

# Women's inclusion in armed forces a priority, says Rajnath

Officials highlight expanding opportunities for women across all three armed services; as per data, women make up 13.4% of IAF, 6.85% of Army, 6% of Navy, with numbers rising steadily since 2005

**Saurabh Trivedi**

NEW DELHI

**T**he parliamentary consultative committee on Defence, headed by Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, was briefed on the representation of women in the armed forces.

Mr. Singh spoke on the government's commitment to provide maximum representation to women in the forces.

As per the data from the Ministry of Defence (MoD), women form 13.4% of the Indian Air force workforce – the highest among all three services – while they make up 6.85% of the Army's workforce and 6% of the Navy's.

In 2024, there were a total of 1,735 women in the Army, 1,614 in the Air Force, and 674 in the Navy.



According to data, 13.4% women constitute the Indian Air force workforce, the highest among all three services. EMMANUAL YOGINI

In 2005, the figures were 767, 574, and 154, respectively.

Twelve branches in the Army are open to women officers, including combat. In the Navy, all branches are open for women officers except submarines. All

branches of the Air Force are open for women officers.

## More to come

Asked about women's representation in the armed forces, a senior Defence Ministry official said that

they were opening more and more branches for women for all categories. Women are eligible for various roles, including technical and non-technical positions, and can join through different entry schemes. Most of the defence training institutes and academies have been opened for women.

Colonel Sofiya Qureshi of the Indian Army, who led the Operation Sindoor briefing along with Wing Commander Vyomika Singh of the Air Force, have become an inspiration for women aiming to join the armed forces.

Another senior defence officer said that women in the armed forces are doing remarkably well and their number is only going to increase in the future as the forces adopt a more gender neutral approach.

# How did it get delayed?

The Defence Ministry had signed a ₹48,000 crore contract with HAL for 83 MK1A jets, and deliveries were to start in March 2024 with at least 16 planes to be delivered to the IAF every year. However, not a single Tejas Mark-1A has been delivered so far. In August 2021, the HAL placed an order for 99 F-404 engines with GE Aerospace at a cost of ₹5,375 crore for the 83 Mk1A jets. The first engine arrived in India only in April this year after a delay of one and half years and the second engine was delivered early this month. Additionally, a deal for 97 additional jets, estimated to ₹67,000

## India's fighter jet strength

### IAF CURRENT SQUADRONS

SU-30MKI	13
Jaguar	6
Mirage 2000	3
MIG-29UPG	3
Rafale	2
LCA	2
MIG-21	2
Total sqns	31

### THE PLANNED LINE-UP

LCA-MK1A	180 (83+97)
LCA-MK2	120<
MRFA	114
AMCA	120<

IAF LCA Tejas during the Aero India 2023 air show at Yelahanka air base in Bengaluru.





crore, is expected to be concluded in the next few months. HAL has assured to scale up production to 24 jets a year.

Amid these delays, an Empowered Committee for Capability Enhancement of the IAF headed by the Defence Secretary R. K. Singh identified key thrust areas and made recommendations for medium- and long-term measures in the report submitted to Defence Minister Rajnath Singh in March.

As per the IAF, the LCA Mk2, larger and more capable than the Mk1 variants, is meant to replace the Mirage 2000, MiG-29 and Jaguars. It is expected to take first flight in 2026. In February 2025, IAF Chief Air Chief Marshal A. P. Singh said that they need to add 35-40 jets every year to make up for the shortage in numbers. Both these programmes, LCA-Mk1A and Mk2, are extremely critical to shore up fighter numbers of the IAF over the next 10-15 years. In an interview to PTI in June, HAL Chairman and Managing Director D. K. Sunil said that GE Aerospace is expected to supply 12 engines in the current fiscal and that the jets would be delivered to the IAF.

Moreover, India has procured 272 Su-30MKIs from Russia of which around 260 remain in service. Last December, the Ministry of Defence signed a ₹13,500 crore deal with HAL for 12 Sukhois to replace those lost in crashes. A major upgrade programme for the Sukhoi's has been lined up to be undertaken by HAL. The upgrade of 84 jets in the first batch has already been approved. Meanwhile, by early 2040s, some of the earlier batch of SU-30MKIs will go out.

### What is the way forward?

The IAF has drawn up an ambitious plan to induct more than 600 jets over the next two decades, a large number of them being LCA variants. This includes 180 LCA-Mk1A, over 120 LCA-Mk2, 114 MRFA and at least 120 AMCA. A Twin-Engine Deck Based Fighter for the Navy's aircraft carriers is also on the drawing board. However, all this hinges on timely

production and deliveries.

Mr. Singh said in an interview recently that they are talking to partners for the likely import of a small number of fifth gen fighters as an interim measure while the AMCA development continues. The option is between the Russian SU-57 and American F-35. These are sensitive negotiations, Mr. Singh said adding, "When it reaches a tangible stage, whether it is an Acceptance of Necessity (AoN), a Request For Proposal or ultimately through a contract that is when the media will come to know."

Ultimately, it is the fifth gen AMCA that is the way forward while the LCA variants and MRFA fill numbers and add strength in the medium term. The Aeronautical Development Agency (ADA) that is developing the aircraft has floated an AoN inviting private sector participation for the production. Even HAL has to bid for it, unlike the nomination in the past. "I imagine it will take 3-6 months to reach the contract award stage", Mr. Singh said. "Thereafter the project itself of development and an AMCA prototype to actually take to the skies, it would be a 10-year program, I would imagine."

On the engine front, the F414 engine to power the LCA-Mk2 is to be licence manufactured by HAL for which commercial negotiations with GE are underway. The AMCA development is envisaged in two phases – Mk1 development and couple of squadrons with the GE414 engine, and AMCA-Mk2 with a more powerful 110KN engine that is to be co-developed with a foreign partner for which talks are underway.

All this leaves the MRFA deal, for which the Request For Information was issued to global aircraft manufacturers in April 2019, but there has been no progress since. Given the huge cost involved, the long timelines and various other programmes already in the pipeline, it has to be seen how it can be taken forward.

*Dinakar Peri is Fellow, Security Studies at Carnegie India.*

# Uncertainty looms over resumption of MNREGS in Bengal as Centre yet to approve labour budget

## State govt 'failed miserably' in implementing scheme, says Rural Development Minister

**HARIKISHAN SHARMA**

NEW DELHI, AUGUST 4

THE RESUMPTION of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MNREGS) in West Bengal remains uncertain as the August 1 deadline set by the Calcutta High Court for restarting the scheme is over and the Centre is yet to clear the state's labour budget for the financial year 2025–2026, *The Indian Express* has learnt.

According to sources, the West Bengal government had written to the Union Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD) seeking approval to its labour budget, but the same has not been done so far.

The labour budget is approved by the Empowered Committee headed by the Union Rural Development Secretary. States can generate their demands for funds using NREGASoft, the management information system of the MGNREGS, only after this committee clears their labour budget pro-

posals.

Rural Development Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan said on Monday that the Central government is committed to the development of West Bengal and the welfare of its people. He alleged that the Mamata Banerjee government has "failed miserably" in effectively implementing MGNREGS, but did not say anything about the resumption of the scheme in the state.

"From the year 2019 to 2022, Central teams visited 19 districts of West Bengal. During these visits, the Central teams found many anomalies and irregularities in the works of MNREGA in the state such as absence of work at the site, dividing the work into portions against the rules, misappropriation of funds... flouting rules and norms of MNREGA," Chouhan said in a post on X.

"Due to these unethical actions of the state government, misuse of public money and lack of improvement in the system, the Ministry of Rural Development has stopped the release of funds of the state gov-



Union Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan in Bhopal, Monday. *X@ChouhanShivraj*

ernment under Section 27 of the MNREGA Act," he said.

Under the MNREGS, the MoRD releases funds to states "based on agreed labour budget". Generally, the states' labour budget proposals are approved by the MoRD by the end of January or before the beginning of the financial year (April–March). In West Bengal's case, no labour budget has been approved after FY 2021–22 after the Centre suspended the implementation of the scheme in the state.

By invoking Section 27 of MGNREGA, 2005, the Centre had stopped release of funds to West Bengal with effect from March 9, 2022.

In an order on June 18, 2025, the Calcutta High Court directed that the "scheme be implemented prospectively with effect from August 1, 2025".

However, West Bengal officials say they have not received any intimation from the Centre about resumption of the scheme in the state. They have also been urging the ministry to approve of the labour budget but the same has not happened yet, said an official.

The ministry officials have maintained silence so far on the issue of Bengal. Asked whether the MoRD challenged the June 18 order of the Calcutta HC, the officials did not respond. They also did not respond to queries on non-approval of Bengal's labour budget.

According to sources, the Centre has not yet challenged the court order yet. On July 22, Union Minister Chouhan told the

Lok Sabha that the High Court order is "being studied in the ministry to decide further course of action".

In January this year, West Bengal's Rural Development Minister Pradip K Mazumdar wrote a letter to Chouhan, seeking an appointment for a meeting, which has not happened so far. Earlier, multiple meetings between the Centre and West Bengal government officials have taken place but the issue has not been resolved till date.

Before the Centre suspended the MGNREGS in March 2022, West Bengal figured among the top performers with 51 lakh to 80 lakh families in the state availing of the scheme annually between 2014–15 and 2021–22. The data available on the NREGS portal shows that the number of households working through the rural job guarantee scheme stood at 51 lakh in 2014–15, 61 lakh in 2015–16, 58 lakh in 2016–17, 52 lakh in 2017–18, 43.89 lakh in 2018–19, 54.57 lakh in 2019–20, 79.64 lakh in 2020–21 and 75.97 lakh in 2021–22.



# Bangladesh arrests 48 Indian fishermen, impounds 3 boats

Union Home Department is looking into matter, says District Magistrate; arrested fishermen are all from Sunderbans; West Bengal fishermen association decides to sever ties with the detained

**Shrabana Chatterjee**

KOLKATA

**T**he Bangladesh Navy has arrested 48 Indian fishermen, including 14 on Saturday night, over the past 20 days for allegedly straying into Bangladeshi waters.

It has also impounded three trawlers. All the fishermen are from the Kwakdip area of the Sunderbans in South 24 Parganas district of West Bengal.

While on July 13, two trawlers – *FB Jhar* and *FB Mangalchandi* – were impounded, the third boat, *Paromita*, was detained on Saturday night.

The District Magistrate of South 24 Parganas, Sumit Gupta, said the administration had informed the Union Home Ministry about the arrest of the fishermen. “It [repatriation] is not in the local authority’s jurisdiction. Since this is a matter of international relations, the Home Department is looking into it,” Mr. Gupta told *The Hindu*.

Visuals shared by local media showed the fishermen in the custody of Bangladeshi authorities, with their wrists tied to their



**Persistent problem:** Last year, Bangladesh released 95 Indian fishermen, while India repatriated 90 Bangladeshi fishermen detained in Indian waters. FILE PHOTO

waists with ropes.

All Bengal Fishermen Association member Joy Krishna Haldar slammed the arrested fishermen, and demanded “strict punishment” for them.

## ‘Annual problem’

“We have decided that no one should venture out beyond the maritime borders. If we do not catch any fish, we come back empty-handed and starve,” Mr. Haldar, who is also from Kwakdip, told *The Hindu* on Monday. “This has be-

come an annual problem. Why do they go beyond the maritime boundary when they know the consequences? This looks deliberate,” he added.

Mr. Haldar said fishermen became “greedy”, and strayed into the Bangladeshi waters in hope of a better catch, especially of Hilsa.

Fish from Bangladeshi waters commands a premium in West Bengal, he added. He said that the association had decided to sever ties with the de-

tained fishermen.

Last year, 95 fishermen released by Bangladesh were felicitated by Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on Sagar Island. India also repatriated 90 Bangladeshi fishermen detained in Indian waters.

While India returned two trawlers belonging to Bangladeshi fishermen, six Indian vessels were returned by the neighbouring country in the exchange held near the International Maritime Boundary Line.

# BNP to oppose July Proclamation if it is against Bangladesh constitution

The party says that though the government consulted various stakeholders before going ahead with the announcement of Charter, it should not go against the 1972 constitution of the country which is based on the sacrifices of 1971 Liberation War

**Kallol Bhattacharjee**  
NEW DELHI

**T**he July Proclamation that is being planned on the anniversary of the anti-government uprising on Tuesday in Dhaka will be opposed if it goes against the constitution of Bangladesh, said a senior leader of Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) on Monday.

Speaking to *The Hindu*, General Secretary of BNP, Mirza Fakhru Islam Alamgir, said the interim government has consulted various stakeholders before going ahead with the planned announcement of



**Mixed opinions:** Student-activists had said in December 2024 that they would use the Charter to 'bury' the constitution. REUTERS

the July Charter on Tuesday. However, he cautioned that the charter should not go against the 1972 constitution of Ban-

gladesh which is based on the sacrifices of 1971 Liberation War.

"The interim government sent us a draft of the

July Proclamation some weeks ago. We did not find anything objectionable in that draft but we do not know what will be the exact draft of the proclamation that will be launched on 5 August. If we find that the proclamation goes against our existing constitution, then we will oppose it," Mr. Alamgir said ahead of Tuesday's launch.

Mr. Alamgir's remarks came hours after the interim government said that Chief Adviser Prof. Mohammed Yunus will announce the July Proclamation at 5 p.m. on Tuesday at the southern plaza of the Jatiyo Sansad – parliament

of Bangladesh.

The July Proclamation came into focus in December 2024 when the student-activists, part of the core support groups of the interim government, announced that they wanted to use the July Proclamation to 'bury' the 1972 constitution. The attempt of the student activists was however not successful and the interim government stepped in and decided to carry forward the idea of the proclamation. In his Id speech on June 6, Mr. Yunus revived the plan saying the text of the proclamation had been agreed upon by "all parties".



# ‘Mercenaries’ from China, Pak, other countries fighting for Russia: Ukraine

## Moscow plays down Trump’s subs, cautions against nuclear rhetoric

**REUTERS**

KYIV, AUGUST 4

PRESIDENT VOLODYMYR Zelenskyy said Monday that Ukrainian troops in northeastern Ukraine were fighting foreign “mercenaries” from various countries including China, Pakistan and parts of Africa, and vowed a response.

Zelenskyy has previously accused Moscow of recruiting Chinese fighters for its war effort against Ukraine, charges Beijing denied, while North Korea has also provided thousands of its own troops in Russia’s Kursk region. “We spoke with commanders about the frontline situation, the defence of Vovchansk, and the dynamics of the battles,” Zelenskyy wrote on X after visiting a frontline area in the north-eastern Kharkiv region.

“Our warriors in this sector are reporting the participation of mercenaries from China, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, and African countries in the war. We will respond.” *Reuters* contacted the embassies of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Pakistan in Kyiv to

request comment. Russia did not immediately comment publicly on Zelenskyy’s comments.

Russia said on Monday that everyone should be “very, very careful” about nuclear rhetoric, responding to a statement by US President Donald Trump that he had ordered a repositioning of US nuclear submarines.

Trump said Friday he had ordered two nuclear submarines to be moved to “the appropriate regions” in response to remarks from former Russian president Dmitry Medvedev about the risk of war between the adversaries.

“In this case, it is obvious that American submarines are already on combat duty. This is an ongoing process, that’s the first thing,” Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters. “But in general... we would not want to get involved in such a controversy...” he added. “Of course, we believe that everyone should be very, very careful with nuclear rhetoric.”

Meanwhile, Russia no longer considers itself bound by a moratorium on the deployment of short- and medium-range missiles, the Russian Foreign Ministry said on Monday.



# China pushes back at US demand to stop buying Russia, Iran oil

**DIDI TANG**

WASHINGTON, AUGUST 4

US AND Chinese officials may be able to settle many of their differences to reach a trade deal and avert punishing tariffs, but they remain far apart on one issue: the US demand that China stop purchasing oil from Iran and Russia.

“China will always ensure its energy supply in ways that serve our national interests,” China’s Foreign Ministry posted on X on Wednesday following two days of trade negotiations in Stockholm, responding to the US threat of a 100% tariff. “Coercion and pressuring will not achieve anything. China will firmly defend its sovereignty, security and development interests,” the ministry said.

The response is notable at a time when both Beijing and Washington are signaling optimism and goodwill about reach-

ing a deal to keep commercial ties between the world’s two largest economies stable. It underscores China’s confidence in playing hardball when dealing with the Trump administration, especially when trade is linked to its energy and foreign policies.

US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent said that when it comes to Russian oil purchases, the

“Chinese take their sovereignty very seriously... We don’t want to impede on their sovereignty, so they would like to pay a 100% tariff.” On Thursday, he called the Chinese “tough” negotiators, but said China’s pushback hasn’t stalled the negotiations.

“If the US is bent on imposing tariffs, China will fight to the end, and this is China’s consistent official stance,” said Tu Xinquan, director of the China Institute for WTO Studies at the University of International Business and Economics in Beijing.

**AP**



## Senior Israeli officials urge Trump to help end Gaza war

**Agence France-Presse**  
JERUSALEM

Hundreds of retired Israeli security officials, including former heads of intelligence agencies, have urged U.S. President Donald Trump to pressure their own government to end the war in Gaza. "It is our professional judgement that Hamas no longer poses a strategic threat to Israel," the former officials wrote. "When we achieved all military objectives, this war ceased to be a just war," said Ami Ayalon, former director of the Shin Bet security service.

# Be very cautious with nuclear rhetoric, says Russia in reply to Trump's remarks

**Agence France-Presse**  
MOSCOW

Russia called for caution on Monday after U.S. President Donald Trump said he would deploy two nuclear submarines following an online row with former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev.

Mr. Trump said he had ordered the deployment in response to what he alleged were highly provocative comments by Mr. Medvedev, saying the submarines would be positioned in "appropriate regions".

"Russia is very attentive to the topic of nuclear non-proliferation. And we be-



**Escalation game:** The U.S. President ordered the deployment of two nuclear submarines following a row with Dmitry Medvedev. AFP

lieve that everyone should be very, very cautious with nuclear rhetoric," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters on Monday.

The row between Mr.

Medvedev and Mr. Trump erupted against the backdrop of the U.S. leader's ultimatum for Russia to end its military offensive in Ukraine or face fresh econom-

ic sanctions.

Mr. Medvedev – one of Russia's most prominent anti-Western hawks – accused Mr. Trump of "playing the ultimatum game" and said that Mr. Trump "should remember" that Russia was a formidable force. "Each new ultimatum is a threat and a step towards war. Not between Russia and Ukraine, but with his own country," he said.

The chief of staff to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on Monday backed Mr. Trump's actions. "The concept of peace through strength works," Andriy Yermak wrote on social media.

# Centre hits back after Trump threatens more tariffs on India

Tariffs 'paid by India' will be substantially raised as it keeps profiting from Russian oil, says U.S. President

MEA says U.S. 'actively encouraged' Russian imports since war in Ukraine, points at EU's trade with Russia

**T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan**  
NEW DELHI

Less than a week after he announced a 25% tariff on imports from India "plus a penalty", U.S. President Donald Trump on Monday once again raised the issue of India buying oil from Russia and profiting from it. He stated that he would be "substantially" raising the tariff "paid by India to the USA". It should be noted that such tariffs are paid by importers in the U.S., rather than the country on which the tariffs are levied.

The Indian government hit back at Mr. Trump's statements and also criticism from European countries on India's trade with Russia, saying that such "targeting of India" was "unjustified and unreasonable".

In a statement, the government pointed out that not only did the U.S. encourage such trade previously, both the European Union and the U.S. continue to actively trade with Russia at levels significantly higher than India's."

"India is not only buying massive amounts of Russian Oil, they are then, for much of the Oil purchased, selling it on the Open Market for big profits," Mr. Trump posted on the social network Truth Social. "They don't care how many people in Ukraine are being killed by the Russian War Machine. Because of this, I will be substantially raising the Tariff paid by India to the USA. [sic]"

The Ministry of External Affairs responded to the statement, saying that the U.S. had previously "ac-

They [India] don't care how many people in Ukraine are being killed by the Russian War Machine. Because of this, I will be substantially raising the Tariff paid by India to the USA

DONALD TRUMP, U.S. President



It is revealing that the very nations criticising India are themselves indulging in trade with Russia. Unlike our case, such trade is not even a vital national compulsion

MEA STATEMENT

tively encouraged" the import of Russian oil.

"India has been targeted by the United States and the European Union for importing oil from Russia after the commencement of the Ukraine conflict," the official spokesperson of the Ministry of External

Affairs said. "In fact, India began importing from Russia because traditional supplies were diverted to Europe after the outbreak of the conflict. The United States at that time actively encouraged such imports by India for strengthening global energy markets sta-

bility." The MEA's statement added that India's oil imports from Russia are meant to ensure "predictable and affordable energy costs" for the Indian consumer. "They are a necessity compelled by the global market situation," it added. "However, it is revealing that the very nations criticising India are themselves indulging in trade with Russia. Unlike our case, such trade is not even a vital national compulsion."

The MEA said that the European Union in 2024 had a bilateral trade of €67.5 billion in goods with Russia, in addition to a trade in services estimated at €17.2 billion in 2023.

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**INDIA AND THE TRUMP ERA**

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# Centre hits back after Trump's tariff threat

The U.S. President had on July 31 signed an executive order that authorised a 25% tariff on imports from India. A day earlier, he had posted on Truth Social that he would be imposing this tariff plus a penalty “because their [India’s] tariffs are far too high, among the highest in the world, and they have the most strenuous and obnoxious non-monetary trade barriers of any country”.

Apart from this, he also cited India’s energy and military equipment purchases from Russia as an irritant.

Following this announcement, Union Minister of Commerce and Industry Piyush Goyal had informed both Houses of Parliament that the government was “studying the implications” of Mr. Trump’s announcement, consulting all the relevant domestic stakeholders, and would “take all steps necessary to secure our national interest”.

## Western trade with Russia

“This is significantly more than India’s total trade with Russia that year or subsequently,” the MEA said. “European imports of LNG [liquefied natural gas] in 2024, in fact, reached a record 16.5 mn tonnes, surpassing the last record of 15.21 mn tonnes in 2022.”

Europe’s trade with Russia includes not just energy, but also fertilizers, mining products, chemicals, iron and steel and machinery and transport equipment, the statement said.

“Where the United States is concerned, it continues to import from Russia uranium hexafluoride for its nuclear industry, palladium for its EV [electric vehicle] industry, fertilizers as well as chemicals,” the MEA noted.

“In this background, the targeting of India is unjustified and unreasonable,” it added. “Like any major economy, India will take all necessary measures to safeguard its national interests and economic security.”

The 25% tariff places India at a relative disadvantage compared to some of its competitors such as Vietnam, Indonesia, Mexico, and the Philippines. Mr. Trump’s new tariffs are expected to take effect from August 7

## KABUL

### Afghanistan has its 'sharpest surge' ever of child malnutrition, says UN



AFP

▲ Afghanistan is seeing its sharpest-ever surge of child malnutrition, the World Food Program said on Monday, adding it needed \$539 million to help the country's most vulnerable families. Almost 10 million people, a quarter of Afghanistan's population, face acute food insecurity. One in three children is stunted. AP

## TEHRAN

### Iran sets up new Supreme National Defence Council after Israeli strike



AP

▲ Iran founded a new defence council after attacks in June by Israel and the U.S., Iranian state media reported on Monday. Iran's Supreme National Security Council, the country's highest security body, made the decision to establish the Supreme National Defence Council, which will be headed by President Masoud Pezeshkian. AP