

# PM Modi makes strong pitch for self-reliance

PM's Independence Day address peppered with announcements of economic and other reforms

PM highlights the successful use of Indian arms and weapon systems during Operation Sindoor

Announces mission to check the 'conspiracy to change the demography' of border regions

Nistula Hebbar  
NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a strong pitch for self-reliance in his Independence Day address, with policy prescriptions for economic- and security-related reforms. For any nation, even today, the yardstick of *aatma saman* (self-respect) remains *aatmanirbharta* (self-reliance), he said, also using the speech to warn of a conspiracy to change the country's demographic make-up.

The speech was peppered with substantive announcements on reforms, which Mr. Modi presaged by stating that "self-reliance is not limited to import-export, rupees, pounds or dollars, but [is] linked to our own strengths and capabilities". The speech gains significance in the context of the 50% tariff on Indian goods announced by U.S. President Donald Trump, and included an oblique reference to the consequent challenges faced by India. Mr. Modi said that

## Key announcements

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in his Independence Day address, announced economic- and security-related reforms, and emphasised self-reliance. Highlights from the speech:



### Mission Sudarshan Chakra

India will be building an air defence system by 2035 to not only shield military and civilian areas but also to strike back in a precise, targeted manner

### Pradhan Mantri Viksit Bharat Rozgar Yojana

The scheme would give a one-time grant of ₹15,000 to first-time employees in the private sector and incentives to the private sector to create employment

### Nuclear energy capacity

India will aim at increasing its nuclear energy capacity 10-fold via its 10 nuclear energy plants by 2047

### Made-in-India semiconductor

India will launch 'Made-in-India' semiconductor chips by the end of 2025

PHOTO: SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

India needed to be bigger by its own strength, not by trying to reduce the footprint of another country, adding that the "economic greed of some countries is evident", without naming names.

### Pillar of development

Starting with the deployment of Indian arms and weapons systems during Operation Sindoor, which he said had perplexed the enemy, Mr. Modi emphasised that self-reliance in the defence and economic spheres is the cornerstone of a developed India.

The Prime Minister announced two major task forces, one to initiate second-generation reforms of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) regime, eight years after its introduction, and a high powered task force for next generation economic reforms.

"You [Indians] will get a Diwali gift, the task force

on second generation GST reforms will result in major relief in prices of essential goods," he said. In a bid to boost employment generation, he said the government would create a new corpus of ₹1 lakh crore, the Pradhan Mantri Viksit Bharat Rozgar Yojana, which would give a ₹15,000 one-time grant to first-time employees in the private sector, and incentives to the private sector to create employment.

The government also aims to reduce the compliance cost for medium, small, and micro enterprises (MSMEs), hoping the relief from fear of arbitrary legal actions will give a fillip to a sector that creates jobs.

"India will launch 'Made-in-India' semiconductor chips by the end of 2025," Mr. Modi said. He emphasised the need for innovation in AI, cyber security, deep-tech, and operating systems for global competitiveness. Six semiconductor units are already on the ground, and four new units have been given the green signal, he said.

The Prime Minister declared that India would build a "Sudarshan Chakra" shield weapon system by 2035. This will not just protect military and civilian areas but will allow India to strike back in a precise, targeted manner, underscoring the country's commitment to strategic autonomy.

### Demographic mission

Mr. Modi made a mention of the anti-Naxal operations especially in Chhattis-

garh where he said terror corridors had now become green corridors. He did, however, warn of a "conspiracy to change the demographic character" of the country, especially in border areas.

He announced the establishment of a High Powered Demographic Mission to deal with the challenges posed by this issue. "Infiltrators are snatching away the livelihood of the youth and are targeting the sisters and daughters of my country. They mislead innocent tribals and capture their land. The country will not tolerate this. When demographic change takes place in border areas, it causes a threat to national security," he said.

Repeating that he would stand like a wall between the world and the interests of Indian farmers, a reflection on U.S. demands in its tariff negotiations with India, the Prime Minister said the need of the hour was to reduce fertilizer dependency on other countries.

Noting that a major part of India's Budget was con-

cerned with procuring fuel and energy from other countries, he said that India would aim, by 2047, to increase its capacity of nuclear energy 10-fold via its 10 nuclear energy plants.

Self-reliance in critical minerals was also flagged by Mr. Modi, with the launch of the National Critical Minerals Mission, to explore 1,200 sites where such minerals are to be found.

### Praise for RSS

The Prime Minister singled out the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh, the ideological motherhood of the BJP and the Sangh Parivar, for praise.

As the organisation nears its century mark, he called it a golden page of Indian history devoted to service, "probably the largest NGO in the world."

The address also made history for its 103-minute duration, being the longest August 15 speech by any Prime Minister of independent India, and also breaking Mr. Modi's own 98-minute record during the 78th Independence Day last year.

# India to build indigenous air defence system by 2035: PM

**Sudarshan Chakra** aims at providing complete security for strategic and civilian areas, such as hospitals and railway stations; national security cannot rest on foreign dependence, says Modi

**Saurabh Trivedi**  
NEW DELHI

India will develop an indigenous air defence system by 2035 not just to neutralise enemy attacks, but also to hit back strongly, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said in his Independence Day address on Friday. The mission, announced on the eve of Krishna Jayanti, will be called 'Sudarshan Chakra' in honour of Lord Krishna's mythological shield.

"By 2035, all the important places of the nation, which include strategic as well as civilian areas, like hospitals, railways, any centre of faith, will be given complete security cover through new platforms of technology. This security shield should keep expanding, every citizen of the country should feel safe," Mr. Modi said.

"Whatever technology comes to attack us, our technology should prove to be better than that and hence, in the coming 10



**Military asset:** Prime Minister Narendra Modi interacts with NCC cadets at Red Fort in New Delhi on Friday. SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

years, I want to expand this national security shield, strengthen it, modernise it," the Prime Minister said.

## Missile systems

India currently has three S-400 missile systems developed by Russia, which played a crucial role in taking down Pakistani drones and missiles fired towards more than 15 Indian cities in retaliation for Operation Sindoor in May. India's Integrated Air Command and Control System (IACCS) played a pivotal role in maintaining air superiority over Pakistan.

Mr. Modi hailed Operation Sindoor as a landmark demonstration of India's strategic autonomy and self-reliance in defence. The armed forces had used 'Made-in-India' weapons during the operation to dismantle terror networks and Pakistan-based infrastructure, he said, signalling an era where India rejects nuclear blackmail and foreign-imposed terms.

"Indigenous capabilities allow India to act decisively and independently. National security cannot rest on foreign dependence," he declared, calling self-reliance the bedrock of

strength, dignity, and the journey to a developed India by 2047.

On the Indus Waters Treaty, the Prime Minister was unequivocal: "Blood and water will not flow together. The Treaty was unjust – our farmers suffered while enemy lands were irrigated. India will no longer compromise on national interests."

He underlined self-reliant India as a core pillar of Viksit Bharat, warning against the "dangerous habit" of dependence. "Self-reliance is not just about exports, imports, the rupee, or the dollar – it is about our ability to stand on our own," he said.

Calling on innovators and youth to develop indigenous jet engines, he drew parallels with India's COVID-19 vaccine success and the UPI revolution. "Our scientists and youth must take it up as a direct challenge," he urged.

Mr. Modi also celebrated Group Captain Shubhan-shu Shukla's achievements in space.



# PM says 'Made-in-India' chips by end 2025, calls for indigenous social media and tech platforms

**SOUMYARENDRA BARIK**  
NEW DELHI, AUGUST 15

DURING HIS Independence Day address Friday, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said that 'Made in India' semiconductor chips will be available in the market by the end of 2025. He also urged the country's youth to develop indigenous technology platforms like social media.

The prime minister said that the thought of having a semiconductor factory in India first began 50-60 years ago, but the plan was stuck in limbo, until the government started working on the semiconductor industry in mission mode, under which six chip plants are already under construction and four more have received the green light.

"No one can deny the fact that the 21st century is technology-driven... countries which excelled at technology reached the summit of development, their economic power reaching new heights," the PM said.

"Talking of different dimensions of technology, I would like to draw your attention towards semiconductors. I'm not standing here at the Red Fort to criticise any past government, but the country's young generation should know that 50-60 years

EXPLAINED

**E** 'Chip factory idea revived after nearly 60 years'

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ago, files started on semiconductors, with thoughts of having a factory. You will be surprised to know that semiconductors, which have become the strength of the world, files and thoughts related to the industry got stuck in limbo in India 50-60 years ago. The thought of semiconductors faced a feticide... we lost 50-60 years. Today, many countries have attained expertise in semiconductors and are showing their strength globally," PM Modi said in his address.

"We have freed ourselves from that past burden and have furthered work on semiconduc-

tors on mission mode... Six units are in the offing, and four of them are soon coming out of the drawing board... By the end of this year, chips made in India, made by the people of India will be available," he added.

Earlier this week, the Union Cabinet cleared four new semiconductor assembly and testing plants under its India Semiconductor Mission, which have a total financial outlay of Rs 4,594 crore.

Two of these plants will come up in Odisha, and one each in Punjab and Andhra Pradesh. With these, the government is now offering financial incentives for the construction of a total of 10 semiconductor-related factories, ranging from a fabrication plant to assembly and testing operations.

The two plants in Odisha include a Rs 2,066 crore assembly and testing (ATMP) facility being set up by SiCSem Pvt Ltd, which will produce silicon carbide-based diodes and MOSFETs, and another ATMP plant by 3D Glass Solutions Inc. worth Rs 1,943 crore. Union IT Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw said the second plant has investments from Intel, Lockheed Martin, and other VC and PE funds.

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# PM pushes for self-reliance in energy, critical minerals

AGGAM WALIA

NEW DELHI, AUGUST 15

PRIME MINISTER Narendra Modi in his Independence Day address from the Red Fort called for India to become self-reliant in energy and critical minerals, pointing to the opportunity cost of a high petroleum import bill. Modi also said the government has “opened the doors” of nuclear energy to the private sector, and aims to grow nuclear generation capacity tenfold by 2047.

“We all know that we are dependent on many countries for energy, be it petrol, diesel, or gas. We have to spend lakhs of crores of rupees to import energy,” PM Modi said. “If we weren’t dependent, that money could have been used for India’s future, its farmers, and to fight poverty. But we are working on becoming self-reliant in this aspect,” he added.

In 2024-25, India’s crude oil imports were valued at \$137 billion, petroleum products at \$24 billion, and LNG at \$15 billion. Altogether, they accounted for 22.3 per cent of India’s total imports, compared to 23 per cent in 2023-24, according to the Petroleum Planning and Analysis Cell of the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas.

## ‘Critical minerals exploration ongoing’

PM Modi said critical minerals have taken centre stage globally, underpinning technologies across sectors — from energy to industrial to defence.

“That is why we have launched the National Critical Mineral Mission (NCMM). Exploration is underway at more than 1,200 sites, and we are moving ahead towards becoming self-reliant in critical minerals as well,” he said.

So far, the Ministry of Mines has auctioned 24 critical mineral blocks — some requiring further

## NCMM, NUCLEAR SECTOR REFORMS IN FOCUS

‘WE HAVE launched the National Critical Mineral Mission (NCMM). Exploration is underway at more than 1,200 sites, and we are moving ahead towards becoming self-reliant in critical minerals as well,’ the prime minister said in his speech, underlining the strategic focus on critical minerals

‘INDIA IS India is taking big initiatives on nuclear energy. Ten new nuclear reactors are currently operational. We have also resolved to increase our nuclear energy capacity by 10 times by 2047,’ PM Modi said, adding that his government has ‘brought many reforms in the nuclear sector...’

exploration and others ready for development into mines — and aims to auction 100 more by 2030. Mining sector experts caution, however, that operationalising auctioned mines could take several years. To address bottlenecks, the ministry has set up a Project Monitoring Unit (PMU) to streamline regulatory processes and expedite clearances.

The Centre is also doubling down on the exploration and acquisition of critical mineral blocks abroad. Earlier this week, the Lok Sabha passed amendments to the Mines and Minerals (Development & Regulation) Act, enabling the National Mineral Exploration Trust (NMET) to fund overseas exploration.

## ‘10X nuclear boost; pvt sector involvement’

“India is taking big initiatives on nuclear energy. Ten new nuclear reactors are currently operational. We have also resolved to increase our nuclear energy capacity by 10 times by 2047,” PM Modi said in his address. India’s installed nuclear capacity stood at roughly 8.8 gigawatts (GW) as of June 30, accounting for just under 2 per cent of its total electricity generation capacity.

“Reform is a continuous process... We have brought many reforms in the nuclear sec-

tor. We have now opened the doors of nuclear energy to the private sector as well. We want to combine our strengths,” Modi added.

In the 2024-25 Budget, the government proposed partnering with the private sector to finance and build Bharat Small Reactors (BSRs) for captive use, to be commissioned and operated by the Nuclear Power Corporation of India (NPCIL).

Full-scale private participation, however, will require amendments to the Atomic Energy Act and the Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Act, currently under internal discussion. A Department of Atomic Energy task force is also examining safeguards, fuel procurement, waste management, and other aspects of private ownership and operation of nuclear plants.

In his speech, Prime Minister Narendra Modi also noted that India has met a key climate target five years early, with non-fossil fuel sources accounting for 50 per cent of the country’s installed electricity capacity as of June 30.

These sources — which include nuclear, large hydro, and renewables — made up just 30 per cent of installed capacity in 2015 and 38 per cent in 2020, before rising sharply over the last five years, on the back of solar and wind power.



# Next-gen GST reforms by Diwali, says PM; just two rates: 5% & 18%

**AANCHAL MAGAZINE**

NEW DELHI, AUGUST 15

TARGETING TO push through next-generation reforms in the Goods and Services Tax regime before Diwali in October, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said Thursday the lower tax burden will be a Diwali gift to the common man, small entrepreneurs and MSMEs.

These reforms are expected to boost consumption as the GST rates on goods such as refrigerators, air conditioners and packaged and branded food items like fruit juices, butter, cheese, condensed milk, nuts, dates and sausages, and medical items including medical grade oxygen, gauze, bandages, diagnostic kits are likely to be cut.

“This would enhance  
**CONTINUED ON PAGE 2**

EXPLAINED

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**Simple  
structure,  
less burden**

DOING AWAY with multiple rates will ease compliance and lower tax burden on common people. The complexity of GST structure has made its administration unwieldy.

## ● Next-gen GST reforms by Diwali

affordability, boost consumption, and make essential and aspirational goods more accessible to a wider population," the Ministry of Finance said in a statement.

The Central government's proposal, expected to come into effect by October, would mark a significant change in the GST design eight years after its rollout. It has suggested replacing multiple slabs — 5 per cent, 12 per cent, 18 per cent and 28 per cent — with a broad two-slab structure — 5 per cent and 18 per cent — in addition to a 40 per cent special rate for sin and demerit goods, sources in the know said.

As per the proposal, 99 per cent of items in the current 12 per cent slab are set to be moved to the 5 per cent slab, while 90 per cent of goods and services currently at 28 per cent would shift to the 18 per cent tax slab. Common-use items will continue to be in the zero or 5 per cent slab, while rates below 5 per cent for gems and jewellery, gold, dia-

monds will remain unchanged.

Currently, the topmost GST slab is 28 per cent on top of which compensation cess, ranging from 1 per cent to 290 per cent, is levied on sin and luxury goods such as cars, refrigerators, air conditioners, pan masala, tobacco and cigarettes. With compensation cess coming to an end by November-December as compensation-related loans get repaid, the cess rates are proposed to be subsumed to a uniform rate of 40 per cent. The special rate of 40 per cent would be levied on only about seven items as the Centre has proposed shifting cement and white goods into the lower tax bracket of 18 per cent.

Sin goods will continue to face the same tax incidence, sources said. For instance, tobacco, a sin good, will continue to face the same tax incidence of 88 per cent that exists today, sources said. Online gaming, which currently faces 28 per cent levy, is likely to attract the topmost 40 per cent

GST rate.

Though there might be an initial impact on revenues, the gains from higher compliance and consumption are expected to offset the losses, sources said. "In line with the Laffer curve, reduced tax rates are expected to result in higher consumption and bring more people into the GST base," a source said.

"It is the time to seize the moment and undertake this holistic reform for easing compliance and lower tax burden for common people," the source said.

In its statement, the Ministry of Finance said it has already sent its proposal to the ministerial panel for GST rate rationalisation. "The Central Government has sent its proposal on GST rate rationalisation and reforms to the Group of Ministers (GoM) constituted by the GST Council to examine this issue," it said.

Sources said the GST Council, the overarching federal body with members from both the Centre as well as states, is likely to meet next month, and may hold multiple

meetings, in the run-up to Diwali since decisions involving rate reductions that could potentially result in revenue losses will need to be discussed threadbare. The last meeting was held in December 2024.

The reforms also seek to reduce classification-related disputes, correct inverted duty structures in specific sectors such as textiles, ensure greater rate stability, and further enhance ease of doing business. "These measures would strengthen key economic sectors, stimulate economic activity, and enable sectoral expansion," the Ministry said.

It said the end of compensation cess has created fiscal space, providing greater flexibility to rationalise and align tax rates within the GST framework for long-term sustainability.

With the Central government's proposal involving a complete overhaul of rates, this would imply a careful item-by-item consideration of approximately 1,500 categories of goods and services in the GST Council meeting.

In its last meeting held in Jaisalmer in December 2024, the GST Council had held discussions on lowering rates on several items. However, it had decided to defer a key decision to lower the tax rate on health and life insurance premiums. As per the proposal, exemption for premiums paid by senior citizens for health insurance and premiums paid by all for term life insurance was under consideration.

The potential revenue losses from the major tweaks in GST rates are likely to be met by resistance from states as it may further strain their fiscal health. The earlier rate rationalisation proposals have been unpalatable to many states, both BJP-ruled and Opposition, as several attempts to simplify or reduce rates on consumer-focused items were stalled before in the GST Council.

As per government data for 2023-24 shared in Parliament last year, around 70-75 per cent of the GST revenue came from 18 per cent tax slab, while the 12 per cent slab contributed 5-6 per cent of

the GST collections. The lower 5 per cent slab accounted for 6-8 per cent of the GST, while the higher 28 per cent slab's share was 13-15 per cent.

Since the proposals would involve revenue losses, there are apprehensions that some states may resist the tweaks, which could also result in voting being conducted in the GST Council meeting. The Finance Ministry said the Centre is committed to working closely with the states in the "true spirit of cooperative federalism". "It will be building a broad-based consensus with the States in the coming weeks, to implement the next generation of reforms as envisioned by Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi," it said.

The GST Council, when it meets next, will deliberate on the recommendations of GoM, and every effort will be made to facilitate early implementation so that the intended benefits are substantially realised within the current financial year, the Ministry said.



# Govt. proposal in 2024 for a panel on 'demographic challenges' never took off

**Vijaita Singh**

NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced a High-Powered Demography Mission on Friday. However, a similar committee announced before the 2024 Lok Sabha Election was never formed.

In her Interim Budget speech on February 1, 2024, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman had said the committee will be constituted to consider the challenges arising from "fast population growth and demographic changes." The terms of reference and composition of the panel were never notified.

On Friday, in his Independence Day speech, Mr. Modi said the "demography of the country is being changed as part of a conspiracy and a well-planned plot" and the mission will do its work in a well thought-out and definite manner in the stipulated time to deal with "this grave crisis that is looming over India".

The Census, which gives

**There is no accurate data on population shifts but the police have flagged the issue at many forums**

a clear picture of migration and demographic changes, was last done in the year 2011 and the next population count is expected in 2027.

Total Fertility Rate (TFR) – the average number of children per woman – in the country has remained constant at 2.0 in 2021, the same as in 2020, according to the Sample Registration System (SRS) report for 2021 released by the Registrar General of India on May 7. Bihar has reported the highest TFR at 3.0, while Delhi and West Bengal reported the lowest TFR of 1.4.

Though there is no accurate data on demographic changes, police and security agencies have been regularly flagging the issue at various forums.

During the annual Director General of Police

conference in 2021, which was presided over by the Prime Minister, police officers from Uttar Pradesh and Assam submitted a research paper flagging demographic changes in districts along the international border with Nepal and Bangladesh.

The compendium of reports compiled by the Intelligence Bureau, which was later pulled down from its website in 2022, said the police had submitted essays highlighting the ongoing demographic changes in the bordering States.

"These have been prepared with the help of data collected through Census exercises, National Family and Health Surveys, local surveys, data enumerated by going through voters' list, etc. However, the thrust remains on the overall demographic changes. These changes in the bordering belt is presenting a big challenge to national security, particularly at the level of border villages and bordering sub-divisions," the report said.

# China says it opposes sanctions by E3 nations over Iran nuclear programme

**Agence France-Presse**

BEIJING

China said on Friday it opposed invoking sanctions on Iran over its nuclear programme after three Western nations told the UN they would reimpose them if no diplomatic solution was found by the end of August.

European sanctions on Iran were eased after a 2015 deal in return for curbs on Tehran's nuclear programme.

On Wednesday, Foreign Ministers from the E3 group – Britain, France and Germany – threatened



Centrifuge machines seen inside the Natanz uranium enrichment facility in central Iran. AP

to reimpose them in a joint letter to UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and the Security Council.

China said on Friday it “opposes invoking” sanc-

tions and “believes that it does not help parties build trust”. Reimposing sanctions was “not conducive to the diplomatic effort for resumption of talks”, Beij-

ing's Foreign Ministry spokesman Lin Jian said.

European countries stepped up warnings to Iran about its suspension of cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency.

That came after Israel waged a 12-day war with Iran in June, partly seeking to destroy its nuclear capability. The U.S. staged its own bombing raid in the war. The letter sets out engagements that the ministers say Iran has breached, including piling up uranium stock to more than 40 times the permitted level under the 2015 deal.



# Trump, Putin shake hands ahead of Ukraine talks at Alaska summit

Previously planned one-on-one meet is now a three-on-three meeting that will include Secretary of State Marco Rubio and special envoy Steve Witkoff; Putin to be joined by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Foreign Affairs Adviser Yuri Ushakov

## Associated Press

ALASKA

U.S. President Donald Trump and Russia's Vladimir Putin shook hands warmly at the start of their Alaska summit on Friday before heading into hours of discussions that could reshape the war in Ukraine and relations between Moscow and Washington.

The leaders greeted each other on the tarmac at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, where officials erected a special stage, with a large "Alaska 2025" sign flanked by parked fighter jets and red carpets. Uniformed military members stood at attention nearby. B-2s and F-22s – military aircraft designed to oppose Russia during the Cold War – were flying over to mark the moment.



**Reaching out:** Donald Trump, right, greets Vladimir Putin at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson in Alaska on Friday. AP

White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt said the previously planned one-on-one meeting between Mr. Trump and Mr. Putin is now a three-on-three meeting that will include Secretary of State Marco Rubio and special envoy Steve Witkoff. Mr. Putin will be joined by Foreign Minister

Sergey Lavrov and Foreign Affairs Adviser Yuri Ushakov. The change indicates that the White House is taking a more guarded approach than it did during a 2018 meeting in Helsinki, when Mr. Trump and Mr. Putin first met privately just with their interpreters for two hours.

Mr. Putin and Mr.

Trump are expected to hold a joint press conference at the end of the summit.

The sit-down gives Mr. Trump a chance to prove to the world that he is both a master dealmaker and a global peacemaker. He and his allies have cast him as a heavyweight negotiator who can find a way to bring the slaughter to a close – something he used to boast he could do quickly.

For Mr. Putin, a summit with Mr. Trump offers a long-sought opportunity to try to negotiate a deal that would cement Russia's gains, block Kyiv's bid to join the NATO military alliance and eventually pull Ukraine back into Moscow's orbit. Despite having so much at stake, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and European

leaders are not invited.

There are significant risks for Trump. By bringing Putin onto U.S. soil the President is giving him the validation he desires after his ostracisation following his invasion of Ukraine three-and-a-half-years ago.

Ahead of the summit, Mr. Trump spoke with Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenko, a close ally of Mr. Putin, by telephone on Friday.

Belarus has backed Mr. Putin's invasion of Ukraine and allowed Russia's Army to use its territory as a launchpad for its first wave of attacks in early 2022.

Mr. Trump said he had thanked Mr. Lukashenko for freeing political prisoners and said that the two sides were "discussing the release of 1,300 additional prisoners".

# Taliban condemn Afghans 'ungrateful' for Islamic rule

**Associated Press**

ISLAMABAD

Taliban's leader Hibatullah Akhundzada warned God would severely punish Afghans who are "ungrateful" for Islamic rule in the country, according to a statement released on Friday marking the fourth anniversary of the Taliban's return to power.

The Taliban seized Afghanistan on August 15, 2021, as the U.S. and NATO withdrew their forces at the end of a two-decade war.

Since then, they have imposed their interpretation of Islamic law on daily life, including sweeping restrictions on women and girls, based on edicts from Akhundzada.

The Taliban leader, who is seldom seen in public, said in a statement that Afghans had endured hardships and made sacrifices for almost 50 years so that Islamic law, or Sharia, could be established. Sharia had saved people from "corruption, oppression, usurpation, drugs, theft, robbery, and plunder."

"These are great divine blessings that our people should not forget and, during the commemoration of Victory Day (August 15), express great gratitude to Allah so that the blessings will increase," Akhundzada said.

"If, against God's will, we fail to express gratitude and are ungrateful for them, we will be subjected to the severe punishment by Allah."

He also instructed the Cabinet and Ministers to drop the word "acting" from their job titles, signifying the permanence of a Taliban administration in Afghanistan and the lack of challengers to their rule.

## Indoor protest

Members of the United Afghan Women's Movement for Freedom staged an indoor protest on Friday in northeast Takhar province against Taliban rule.

The country is gripped by a humanitarian crisis made worse by climate change, millions of Afghans expelled from Iran and Pakistan, and a sharp drop in donor funding.



# South Korean President vows to build 'military trust' with North

**Agence France-Presse**

SEOUL

South Korean President Lee Jae Myung vowed on Friday to "respect" North Korea's political system and build "military trust", a day after Pyongyang said it had no interest in improving relations with Seoul.

Mr. Lee has pledged to pursue dialogue with the nuclear-armed North without preconditions since his election in June, a reversal from his hawkish predecessor.

He said the South Korean government "will take consistent measures to substantially reduce tensions and restore trust" with the North.

"We affirm our respect for the North's current system," he said at an event



South Korean President Lee Jae Myung has pledged to pursue dialogue with nuclear-armed North without precondition. REUTERS

marking the anniversary of liberation from Japanese rule, adding that Seoul had "no intention of engaging in hostile acts".

"I hope that North Korea will reciprocate our efforts to restore trust and revive dialogue," Mr. Lee said.

Mr. Lee's speech came a day after North Korean

leader Kim Jong-un's sister, Kim Yo-jong, said the North has "no will to improve relations" with the South. She also denied reports that North Korea was removing propaganda loudspeakers.

The South's military said in June that the two countries had halted propaganda broadcasts along

the demilitarised zone, adding last week that it had detected North Korean troops dismantling loudspeakers on the frontier.

## 'Unusual move'

Mr. Kim Jong-un also made a speech at a liberation day celebration in Pyongyang, urging the nation to overcome "the challenges facing the DPRK for the great powerful country", using the North's official acronym.

However, in an unusual move for a Liberation Day address, he made no mention of South Korea or the North's "enemies".

The North Korean leader's speech was a "stark contrast" to his sister's "fiery statements", Yang Moo-jin, president of the University of North Korean Studies in Seoul, said.