

# Pilgrims visit Mount Kailash, Mansarovar after six-year wait

First people-to-people mechanism restored between India and China after pandemic and LAC stand-off; 'the grand organisation for this cultural exchange is an important consensus' between leaders of both countries, says Tibetan official

**Suhasini Haidar**  
PULAN (NEAR MOUNT  
KAILASH)

Six years after the last Kailash Mansarovar yatra (pilgrimage) was held, a group of 36 Indian pilgrims conducted the arduous trek around the 18,000-foot-high Mount Kailash and took in the waters at the Mansarovar lake.

The yatra at one of Hinduism's most holy sites is the first of the people-to-people mechanisms between India and China that is being restored after the COVID-19 pandemic and Line of Actual Control (LAC) military stand-off which was decided when Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping met at Kazan last year.

It is expected to be followed by other mechanisms, including the restoration of direct flights, opening of visas and tourism routes, as well as resolving economic and business-related issues.

The pilgrims arrived even as National Security

Adviser Ajit Doval and Defence Minister Rajnath Singh visited China for Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) meetings.

The first batch included pilgrims aged 18 to 69, the group's organising leaders told a group of Indian journalists at the Zhunzhu Pu hostel, where they will stay for a few nights as they complete their *parikramas* (circling the mountain and lake).

Each group includes a doctor, and the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), which is the nodal agency for the yatra, has also coordinated with the Chinese government to allow Indian cooks to travel ahead of the group and set up tents to provide them with food they are more familiar with.

"We are so happy that this yatra has been restarted," said Shailendra Sharma, coordinator of the group.

When asked, Suman Lata, newly retired as a schoolteacher, said while crossing over, the group had not felt any of the tensions between India and



**Long journey:** The first batch of pilgrims on the way to Mount Kailash on Wednesday. SUHASINI HAIDAR

China that have dominated bilateral ties over the past few years, after the Galwan clashes, and stand-off between the Indian Army and the PLA at points like Demchok, only about 250 km east of Pulan (also called Burang).

"We have no truck with politics, I can only say that the Indian government sent us off very well and the Chinese government has received us extremely well too," she told reporters.

The group is one of 15 groups that are coming

through the Nathu La pass in Sikkim and Lipulekh Pass with about 750 originally chosen, traversing more than 3,000 km from Gangtok and back between June 15 and July 2.

Others will follow the same path or come via Lipulekh Pass from Uttarakhand, a slightly more difficult and longer trek to the strategically located peak close to the trijunction of India, Nepal and China.

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## Survey of facilities

In the run-up to the yatra, local officials said they con-

ducted a thorough survey of facilities that would be used. While several non-resident Indians (NRIs) have been able to conduct the pilgrimage using private travel agencies over the last few years, their numbers have been lower.

"The grand organisation for this cross-Himalayan cultural exchange is an important consensus between the leaders of India and China," Wen Tao, Deputy Commissioner of Ali Prefecture, who came to greet the first batch and oversaw arrangements, said. He added that Chinese officials had worked on improving the efficiency of the immigration checkpoint at Nathu La with biometrics, providing multilingual interpreters at different stages, oxygen facilities and special prayer areas at the sites.

Recovering from the day's trek of more than 19 km, that took them to a height of 5,590 metres via Dolma Point, Pranav Gupta from Jammu said: "It is faith not fitness that really gets us through each day of this trek."



# Dragon with Shukla, 3 others to dock with ISS at 4.30 pm today

**AMITABH SINHA &  
ANONNA DUTT**

NEW DELHI, JUNE 25

GROUP CAPTAIN Shubhanshu Shukla embarked on the most consequential flight of his life Wednesday, taking off, along with three others, in the Axiom-4 mission to the International Space Station. This makes him only the second Indian to travel to space.

A fighter pilot and test pilot with the Indian Air Force, with more than 2,000 hours of flying experience, Shukla is the designated pilot for the Crew Dragon spacecraft that took off from NASA's Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Florida exactly at noon India time.

After a 28-hour journey through space, the Dragon spacecraft will dock with the International Space Station around 4.30 pm India time Thursday, allowing the four astronauts to transfer to the only permanent research laboratory in space where they will spend the next two weeks, carrying out scientific experiments and engaging in science outreach events.

Shukla's feat comes 41 years after Squadron Leader Rakesh Sharma — he later retired as Wing Commander — travelled to space on the then Soviet Union's Soyuz T-11 spacecraft and spent about eight days on board the Salyut 7 space station, one of the Soviet forerunners to the current International Space Station.

Two other astronauts on the Axiom-4 mission, Slawosz Uznanski-Wisniewski from Poland and Tibor Kapu of Hungary, are also marking the return of their respective countries to space after more than four decades. For this reason, the

**CONTINUED ON PAGE 2**



A Falcon 9 rocket carrying the Axiom-4 crew lifts off from Kennedy Space Center Launch Complex 39A, on a mission to the International Space Station, in Cape Canaveral, Florida, on Wednesday. *Reuters*

## THE EDITORIAL PAGE

### SECOND VOYAGER

Shubhanshu Shukla's experience will provide critical inputs to the country's space missions, especially Gaganyaan [PAGE 10](#)

## EXPLAINED

### INDIA'S SPACE PROGRAMME: A NEW PHASE BEGINS

[PAGE 15](#)



# Nod for South Asia unit of International Potato Center in Agra

**HARIKISHAN SHARMA**

NEW DELHI, JUNE 25

THE CENTRE on Wednesday cleared a proposal to set up the South Asia regional centre of the Peru-based International Potato Center (CIP) in India.

The CIP-South Asia Regional Centre (CSARC) will come up at Singna in Agra district of Uttar Pradesh and will not only serve farmers in potato-belt states like UP, Bihar and West Bengal but also cater to South Asian countries.

"The major objective of this investment is to increase food and nutrition security, farmers income, and job creation by improving potato and sweetpotato productivity, post-harvest management and value-addition," said an official statement after the Cabinet cleared the proposal sent by the Department of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare.

Sources said the project will cost ₹171 crore, of which India will contribute ₹111 crore while the remaining ₹60 crore will be funded by the CIP. The UP government has provided 10 hectares of land for the proposed centre.

The Cabinet decision came

after UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath wrote to Agriculture Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan on January 20 and highlighted the delay in the establishment of a CIP regional centre in Agra. A Ministry delegation led by Agriculture Secretary Devesh Chaturvedi recently visited Peru.

According to the Government, India's potato sector has the potential to generate significant employment opportunities vis a vis "production, processing, packaging, transportation, marketing and value chain, etc". CSARC will "untap and explore" this potential, the statement said.

"High yielding, nutrient and climate resilient varieties of potato and sweetpotato developed by CSARC will significantly accelerate the sustainable development of the potato and sweetpotato sectors not only in India but in the South Asia region also through world-class science and innovation," the statement added.

India is the world's second top producer and consumer of potato; in 2020, it saw a production of 51.30 million tonnes. At the top is China, with its potato output in 2020 at 78.24 million tonnes.



# India joins BRICS statement expressing 'grave concern' over strikes against Iran

**SHUBHAJIT ROY**

NEW DELHI, JUNE 25

INDIA HAS joined the BRICS grouping to "express grave concern" over the "military strikes against Iran" since June 13 and has called it a "violation of international law and UN Charter.

PM Narendra Modi is expected to travel to Rio de Janeiro for the BRICS summit on July 5-6.

Iran, meanwhile, expressed gratitude to India's "freedom-loving" citizens, political parties, institutions and others who stood by it amid the attacks by Israel and the US.

This comes 10 days after India distanced itself from a statement issued by the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) which condemned the military strikes carried out by Israel.

A joint statement by BRICS said: "We express grave concern over the military strikes against the Islamic Republic of Iran since 13 June 2025, which constitute a violation of international law and the Charter of the United Nations, and the subsequent escalation of the security situation

in the Middle East."

"We express serious concern over any attacks against peaceful nuclear installations that are carried out in violation of international law and relevant resolutions of the International Atomic Energy Agency. Nuclear safeguards, safety, and security must always be upheld, including in armed conflicts, to protect people and the environment from harm," it said, referring to the strikes by US and Israel on nuclear facilities in Fordow, Isfahan and Natanz.

It said that civilian lives must be protected, and civilian infrastructure must be safeguarded, in full compliance with international humanitarian law.

"Guided by the principles enshrined in the UN Charter, BRICS remains committed to promoting international peace and security and to fostering diplomacy and peaceful dialogue as the only sustainable path toward long-term stability in the region. In this regard, we also reaffirm the necessity of establishing a zone free of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East, in line with international resolutions," it said.



# Union Cabinet passes resolution to mark 50 years of Emergency

It vows to honour sacrifices of those who fought against suspension of democratic rights and Constitution; dark chapter in history, says PM

**The Hindu Bureau**

NEW DELHI

**T**he Emergency is an event that will never be forgotten, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said on Wednesday on the 50th anniversary of its declaration by the Indira Gandhi government on June 25, 1975.

The Union Cabinet passed a resolution, vowing to commemorate and honour the sacrifices of those who fought against the suspension of democratic rights and the Constitution. The Cabinet observed a two-minute silence as a tribute to the victims of the Emergency.

Addressing presspersons after the meet, Union Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw said 2025 marked 50 years of *Samvidhan Hatya Divas* (Constitution murder day) as it is now being marked by the government.

“It is as important for the young as it is for the old to draw inspiration from those who resisted dictatorial tendencies and stood firm to defend our Consti-



No Indian will ever forget the manner in which the spirit of the Constitution was violated during the Emergency... We also reiterate our commitment to strengthening the principles in our Constitution

**NARENDRA MODI**

Prime Minister

tution and its democratic fabric,” Mr. Vaishnaw said.

In a series of posts on the social media platform X on Wednesday, Mr. Modi affirmed his government’s commitment to strengthening Constitutional principles. No Indian would “ever forget the manner in which the spirit of the Constitution was violated during the Emergency”, he said.

## ‘Rights were suspended’

It was one of the darkest chapters in India’s democratic history, he added. The values enshrined in the Constitution were set aside, fundamental rights suspended, press freedom extinguished, and a large number of political lead-

ers, social workers, students, and ordinary citizens were jailed, he said.

“It was as if the Congress government in power at that time placed democracy under arrest,” he said.

The poor, marginalised and downtrodden were particularly targeted, and their dignity insulted, the Prime Minister said. Saluting every person who stood firm in the fight against the Emergency, he said they were from all over India, all walks of life, and from diverse ideologies, working closely with each other with one aim – “to protect India’s democratic fabric and to preserve the ideals for which freedom fighters devoted their lives”.



**WHITE HOUSE SAYS INTELLIGENCE ASSESSMENT WAS 'FLAT OUT WRONG'**

# US strikes failed to destroy Iran's nuclear sites: Intelligence report

**REUTERS**

WASHINGTON, TEL  
AVIV, ISTANBUL, JUNE 25

US AIRSTRIKES did not destroy Iran's nuclear capability and only set it back by a few months, according to a preliminary U.S. intelligence assessment, as a shaky ceasefire brokered by U.S. President Donald Trump took hold between Iran and Israel.

Iran and Israel signaled that the air war between the two nations had ended, at least for now, after Trump publicly scolded them for violating a ceasefire.

As the two countries lifted civilian restrictions after 12 days of war - which the US joined with an attack on Iran's uranium-enrichment facilities - each sought to claim victory.

Trump said over the weekend that the US deployment of 30,000-pound bombs had "obliterated" Iran's nuclear program. But that claim appeared to be contradicted by an initial assessment by one of his administration's intelligence agencies, according to three people familiar with the matter. One of the sources said Iran's enriched stocks had not been eliminated, and the country's nuclear program, much of which is buried deep underground, may have been set back only a month or two.

The White House said the intelligence assessment was "flat out wrong." According to the report, which was produced by the Defense Intelligence Agency, the strikes sealed off the entrances to two of the facilities, but did not collapse underground buildings, said one of the people familiar with its findings.



A satellite overview shows the Isfahan Nuclear Research Center, as well as nearby tunnels on Wednesday. *Reuters*

## UN nuclear chief says it's possible that Iran's highly enriched uranium 'is there'

**FRANCOIS MURPHY**  
VIENNA, JUNE 25

THERE IS a chance that much of Iran's highly enriched uranium survived Israeli and US attacks because it may have been moved by Tehran soon after the first strikes, UN nuclear watchdog chief Rafael Grossi said Wednesday.

Israel repeatedly struck

Iranian nuclear facilities during its 12-day war with Tehran, and U.S. forces bombed Iran's underground nuclear facilities at the weekend, but the extent of the damage to its stocks of enriched uranium is unclear.

International Atomic Energy Agency chief Grossi said earlier this week that Iran had informed the IAEA on June 13 - the first day of Israeli strikes - that it would take "special measures" to pro-

tect its nuclear materials.

"They did not get into details as to what that meant but clearly that was the implicit meaning of that, so we can imagine that this material is there," Grossi told a press conference on Wednesday with members of the Austrian government. "So for that, to confirm, for the whole situation, evaluation, we need to return (IAEA inspectors to Iran's nuclear facilities)."

**REUTERS**

### IRAN MILITARY CHIEF DIES OF WOUNDS

Cairo: The head of Iran's Revolutionary Guards command, Ali Shadmani, died of wounds sustained during Israel's military strikes, state media said Wednesday. The guards' command centre vowed "harsh revenge" for his killing.

**REUTERS**



# NATO commits to higher spending sought by Trump

**REUTERS**

THE HAGUE, JUNE 25

NATO leaders Wednesday backed the big increase in defence spending that U.S. President Donald Trump had demanded, and restated their commitment to defend each other from attack after a brief summit in the Netherlands.

While Trump got what he wanted at the annual meeting, tailor-made for him, his NATO allies will be relieved that he committed to the fundamental principle of collective defence after less clear-cut language on Tuesday. Trump told a press conference that "we had a great victory here", adding that he hoped that the additional funds would be spent on military hardware made in the U.S.

## Trump threatens to punish Spain

However, he threatened to punish Spain after Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez declared it could meet its commitments to NATO while spending much less than the new target of 5% of GDP.

"I think it's terrible. You

know, they (Spain) are doing very well ... And that economy could be blown right out of the water when something bad happens," Trump said, adding that Spain would get a tougher trade deal from the U.S. than other European Union countries.

In a five-point statement, NATO endorsed the higher defence spending goal - a response not only to Trump but also to Europeans' fears that Russia poses a growing threat to their security following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

## Macron talks trade

Trump had long demanded in no uncertain terms that other countries step up their spending to reduce NATO's heavy reliance on the U.S.

Despite an appearance of general agreement, French President Emmanuel Macron raised the issue of the steep import tariffs threatened by Trump, and the damage they may do to transatlantic trade, as a barrier to increased defence spending.

"We can't say we are going to spend more and then, at the heart of NATO, launch a trade war," Macron said, calling it "an aberration".