

Face-off over trade deal

'Mutually beneficial': Goyal says trade pact details to be out soon

'Interests related to sensitive sectors being safeguarded'

Jatin Anand
New Delhi, February 4

A DAY after it emerged atop the list of the Opposition's ire against the BJP-led NDA government at the Centre, Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal said on Wednesday that the India-US trade deal was "balanced and mutually beneficial" for both nations. Goyal made a statement on the trade deal, first in the Lok Sabha and later in the Rajya Sabha.

Speaking in the Lok Sabha amid vociferous protests from the Opposition benches, Goyal also sought to underscore that both sides had ensured that their respective interests in regard to the "sensitive sectors" of their economies had been safeguarded. He added that the complete contours of the deal would be announced as soon as the remaining technicalities were concluded.

"After Prime Minister Narendra Modi's February 2025



Union Minister Piyush Goyal in Rajya Sabha on Wednesday. PTI

visit to the United States... interlocutors from both sides engaged in serious discussions at various levels over the last year," Goyal said.

"I want to stress that this is less than the tariffs imposed by America on several competing nations; it will increase India's competitiveness in terms of its exports to the American market. This deal will benefit India's exporters, especially those engaged in labour-intensive sectors... I want to repeat to this hallowed House that Bharat's core sensitivity in the fertiliser and agriculture sectors has been kept in mind," Goyal said. Referring to India's energy needs, Goyal said, "I want to clarify as the government has stated many times publicly, that safe-

guarding the energy needs of 140 crore Indians. Bringing about diversification in energy sources given the prevailing market conditions and changing international context is the foundation of our work ethic in this regard..." he added. "It strengthens both 'Viksit Bharat' and 'Atmanirbhar Bharat'; we will continue to work towards making the Prime Minister's vision in this regard a reality," Goyal said.

Goyal made the same statement in the Upper House. With Opposition MPs seeking clarifications, Rajya Sabha Chairman C. P. Radhakrishnan did not allow any, citing Rule 251 of the Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business in the Council of States.

Kharge terms deal anti-farmer: 'Will spark another 2021-like stir'

Express News Service
New Delhi, February 4

TERMING THE recently-announced Indo-US trade deal "anti-farmer", Leader of the Opposition in the Rajya Sabha Mallikarjun Kharge said on Wednesday that it would spark another farmer's movement, forcing the government to go back on it.

Speaking during the discussion on the Motion of Thanks on the President's Address, Kharge said it was an insult to Parliament that MPs came to know about the trade deal from US President Donald Trump's announcement when the House was in session.

Kharge cited the social media post by US Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins on Tuesday in which she said that the deal would include more American farm products making their way to India.

Earlier in the day, Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal had reiterated that the government had ensured that India's agriculture and dairy sectors were kept secure during the negotiations of the deal.

Kharge said Indian farmers would be destroyed by the deal, while American farmers would benefit.



Mallikarjun Kharge speaks in Rajya Sabha on Wednesday. ANI

"After taking back the black laws [the three farm laws that were withdrawn in 2021 after over a year-long farmers' protest], now you are making the same mistake again... Once again, there will be a farmers' movement and when they come out on to the streets... you will have to take this back like you took that [the three farm laws] back," he said.

Speaking about the trade with China, Kharge said a red carpet was being laid for Chinese trade today. He termed it as a "strategic surrender", saying that China was repeatedly

claiming territory in Arunachal Pradesh. He said the trade was increasing at a time the government says that China had come to the aid of Pakistan during Operation Sindo.

Kharge also raised concerns over the attacks on minorities during the NDA government's term, saying that social justice and harmony were being bulldozed.

Intervening after Kharge, Health Minister and Leader of the House J. P. Nadda cited Goyal's statement, reiterating that agriculture and dairy sectors have been protected in the trade deal.

Earlier, speaking during the discussion, Nadda said the Commerce Minister had said that India and the US would work together to finalise the details of the deal. He said there had been drastic changes during the tenure of the Narendra Modi government and that "right response" was given to Pakistan after the Uri, Pulwama and Pahalgam terror attacks.

Taking a dig at the Opposition, Nadda asked Skill Development Minister Jayant Chaudhary to start "skill development" for the parties. "You have not been able to become credible in 11 years," he said to the Opposition.

Karnataka adopts resolution for restoration of MGNREGA

BJP and JD(S) oppose the resolution and stage walkout; the Opposition had ample opportunities to discuss the VB-G RAM G Act and defend it, but it failed to do so, says Deputy CM Shivakumar

The Hindu Bureau

BENGALURU

A resolution tabled by the Karnataka government in the Legislative Assembly, opposing the repeal of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), 2005, and replacing it with the Viksit Bharat-Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) (VB-G RAM G) Act, 2025, was passed on Wednesday, even as BJP and JD(S) members staged a walkout.

Overnight dharna

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah tabled the resolution on Tuesday, with two days dedicated for its debate. However, the BJP and



Mulling move: Chief Minister Siddaramaiah and his Deputy D.K. Shivakumar during the Assembly session. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

the JD(S) members launched an overnight dharna demanding the resignation of the Excise Minister over corruption allegations on Tuesday and continued it during the legislature session on Wednesday.

Amid non-stop slogan-

neering, the Speaker allowed a debate on the resolution.

Before it was put to vote, Leader of Opposition R. Ashok opposed the resolution and the Opposition members staged a walkout.

Deputy Chief Minister

D.K. Shivakumar said that despite having ample opportunities to discuss the VB-G RAM G Act, 2025, and defend it, the Opposition had failed to do so. The resolution was passed with a voice vote.

Earlier in the day, Rural Development and Panchayat Raj Minister Priyank Kharge responded to the debate and argued that the new law was "anti-federal" for increasing the expenditure of the State governments without consultation, which he termed "economic terrorism".

He pointed out that even NDA allies such as Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu had expressed concern over increasing the State's share from 10% to 40%.

BJP steps back on demand for Jammu Statehood, resists divisional status for Pir Panjal

See J&K as one entity, says BJP MLA and LoP, following statements from senior party leaders who have demanded a separate State for Jammu; NC MLA backs separate Pir Panjal division proposal

Peerzada Ashiq

JAMMU

The Jammu and Kashmir unit of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) on Wednesday stepped back from its demand for separate Statehood for the Jammu region. It also opposed granting divisional status for the Pir Panjal valley, comprising the Rajouri and Poonch districts, amid uproarious scenes and walkouts in the J&K Assembly.

'One entity'

"We see J&K as one entity. It has prospered because of the efforts of Maharaja Hari Singh. We even consider areas in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir as part of J&K," said BJP leader and Leader of the Opposition (LoP) Sunil Sharma after party MLAs staged a walkout from the House, accusing Speaker Rahim Rather of siding with the ruling National Conference (NC). He added, "We will not allow any division. At-



BJP legislators protesting in the House on Wednesday. They later staged a walkout, accusing the Speaker of siding with the NC. ANI

tempts are being made to create separate regional identities, which challenge the historical and cultural unity of J&K."

Mr. Sharma's statement is a departure from the political narrative set over the past two months by two senior BJP leaders – Sham Lal Sharma and Vikram Randhawa – who have expressed support for separate Statehood for the Jammu region.

The LoP ruffled many feathers in the Assembly

by saying the Pir Panjal valley "does not exist anywhere". "The area was earlier described as the Chandrabhaga division. No such place exists," claimed Mr. Sharma.

'Divisive ploy'

On the growing demand for separate divisional status for the Pir Panjal valley, he called it "part of a plan to divide J&K on communal lines".

NC leader and Minister Javed Rana, who won from

the Pir Panjal valley's Mendhar constituency, defended the valley's separate identity and threw his weight behind the demand for divisional status.

'No threat to plurality'

"The region of Pir Panjal is mentioned in the Mahabharata and the Rajatarangini. It was named after Panchal Devi. The region is not just geography but has its own history, culture, and stories of sacrifice written in historical texts, whether it is 1947 or the Operation Sindoor," said the ruling party legislator.

He denied the claim that a separate identity for the region insults fallen soldiers or undermines the Union Territory's plural soul. "A minority cannot be allowed to rule over the majority," said Mr. Rana.

The Speaker adjourned the House for 15 minutes after NC and Congress MLAs staged a protest amid noisy scenes over the LoP's remarks regarding the Pir Panjal region.

Ladakh leaders press for Statehood; talks with Home Ministry remain inconclusive

Vijaita Singh

NEW DELHI

The talks between the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) and Ladakh civil society leaders, being held after over three months, remained inconclusive, said Cherring Dorjay Lakruk, co-convenor of the Leh Apex Body (LAB). The October 22, 2025, draft proposal submitted by the group regarding Statehood and inclusion of Ladakh under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution, thus giving it a tribal status, was discussed at the meeting.

The leaders also demanded the unconditional release of climate activist Sonam Wangchuk and others who were detained after the September 24, 2025, violence in Leh city, where four persons were



Cherring Dorjay Lakruk (centre), representing LAB, said that they were hopeful that the MHA would call another meeting soon. PTI

killed, and several were injured.

The LAB and the Kargil Democratic Alliance (KDA), which have been spearheading the movement for constitutional safeguards in the Union Territory, were called to New Delhi on Wednesday to participate in the meeting

of the high-powered committee. The HPC is led by the Minister of State for Home Affairs.

The meeting continued for three hours, but the MHA officials only offered safeguards available under Article 371 of the Constitution and insisted on strengthening the hill councils.

Article 371 deals with “Temporary, Transitional and Special Provisions”, and exists under Part XXI of the Constitution. It is currently applicable in 12 States.

“The results of the meeting were not satisfactory. We went with a positive outlook but it was not up to our expectations,” said Asgar Karbalai, Co-Chairman, KDA.

Mr. Lakruk added that they were hopeful that the MHA would call for another meeting in the next 15-20 days. “The issue of detention of Sonam Wangchuk and others is dear to the people of Ladakh. The cases registered against them are illegal. We forcefully demanded the release of all of them and pressed for the withdrawal of cases,” he said.

Manipur President's Rule ends; Khemchand new CM

Will prioritise peace, says the Chief Minister; BJP's Kuki-Zo member Nemcha Kipgen and Losii Dikho of the Naga People's Front sworn in as Deputy CMs; two more MLAs take oath as Ministers

Rahul Karmakar

GUWAHATI

The installation of a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance government, with a Meitei leader at the helm, brought an end to nearly a year of President's Rule in Manipur on Wednesday.

Around 6 p.m., Manipur Governor Ajay Kumar Bhalla administered the oath of office to former Assembly Speaker and martial artist Yumnam Khemchand Singh as the State's second Chief Minister since the 2022 election.

The first, Nongthombam Biren Singh, resigned on February 9, 2025, following the ethnic conflict between the Kuki-Zo and Meitei communities that broke out on May 3, 2023. The



New role: Yumnam Khemchand Singh arriving at the Imphal airport ahead of taking oath as Chief Minister on Wednesday. ANI

swearing-in ceremony followed the revocation of President's Rule, which was imposed on February 13, 2025.

Mr. Khemchand Singh represents the BJP from the Singjamei constituency.

The BJP's Kangpokpi MLA, Nemcha Kipgen,

from the Kuki-Zo community, and Naga People's Front MLA Losii Dikho, a Naga leader representing the Mao constituency, were sworn in as Deputy Chief Ministers. The former took the oath virtually from Manipur Bhavan in New Delhi.

Two other Meitei MLAs

– Govindas Konthoujam of the BJP (Bishnupur) and Khurajam Loken Singh of the National People's Party (Wangoi) – were sworn in as Ministers at the Lok Bhawan in Manipur's capital, Imphal. "There will always be challenges. We will prioritise peace and work for the State's development and growth," Mr. Khemchand Singh said after swearing in.

Congratulating the new Chief Minister and his team, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said, "I'm confident they will work diligently towards furthering development and prosperity for my sisters and brothers of Manipur."

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Khemchand sworn in as new Manipur CM

Speaking with journalists before heading for a Cabinet meeting, the Chief Minister said, “Manipur has 36 communities, and, naturally, we have two Deputy Chief Ministers representing two major communities.” He said the Prime Minister, Home Minister Amit Shah, and the BJP’s national president Nitin Nabi entrusted him with taking the State forward and ensuring lasting peace.

Mr. Dikho said the new government will try to fulfil the responsibilities given by the Centre. “We will reach out to the people. We will ensure inclusivity and transparency,” he said.

Reacting to opposition to the government formation from certain quarters, he said it was expected. “It takes time to get things going,” he added.

Two Kuki-Zo MLAs of the BJP – former Director-General of Police L.M. Khaute (Churachandpur seat) and Ngursanglur Sanate (Tipaimukh) – were present during the swearing-in ceremony.

They reached Imphal from New Delhi earlier in the day, along with the other Manipur BJP leaders and the party’s central observers Sambit Patra and Tarun Chugh.

Ms. Kipgen’s swearing-in as one of the two Deputy Chief Ministers was significant, as the Kuki-Zo Council (KZC), Kuki Inpi Manipur (KIM), and other bodies had asked the Kuki-Zo MLAs not to be a part of the government. These bodies want a Union Territory-like separate administration as the condition for the Kuki-Zos to participate in governance.

The KZC warned that any Kuki-Zo MLA who chooses to disregard the “collective decision” by joining the government would do so in their individual capacity and would be “held responsible for any consequences”.

The KIM stated that no Kuki-Zo MLA should, under any circumstances, associate with or lend legitimacy to a “so-called popular government that stands in complete disregard of the suffering, aspirations, and political will of the Kuki-Zo people.” The ethnic violence had left more than 260 people dead and an estimated 62,000 others internally displaced. A large majority of them are still lodged in relief camps.

The U.S. trade deal – gains from economic diplomacy

India's trade playbook is working strongly, steadily and at scale. Its new trade architecture resembles a newly built expressway, anchored in strategic trade agreements that will enable faster, more predictable movement for trade. After concluding a major free trade agreement with the European Union (EU), the United Kingdom and other partners, India has now secured a consequential trade deal with the United States.

The road to this deal was neither short nor simple. Shaped through a demanding and intricate process, the deal stands as a testament to the strength, steadiness and foresight of Indian negotiators. After nearly a year of sustained dialogue, technical negotiations and quiet diplomacy, India and the U.S. agreed upon the lower tariff of 18%. The reduction of U.S. tariffs on Indian goods to this competitive level is a huge boost to Indian exports, providing improved market access, policy certainty and avenues for new strategic partnerships.

A growing network of partnerships
The India-U.S. trade deal represents an important outcome in India's expanding network of international trade partnerships. The trade agreements with the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), the U.K., and the EU give India preferential market access to the whole of Europe. Agreements with Australia and New Zealand make India a key partner of the Pacific, trade agreements with Oman and United Arab Emirates provide greater access to West Asia, and the latest deal with the U.S. deepens India's stronghold in America – a clear reflection of India's deep integration with the world.

The U.S. is the largest import market in the world and India's biggest export destination, accounting for almost one-fifth of India's total exports. Indian exports to the U.S. span a wide range of sectors, which includes apparel, gems and jewellery, agricultural products, footwear, leather and several other manufacturing products, supporting both employment and manufacturing value chains in India. With the elevated U.S. tariff levels of 50% last year, several Indian exporters were at a competitive



Anant Goenka

is President, Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), and Vice-Chairman, RPG Group

disadvantage in this critical market. The revised tariff not only provides meaningful relief and improves India's relative position *vis-à-vis* competing suppliers but also provides a constructive basis for advancing discussions under the ongoing India-U.S. Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA). By easing immediate trade frictions, the agreement creates space to address broader issues such as regulatory cooperation, market access and supply chain under the BTA.

The gains and broader implications

The clearest gains from the tariff reduction are likely to accrue to employment-intensive export sectors, particularly apparel. The U.S. is the world's largest apparel import market, and with Indian exports now facing an 18% tariff, lower than key competitors such as Vietnam and Bangladesh, Indian manufacturers regain price competitiveness in several high-volume categories. Similar dynamics apply to gems and jewellery (where margins are highly sensitive to tariff changes and the U.S. remains a critical destination), as well as to marine products, processed foods, footwear and leather (where even modest tariff moderation materially improves landed costs). A lower tariff will enhance export viability across these sectors and support India's positioning in diversified global supply chains, further encouraging these industries to go for capacity expansion.

On the whole, the reduction in U.S. tariffs on Indian goods immediately enhances India's competitive position relative to several major exporting nations that face higher duties, including China, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Brazil, South Africa, Pakistan as well as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries.

This competitive positioning builds up India's export sectors and supports the country's long-term goal of becoming a global manufacturing hub.

Beyond immediate economic relief, the deal opens pathways for long-term growth and boosts the overall India-U.S. economic relationship. It encourages joint ventures, technology partnerships and investment in high-value sectors, fostering innovation, employment and

Industry must use the opportunities that the India-U.S. trade deal presents

skill development.

For India, it consolidates global economic leadership and strengthens the country's capacity to engage in high-value international partnerships. For the U.S., it highlights the advantages of partnering with India to drive innovation, expand markets and reinforce supply chains. Progress on tariffs supports deeper engagement across regulatory co-operation, digital trade, clean energy and innovation-led sectors. The deal creates a mutually beneficial cycle of growth and opportunity, laying the foundation for collaboration that extends beyond commerce.

From a strategic perspective, closer economic ties complement cooperation in wider forums such as the Quad (India, Australia, Japan, the U.S.) where supply-chain resilience and trusted partnerships are central priorities. A stable trade relationship reinforces these objectives.

From tariffs to trust, a strategic reset in ties
This trade deal is more than a temporary adjustment of tariffs. It restores trust, unlocks economic opportunities and shores up a constructive strategic relationship. The India-U.S. partnership is poised to expand in areas which include technology, defence, energy and high-value manufacturing.

The deal demonstrates how thoughtful negotiation and shared priorities can turn complex challenges into lasting opportunities. It reveals how two democracies, when willing to engage thoughtfully, can craft solutions that serve national interests while advancing global stability. The India-U.S. trade deal is not just an economic milestone. It represents a renewed, balanced and strategic partnership, setting the stage for deeper cooperation and mutual prosperity in the decades ahead.

The India-U.S. trade improves access to the most important export destination, strengthens competitiveness across key sectors and supports the next phase of bilateral economic engagement. With policy momentum in place, the focus now shifts to industry to leverage these opportunities through investment, scale and enhanced competitiveness.

• GEOPOLITICS

'Iran is of much greater consequence (than Venezuela)'



EXPERT EXPLAINS

AJAY SINGH

MANAGEMENT ADVISOR & FORMER OIL INDUSTRY EXECUTIVE WITH EXPERIENCE IN WEST ASIA

AFTER WEEKS of heightened tensions, including the build-up of American forces, the US and Iran are set to hold talks in Oman on Friday over Tehran's nuclear programme. In geopolitical terms, a crisis in Iran could potentially have far greater consequences than Venezuela. **Anil Sasi** speaks to **Ajay Singh**, a management advisor based in Tokyo, about how the US threat of force in the region could upset oil flows and affect prices. Singh is also a former Shell and Japan Petroleum Corporation executive with considerable experience of West Asia.

The oil price fluctuated widely as the US-Iran military conflict seemed imminent, before the parties agreed to negotiate. What is the outlook for oil and gas markets?

The US is using the threat of force to coerce Iran into a fundamental change of direction. Spot oil and gas prices will remain sensitive as the possibility of war still very much exists. If a conflict breaks out, Iran may attempt a blockade of the Strait of Hormuz, which would stop the flow of around 20% of the world's oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG) from various Persian Gulf countries. If that happens, prices would spike to much higher levels, as that sort of volume cannot be replaced at short notice.

The military scenarios are difficult to predict, but if a blockade can be prevented or cleared quickly, prices would recede rapidly. Damage to production facilities in some Gulf nations could also occur, but it would be of smaller magnitude and could be compensated for using other sources. OPEC and other countries currently have an ample surplus oil production capacity of 3-4 million barrels per day (bpd). Several new LNG supply projects will also come onstream in the near future in the US and elsewhere.

Iran is important for oil and gas. How crucial is it in the current geopolitical context, especially compared to Venezuela?

Iran is of much greater consequence. It holds the world's third-largest oil reserves, located strategically vis-à-vis Asian and European markets. Iranian oil is of good quality and can be produced using conventional techniques at low cost. Most Venezuelan oil, on the other hand, is a highly viscous sludge that requires expensive underground heating to flow.

Iran has many highly productive "super-giant" oilfields containing many billions of barrels, with multiple reservoirs stacked above each other. Some, such as the Azadegan oilfield, stretch across the border into Iraq. Iran's oil production be-

Question of oil quality

- Iranian oil is of good quality and can be produced using conventional techniques at low cost.
- Most Venezuelan oil, on the other hand, is a highly viscous sludge that requires expensive underground heating to flow.

fore the 1980s Iran-Iraq war exceeded 6 million barrels per day, but has stayed below 4 million bpd ever since.

Even more important are Iran's gas reserves, the second largest in the world. The South Pars field, which Iran shares with Qatar, is the largest gas field in the world, and holds over a thousand trillion cubic feet of gas. Iran came close to investing in four LNG plants to export that gas in the early 2000s, but those plans never materialised due to concerns over its nuclear programme and consequent sanctions.

Qatar, meanwhile, has developed its side of the field, exporting gas worth over \$40 billion last year alone, and is expanding production capacity.

What could be America's goal in the context of Iranian oil and gas, and more widely?

The US aims to secure its global petroleum dominance and its political primacy in West Asia. It is now the world's top oil producer, consuming most of its output domestically, while Saudi Arabia is second. The US is also the world's top LNG producer and exporter, with Qatar being the second. If the risk of Iran going nuclear can finally be eliminated, then US interests would be better served by ending sanctions and developing Iran's petroleum resources.

Iran's petroleum industry needs major investments, infusion of new technology and access to global markets. The US would like its companies to fulfil that role. If a stable legal framework that balances profit sharing between Iran and foreign investors

can be achieved, then I believe international oil companies will invest.

China has grown close to Iran, given the US sanctions on the latter. China reportedly buys over 1.5 million barrels of Iranian oil per day, sanctions notwithstanding, and is Iran's largest trading partner. The US does not wish to cede such space to its geopolitical rival in West Asia.

Iran could also be an attractive market for other goods and services if petroleum export revenues increase and are used for the welfare of its people. Iran's population of 90 million is bigger than Germany's, and half of it is younger than 35. But a stable, effective government and peace are a must.

Is regime change essential and likely in Iran, and what might be the nature of the new dispensation?

It may be premature to draw any conclusions about that. There is, of course, much hardship and discontent among the Iranian people, and the US demands of the Iranian regime constitute a total reversal of its core policies.

But Iranians are also a nation conscious of their civilisational power, unlikely to put up with foreign overlordship. They remember the overthrow of their democratically elected prime minister, Mohammad Mossadegh, in 1953, which the US later acknowledged it had engineered to protect Western oil and political interests.

For any regime in Iran to succeed, current or new, it would have to rapidly deliver economic benefits to the people and be seen as independent.

TALKS FOCUS ON TERRITORY AND ZAPORIZHZHIA NUCLEAR PLANT

Russia, Ukraine hold fresh US-brokered talks in UAE

Russia demands that Ukraine withdraw from eastern Donetsk

Reuters
Kyiv, February 4

UKRAINIAN AND Russian officials wrapped up a “productive” first day of new US-brokered talks in Abu Dhabi, Kyiv’s lead negotiator said on Wednesday, as fighting in Europe’s biggest conflict since World War Two raged on.

The two-day trilateral meetings come after Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Russia had exploited a US-backed energy truce last week to stockpile munitions, attacking Ukraine with a record number of ballistic missiles on Tuesday.

“The work was substantive and productive, focused on concrete steps and practical solutions,” Rustem Umerov, head of Ukraine’s National Security & Defence Council, wrote on X.

Shortly after the talks began, Russian forces struck a crowded market in eastern Ukraine with cluster munitions, killing at least seven



Russian multiple rocket launcher TOS-1A fires towards enemy positions from an undisclosed location in Ukraine on Wednesday. REUTERS

people and wounding 15, the Donetsk region’s Governor Vadym Filashkin said.

Umerov said he would prepare a report for Zelenskyy, and talks were expected to continue on Thursday, a source familiar with the matter told Reuters.

Photographs released earlier in the day by the United Arab Emirates’ foreign ministry showed the three delegations sitting around a U-shaped table, with U.S. officials seated at the centre, including special envoy Steve Witkoff and US President Donald Trump’s son-in-law Jared Kushner.

Trump’s administration has pushed both Kyiv and Moscow to find a compromise to end the four-year-old war, but the two sides remain far apart on key points despite several rounds of talks with U.S. officials.

The most sensitive issues are Moscow’s demands that Kyiv give up land it still controls and the fate of the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, Europe’s largest, which sits in a Russian-occupied area. Moscow wants Kyiv to pull its troops out of all of the Donetsk region, including a belt of fortified cities regarded as one of Ukraine’s

strongest defences, as a precondition for any deal.

Ukraine said the conflict should be frozen along the current front line and has rejected any unilateral pullback of its forces. Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said on Wednesday that Russian troops would keep fighting until Kyiv made “decisions” that could bring the war to an end.

Russia currently occupies about 20% of Ukraine’s national territory, including Crimea and parts of the eastern Donbas region seized before the 2022 invasion.

U.S., Iran confirm talks amid flare-up over drone downing

Tehran says it is ready to hold talks with U.S.; White House confirms Steve Witkoff would meet Iranian officials later this week; U.S. military said it shot down an Iranian drone in the Arabian Sea

Stanly Johny

Iran's Foreign Ministry on Wednesday said preparations were completed for holding talks with the U.S. in the coming days, hours after the U.S. military said it had shot down an Iranian drone that approached its aircraft carrier *USS Abraham Lincoln* in the Arabian Sea. U.S. President Donald Trump also said in Washington that his administration is "negotiating" with Tehran.

"Planning [for the talks] has already been carried out and that details on the venue will be announced once finalised," Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Esmaeil Baghaei said on Wednesday, according to state-owned *Press TV*.

Mr. Trump, while speaking to presspersons at the White House on Tuesday, said: "[The talks] are all over. But they are negotiating. They'd like to do something, and we'll see if something is going to be done... They had a chance to do something a while



An anti-U.S. billboard displayed on a building in Tehran's Valiasr Square on Wednesday. AFP

ago, and it didn't work out, and we did (Operation) *Midnight Hammer*," he said, referring to the U.S. strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities in June 2015. "I don't think they want that happening again, but they would like to negotiate."

White House spokesperson Karoline Leavitt said Mr. Trump's special envoy Steve Witkoff is set to have talks with Iranian officials later this week.

While the U.S., along with threats and troop mobilisation, signalled a readiness for diplomacy, Iran reciprocated with diplomatic

engagement coupled with warnings that any attack could trigger a regional war. Iran conducted live-fire military drills in the Strait of Hormuz, a critical chokepoint between the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman which opens into the Arabian Sea.

On February 3, the U.S. Central Command said, an Iranian Shahed-139 drone "unnecessarily manoeuvred" towards *USS Abraham Lincoln*, which was sailing about 800 km from Iran's Southern coast. An F-35C fighter from the *Lincoln* shot the drone

down, said Capt. Tim Hawkins, spokesperson for the U.S. Central Command.

In a separate incident, two Iranian boats, accompanied by a Mohajer surveillance drone, tried to seize a U.S.-flagged tanker near the Strait of Hormuz. A U.S. guided missile destroyer escorted *M/V Stena Imperative* to safety "with defensive air support from the U.S. Air Force," said Capt. Hawkins.

Iran's *Fars* news agency carried a report on Tuesday, saying the primary mission of the drones was "monitoring all military movements in areas adjacent to the Islamic Republic". "The Shahed-129 drone was conducting its routine and legal mission of reconnaissance, monitoring, and imaging in international waters. This is considered a standard and lawful procedure," said a report in *Tasnim*, another semi-official news agency. "The drone successfully transmitted its surveillance and reconnaissance footage to the command centre."