have offered immediate help to the U.S. Britain is flat-out refusing to be drawn into the war. France says the fighting would have to die down first. Austrian Chancellor Christian Stocker said that Europe "will not allow itself to be blackmailed" into joining the United States and Israel military campaign in the West Asia. "Europe — and Austria as well — will not allow itself to be blackmailed," he said ahead of the European Council summit of the leaders of the 27 EU nations. "Intervention in the Strait of Hormuz is not an option for Austria anyway." EU foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas said there was "no appetite" among leaders to expand a European naval force in the Red Sea to help secure the Strait of Hormuz or otherwise join the fray.

European Space Agency reconnects with Proba-3 spacecraft after a month

PARIS: THE European Space Agency announced on Thursday it has re-established communication with a spacecraft that is part of its Proba-3 mission, after losing contact with the satellite a month ago. Proba-3, which launched on a two-year mission in 2024, uses two spacecraft flying in precise formation to simulate a solar eclipse more than 60,000 kilometres above Earth. Scientists have used this delicate dance to get a rare glimpse of the Sun's little-known outer atmosphere, which is called the corona. One satellite has a 1.4-metre (five-foot) shield that plays the role

of the Moon in blocking the Sun's light, while the other observes the corona from the shadow. However something happened to the second spacecraft, which has the crucial coronagraph instrument, on February 14. A chain reaction led to the spacecraft losing its orientation, causing its solar panel to face away from the Sun, draining the batteries. The spacecraft then entered survival mode — it has been silently floating through space since. However overnight "some miracle happened because we reconnected with the spacecraft," ESA director Josef Aschbacher

said on Thursday. The other spacecraft — the one with the shield — had been "following and observing" its lost twin, he told a press conference held after an ESA Council meeting. The lost spacecraft had been "tumbling" when an ESA team in Spain "saw that some sunlight is actually hitting the solar panels," Aschbacher explained. They seized the chance, using this small amount of power to re-establish a connection. The spacecraft's solar panel is now facing the Sun, allowing it to charge its batteries. ESA experts will switch instruments back on and assess damage.

Hezbollah battles Israeli military in south Lebanon

BEIRUT: HEZBOLLAH said on Thursday its fighters were battling Israeli forces in south Lebanon, as a military source on the ground said Israeli troops were slowly advancing while "systematically destroying" border towns. Lebanon was drawn into the Middle East war on March 2 when Iran-backed Hezbollah attacked Israel to avenge the killing of supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Israel responded with intense strikes on Lebanon that have killed at least 968 people and displaced over a million more, according to local authorities, and

by launching ground operations in the south. In a statement, Hezbollah said its fighters had ambushed Israeli troops entering the border town of Taybeh and destroyed a tank. "The enemy then attempted to continue its advance" from a nearby area, but fighters "again targeted them with guided missiles, scoring direct hits and destroying five Merkava tanks", Hezbollah added. "Enemy soldiers were seen fleeing the area of engagement." The Israeli army announced on Monday that it had launched "limited" ground operations in Lebanon. A military source

in south Lebanon told AFP that the Israeli army was advancing slowly and "systematically destroying" the border villages it enters. Lebanon's state-run National News Agency reported a "violent night" in Khiam and Taybeh, saying the towns were "targeted by several airstrikes and subjected to heavy artillery shelling that continued until dawn". On Wednesday, Hezbollah said it had repelled an attempt by "Israeli enemy soldiers to advance" in Khiam. In recent days, the group said it targeted Israeli forces along the Lebanon border and in towns like Khiam.