

Battle readiness



Field exercise: K-9 Vajra tanks showcase their artillery capabilities during the **Vajra Ghaat' exercise**, conducted by the Southern Command's White Tiger Division in the Pokhran Field Firing Range on Monday. ANI

Women's entry in Sabarimala temple: Top court says 9-judge bench to hear matter in April

Express News Service
New Delhi, February 16

WITH THE Centre also backing demands for a review of the Supreme Court's September 2018 judgment in the case on whether women can be allowed to enter the Sabarimala temple in Kerala, the top court said Monday that a 9-judge bench will start hearing the review petitions on April 7.

A three-judge bench of Chief Justice of India Surya Kant and Justices Joymalya Bagchi and Vipul M Pancholi said the CJI will notify the composition of the 9-judge bench separately through an administrative order.

"We are supporting the review. It needs to be reviewed...", Solicitor General Tushar Mehta, appearing for the Centre and some states, informed the bench.

The bench said that parties backing the review should submit arguments from April 7 to April 9, and those opposing it from April 14 to 16. The bench said it will hear the rejoinder arguments on April 21, and likely conclude the hearing on April 22.

Besides the Sabarimala matter, the SC was also considering petitions arising out of questions concerning the entry of Muslim women into mosques, female genital mutilation in the Dawoodi Bohra community, and the plea for the entry of Parsi women who married outside the community to the fire temple.

On September 28, 2018, a 5-judge bench of the court, by a 4:1 majority, lifted age restrictions on women's entry to the hill shrine in Kerala. It struck down as unconstitutional Rule 3(b) of the Kerala Hindu Places of Public Worship Rules, 1965, which allowed the exclusion of women on the grounds of custom.

However, on November 14, 2019, the top court, in a 3:2 ruling, said that the September 2018 decision may impinge on the affairs of other religions as well and would require a more detailed examination. It decided to keep petitions seeking review of the verdict, which lifted the age restrictions on women's entry, pending a larger bench's decision on the matter.

In keeping with this, the SC subsequently constituted a 9-judge bench to consider the matter.



The SC has scheduled petitions seeking a review of its 2018 verdict permitting women of all ages to enter the Sabarimala hill shrine. FILE

Why row has landed CPI(M) govt in double bind on election eve

Shaju Philip
Thiruvananthapuram,
February 16

WITH THE Supreme Court now scheduling petitions seeking a review of its 2018 verdict permitting women of all ages to enter the Sabarimala hill shrine, the spotlight is now on the CPI(M)'s stand, and the emerging gap between the positions of the party and its government in Kerala.

The hearing is likely to conclude on April 22 in the midst of the Kerala Assembly elections.

Kerala law minister and CPI(M) leader P Rajeev told the media that the LDF government would "always stand for the protection of faith". "The government stands to protect the faith of the devotees. However, there is enough time to decide on the stand to be adopted in the Supreme Court. It is a complex constitutional issue... This is not a situation to say 'yes' or 'no'."

However, earlier in the day, CPI(M) state secretary M V Govindan said, "On the Sabarimala issue, the stand of the government and that of the party may not necessarily be the same."

The CPI(M) leadership's position has drawn criticism from the Opposition. The UDF's Leader of the Opposition (LoP) in the Assembly, VD Satheesan, said the state government should correct its earlier affidavit in the SC, in which it favoured the entry of young women into the hill shrine. BJP state president Rajeev Chandrasekhar said the latest episode was another

example of the CPI(M)-led LDF government taking a "U-turn" on major issues. "Considering the approaching Assembly elections, they (the government) may take any stand," he said.

In its recent efforts to revive its image among Hindus, CM Pinarayi Vijayan and the CPI(M) have drawn closer to Hindu community leaders, besides holding the Global Ayyappa Sangamam summit to mark the 75th anniversary of Travancore Devaswom Board, the state government body that manages the Sabarimala shrine, in September 2025.

The Nair Service Society (NSS), an organisation of the upper-caste Hindu Nair community, said it expected the state government to stand in favour of protecting the traditions and rituals at the temple.

Another prominent Hindu community leader Vellappally Natesan, who represents the Ezhava community, said, "The government should correct what needs to be corrected."

The CPI(M) has been pursuing several strategies to retain its Hindu vote base, which has even drawn flak from within the Left front.

The BJP has already declared "viswasa samrakshanam (protecting the faith)" as one of its themes for the Assembly elections in the wake of the Sabarimala gold theft scandal, further fuelling its narrative about the CPI(M) being allegedly against devotees on the Sabarimala issue.

AFTER STATE MINISTER MET RAJNATH

United Goa firm on Dabolim airport's fate: 'Touching it will kill economy'

Pavneet Singh Chadha
Panaji, February 16

THE NEED to protect the Goa International Airport in Dabolim has emerged as a rare point of agreement among the BJP, the Congress, and the AAP in the state, with leaders across party lines clear that any plans otherwise will hurt the interests of the state.

Following a meeting with Defence Minister Rajnath Singh last week, Goa Transport Minister and Dabolim MLA Mauvin Godinho had told the media that a private airport operator was "lobbying" to turn Dabolim airport into an exclusive naval facility.

Since then, speculation has

»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

Key factors: Tourism, traffic to freight and connectivity

• WHY DABOLIM MATTERS

Year	Domestic passengers (lakh)	International passengers (lakh)
2023	69.55	4.81
2024	67.41	3.02
2025	62.96	2.06

KEY CONCERNS: Stakeholders say the shift to Mopa will create a significant financial and time burden for South Goa tourists

COST: One-way taxi from Mopa to Palolem (South Goa) estimated between Rs 4,500 and Rs 5,000.

TIME: While a flight from Mumbai or Bengaluru takes approximately

an hour, the subsequent road transfer from Mopa to the far South can take 3 hours.

LOCATION: Residents also highlight that Dabolim's location is

equidistant from Goa's farthest corners, reaching both Mandrem (North) and Palolem (South) in roughly 90 minutes.



Dabolim airport's fate

been rife about the future of commercial flight operations at Dabolim airport and the potential impact on the state's thriving tourism business and overall economy.

The Chief Minister's Office issued a categorical statement: "Speculation suggesting that consent has been given to discontinue civilian services at Dabolim Airport is incorrect and misleading." But that has done little to quell apprehensions.

"It will be a death knell for tourism," said Valencio Savio Goes, a third-generation taxi driver and a prominent member of the North and South Goa taxi union, echoing fears of many in the tourism industry. "The entire economy of South Goa will be hit hard. Who will want to take a three-hour taxi ride from Mopa to Palolem and pay Rs 4,500 after taking an hour-long flight from Mumbai or Bengaluru?"

The Dabolim airport does a fair share of heavy lifting for Goa, with a footfall of about 63 lakh domestic passengers and 2 lakh international passengers last year. The newer airport in Mopa handled 47.1 lakh domestic passengers and 3.9 lakh international passengers in 2025.

The history — and why it matters

Built by the Portuguese as a civilian airport in 1955, it was taken over by the Indian Navy's air wing soon after Goa was liberated in December 1961. Coming under the Ministry of Defence, the airport currently operates as a civil enclave in the military airbase INS Hansa. The Airports Authority of India (AAI) maintains an international civil enclave for civil aircraft operations, with the Indian Navy providing air traffic services.

"It was the first airport in the country to receive charters — special flights for holiday-makers from Europe who came to Goa during vacations," said

Jack Sukhija, president, Travel and Tourism Association of Goa (TTAG).

Dabolim's central location has significantly contributed to the state's growth as a tourism hub, and particularly helped develop South Goa as a luxury tourist area.

Vinay Albuquerque, director of a Goa hospitality group, said, "You can reach Mandrem and Arambol in the far North in 90 minutes (from Dabolim) and commute to the extreme South... down to Palolem in almost the same time."

Hansel Vaz, founder of Goa's Cazulo premium feni, added, "It is also a logistics hub... in the sense that a port, industrial estates and railway terminal are all nearby and it offers good road connectivity."

Albuquerque cautioned that any plan to shut the airport will crush the booming tourism industry in the southern part of the coastal state. "The one-way taxi fare from Mopa (airport to South Goa) will be approximately Rs 5,000. For a family travelling on a budget, it's going to be extremely difficult to spend that kind of money only on taxi transfers. For larger hotels, people may not come, not so much because of the budget but because of transfer times. Businesses in Palolem and Agonda in South Goa will be wiped out," Albuquerque said.

When the Mopa airport was first approved in 2000, the Ministry of Civil Aviation recommended closing Dabolim airport for civilian operations upon the new airport's commissioning. Following protests, the ministry constituted a task force and, in July 2010, modified its decision to allow continuation of civilian aircraft operations at Dabolim.

In 2023, Goa's second airport — Manohar International Airport at Mopa in North Goa, developed by GMR Goa International Airport Limited (GGIAL),

a subsidiary of GMR Airports Limited — opened for commercial operations. The rationale cited for the two airports was to "cater to the growing passenger footfall", sustain tourism growth and create employment, with the government estimating that the new airport is expected to handle 13.1 million passengers by 2036.

In August 2023, after some international and domestic airlines shifted operations from Dabolim to Manohar International Airport, Goa Chief Minister Pramod Sawant wrote to then Union Minister of Civil Aviation Jyotiraditya Scindia, urging him to ask airlines to "reverse their decision".

"Although time and again, the Government of Goa has assured the residents of South Goa that civilian aircraft operations from Dabolim airport would continue, this shifting of operations by airlines has created fear among different industries, particularly the hotel industry... and people who earn their livelihood from Dabolim airport. This may potentially lead to instability/agitations among people of Goa," the communiqué said.

With rumours of closure rife again, stakeholders such as the TTAG are again seeking intervention. "It has always been critical to Goa as the state's primary, centrally located and historic air gateway, managing a large bulk of passenger traffic and handling a vast amount of international charter flights. It would be pertinent to note that even the Kashmir airport functions as a defence and civilian airport," the association said.

Agreement on keeping it running

Last week, state Transport Minister Godinho and BJP Rajya Sabha MP Sadanand Shet Tanavade wrote to Defence Minister Rajnath Singh seeking his intervention for "continued unhindered operations" at Dabolim airport. The letter, dated February 10, said several stakeholders in South Goa were con-

cerned that shifting all commercial operations to Mopa would be detrimental to livelihoods.

Godinho did not respond to calls seeking a comment.

In a post on X last Thursday, Aam Aadmi Party convener Arvind Kejriwal called any plan to shut commercial operations at the airport "unacceptable", saying, "The BJP government at the Centre is planning to convert Dabolim exclusively for defence purposes. Dabolim acts as a lifeline for South Goa... We will fight to keep Dabolim for civil purposes."

South Goa's Congress MP Capt Viriato Fernandes called it a "clear conspiracy to end commercial flights under the guise of security measures post Operation Sindoor".

"Almost 4.5 lakh to 5 lakh people are directly and indirectly dependent on the commercial operations at Dabolim airport for their livelihood. We are not saying the airport will shut down entirely. It will continue as a naval airport, but civilian and commercial operations are being systematically pushed out," he claimed.

The government has denied these allegations. "Any speculation suggesting that consent has been given to discontinue civilian services at Dabolim Airport is incorrect and misleading. Goa presently benefits from a dual-airport system, with operations at both Dabolim and Manohar International Airport, Mopa," the chief minister's office said in a statement.

Goa Tourism Minister Rohan Khaunte claimed that speculation was being driven by some "insecure people ahead of elections". "This issue has been raised several times in the past and has been addressed," he said. "Tourism in Goa started with Dabolim airport. With several enhancements in infrastructure at the airport, we are very clear that Dabolim airport will continue to be operational," he said, adding that both airports were "required for Goa's development as a tourist destination."

SC Bench to review if new data law delivers a 'body blow' to RTI

Krishnadas Rajagopal

NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Monday agreed to refer to a Constitution Bench a series of petitions arguing that India's new digital personal data law delivers a "body blow" to citizens' right to a transparent and accountable government under the Right to Information (RTI) Act.

Section 44(3) of the Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act of 2023 imposes a "blanket ban" on the RTI Act applicants, preventing them from seeking disclosure of 'personal information', the petitioners said. They submitted that the provision cynically uses the right to privacy to cripple the citizens' right to information.

Chief Justice of India Surya Kant, heading a three-judge Bench, refused a plea to pass an interim order to stay the implementation of Section 44(3), though the top judge said that the petitions raised a "complex, slightly sensitive and really interesting" question of law.

"We may have to lay down what is meant by personal information," Chief Justice Kant remarked, issuing notice to the government.

'Unguided discretion'

Advocate Vrinda Grover, appearing for petitioner Venkatesh Nayak, submitted that the government, instead of using a chisel, used a "hammer to deliver body blows to citizens' right to information".

Ms. Grover argued that Section 44(3) introduced by the DPDP Act has accorded the government "unguided discretion to



This is about

balancing competing interests. We have to iron out the creases and lay down what constitutes personal information

SURYA KANT
Chief Justice of India



deny personal information, which is unconstitutional". In fact, the fundamental right to privacy has been extended to the State.

The petitioners argued that Section 44(3) has amended Section 8(1)(j) of the RTI Act.

Originally, the RTI provision had exempted authorities from disclosing personal information to an applicant if the details sought had no relationship to any public activity or if disclosure would amount to unwarranted invasion of privacy. Even then, the government had to disclose if public interest outweighed privacy. The decision whether or not to reveal 'personal information' was taken by a Public Information Officer or the First Appellate Authority under the RTI Act after thoroughly weighing privacy and transparency concerns.

"Section 8(1)(j) of the RTI Act had struck the right balance between the right to privacy and the right to information," advocates Prashant Bhushan and Rahul Gupta, appearing for the National Campaign for People's Right to Information, submitted.

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A labourer burning paddy stubble at a village in Patiala. FILE PHOTO

States asked to curb wheat stubble burning during harvest season

Press Trust of India

NEW DELHI

The Commission for Air Quality Management in NCR and Adjoining Areas (CAQM) has issued a statutory direction for coordinated and time-bound implementation of State action plans to prevent and eliminate wheat stubble burning in the 2026 harvesting season, officials said on Monday.

The direction has been issued to the governments of Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh, with complementary efforts expected from the governments of Delhi and Rajasthan.

Mapping each farm

The directives include mapping each farm in all the villages for the proposed mode of wheat stubble management, tagging specific nodal officers to a group of farmers and covering all farmers in the district. It also directs the governments to ensure optimum utilisation and timely availability of crop residue management

machines to the farmers - mainly during the peak harvesting season - through a mobile app, mandate rent-free availability of the machines for small and marginal farmers, among other measures.

“Agricultural residue burning contributes to the deterioration of air quality both locally and across the NCR and adjoining areas and therefore requires structured seasonal preparedness.

“Satellite-based monitoring during the wheat harvesting season (April-May 2025), recording such fire incidents across the region, highlighted the need for targeted wheat-season interventions alongside existing paddy-season measures,” a senior official said.

“The commission had provided a broad framework to the States concerned for control and elimination of crop residue burning and directed them to draw up detailed State-specific action plans,” the official added.

SC dismisses pleas against Himanta's 'hate speech', video

A Bench headed by Chief Justice of India asks petitioners to approach the Gauhati High Court despite petitioners pointing out that the head of the Assam government is indulging in hate speech

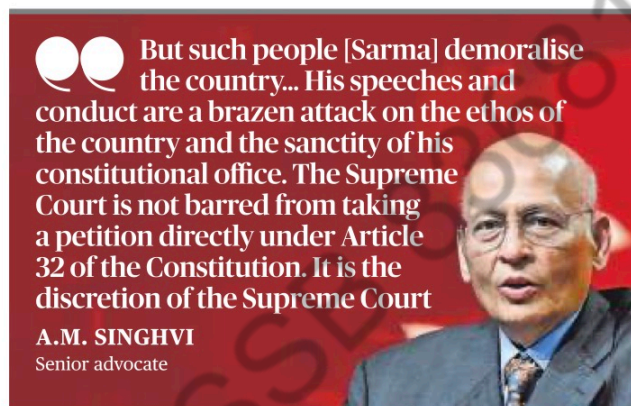
Krishnadas Rajagopal

NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Monday found “no good reason” to entertain a series of petitions seeking a criminal investigation against Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma for giving communal speeches and for a social media post, since deleted, depicting him firing a gun towards an animated image of two Muslim men.

Instead, a three-judge Bench headed by Chief Justice of India Surya Kant asked the petitioners, including the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Communist Party of India, to approach the Gauhati High Court despite the petitioners pointing out that Mr. Sarma is the “boss of Assam”.

The Supreme Court declined to entertain the petition, though it agreed with the petitioners that no political leader or constitu-



tional officeholder should conduct themselves in a manner that harms the secular ethos enshrined in the Constitution.

The petitioner-parties have accused Mr. Sarma of indulging in a “sustained pattern of hate speeches”. They said the social media post, from the “official handle of the Bharatiya Janata Party, Assam on X, and thereafter widely disseminated, has been the most blatant and disturbing manifestation of the pattern complained of”.

The petition said that

the video was removed from the public domain following severe backlash. However, the material continued to be circulated through other platforms.

The petitioners, led by senior advocates A.M. Singhvi and C.U. Singh and advocate Nizam Pasha, submitted that Mr. Sarma, while holding the office of the Chief Minister of Assam, gave speeches which “target, terrorise, and instigate hostility and overt violence against the Muslim community residing in Assam”.

The Supreme Court requested the Gauhati High Court Chief Justice to expeditiously list and hear the petitions, if they are filed before the High Court.

The CJI complained that “every matter” was directly filed before the Supreme Court by parties who ignored the powers of the High Courts. “Whatever the Supreme Court can do, the High Courts can also do,” Chief Justice Kant said.

“But such people [Sarma] demoralise the country... His speeches and conduct are a brazen attack on the ethos of the country and the sanctity of his constitutional office. The Supreme Court is not barred from taking a petition directly under Article 32 of the Constitution. It is the discretion of the Supreme Court,” Mr. Singhvi submitted.

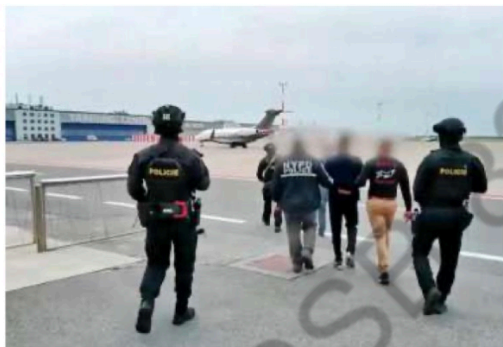
The CJI said High Courts would be demoralised with petitions bypassing them to come straight to the Supreme Court.

Centre silent on Pannun case; officials await U.S. court documents after Gupta pleads guilty

Suhasini Haidar
NEW DELHI

Three days after Indian citizen Nikhil Gupta pleaded “guilty” in a court in New York to charges of murder, conspiracy, and money laundering in order to assassinate Khalistani activist Gurbhant Singh Pannun, the government has yet to comment on the case.

According to investigators in the United States, Mr. Gupta, an Indian businessman, worked with an Indian “government employee” Vikash Yadav, believed to have been associated with India’s Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), to hire a hitman to carry out Pannun’s murder for a sum of \$100,000. Mr. Yadav, who was arrested in December 2023 in Delhi in a separate case of kidnapping and extortion, has been out on bail since April 2024, and is



Indian national Nikhil Gupta being extradited to the United States, from Prague, Czech Republic in June 2024. PTI

expected to appear for his next hearing later this week on February 20, according to his lawyers.

In court last Friday, Mr. Gupta, who had thus far pleaded “not guilty”, made an unexpected appearance, and pleaded guilty to the three counts – murder-for-hire, conspiracy to commit murder-for-hire, and conspiracy to commit money laundering.

The External Affairs Ministry refused to comment on the developments in the New York court.

Gupta’s consular access
Officials indicated that they would await court documents, and confirmed that the Indian Consulate-General in New York had been granted consular access to Mr. Gupta, an Indian citizen, and were prepared to

assist him with any consular requirements.

In his pleadings, Mr. Gupta told the judge in the Southern District of New York court that in 2023 he “agreed with another person” to murder a person in the U.S., and delivered \$15,000 as an advance for the job. Mr. Gupta will face the court again on May 29 for sentencing. It is unclear, however, whether he has confessed his guilt in lieu of a lesser sentence as part of a larger agreement with the U.S. Attorney’s office, which would involve his cooperation in the investigation or as an “approver”.

“The FBI will continue to aggressively defend the homeland against any foreign adversaries who target our citizens for exercising their constitutionally protected rights,” FBI Assistant Director in-charge James Barnacle said in a statement after the guilty

plea, and said Mr. Gupta facilitated a “foreign adversary’s unlawful effort to silence a vocal critic of the Indian government”.

The government has denied any knowledge or involvement in the plot to kill Pannun, which Canadian officials say is linked to the murder of Hardeep Singh Nijjar in Canada in June 2023.

With Mr. Gupta choosing to waive the requirement of a trial in the U.S., the focus of investigators would turn next to the prosecution of Mr. Yadav, who has an FBI “wanted” notice out for him.

According to a second indictment filed by the U.S. Attorney’s office in October 2024, Mr. Gupta took orders from Mr. Yadav, and exchanged messages on organising the killing of Pannun, who is wanted in India on terror charges.

(With inputs from Vijayta Singh)

WHILE GOODS EXPORTS IN JAN REMAINED FLAT, SHIPMENTS TO US SLIPPED 22% TO \$6.5 BILLION

Delegation heads to US to finalise legal text; 18% tariffs by this week

Ravi Dutta Mishra

New Delhi, February 16

AN INDIAN trade delegation is set to visit Washington next week to finalise the legal text of the first tranche of the India-US trade deal, Commerce Secretary Rajesh Agarwal said Monday.

“The chief negotiator, Darpan Jain, will be leading a delegation to the US to finalise the legal agreement. That work will carry on next week in Washington.

The effort is to finalise, close and sign the legal agreement in March 2026. The (penal) 25% tariffs have already gone, and the (reciprocal) 25% tariff will be reduced to 18%. I’m told they are processing, and it should be done fast. We expect it will happen this week,” he said.

The visit holds significance as the US has rolled back the penal 25% tariffs over India’s purchase of Russian oil, but is yet to lower the reciprocal tariffs from 25% to 18% that are hurting exports. While goods exports in January remained flat, shipments to Washington slipped 22% to \$6.5 billion. Meanwhile, goods imported from US rose

23% to \$4.4 billion in January.

Amid concerns that India’s market access to US cotton under the Bangladesh-style market access for Indian garment exports could hurt Indian cotton farmers, an official said adequate protection has been given to sensitive sectors. “The variety of cotton that we are currently importing from the US is the same that will get preferential market access under the US deal,” an official said.

Cotton import concerns

India imports both extra-long staple (ELS) and upland cotton from the US. It imports \$133 million worth of ELS cotton and \$98 million worth of upland cotton from the US, experts said.

Farmer groups have expressed concerns that US exports of upland cotton will compete with Indian domestic production and displace some of it. To avail the zero duty benefit, Indian exporters would import from the US rather than buy this variety domestically, experts said. As per the Bangladesh-US joint statement, the US committed to “establishing a mech-



“The chief negotiator, Darpan Jain, will be leading a delegation to the US to finalise the legal agreement ... The effort is to finalise, close and sign the legal agreement in March”

RAJESH AGRAWAL,
COMMERCE SECRETARY

anism” that will allow for certain textile and apparel goods from Bangladesh to receive a zero reciprocal tariff rate. This mechanism will allow imports of a “to-be-specified volume of apparel and textile” from Bangladesh to enter the US at this reduced tariff rate, the statement read.

The provisions allowing zero reciprocal duty market access also said volume of duty-free textile and apparel products from Bangladesh will be determined based on Dhaka’s imports of “US-produced cotton and man-made fibre textile inputs” from Washington. Bangladesh is the second largest exporter of textiles and apparel goods after China.

Threat to Indian apples

On concerns regarding the threat to apples grown in India from imported US apples, government officials said India is a net importer of apples and any access given under FTAs is under quota.

The official said India is a net exporter of farm products.

Former trade officer and head of think tank GTRI Ajay Srivastava said India produces about 2.5 million metric tonnes of apples annually, and nearly 50 lakh people in Jammu & Kashmir and about 5 lakh families in Himachal Pradesh depend on the apple economy for their livelihoods.

FULL REPORT ON
WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

Trade deficit in Jan widens to three-month high of \$34.68 bn

New Delhi: India’s merchandise trade deficit widened to a three-month high of \$34.68 billion in January, marking the final month impacted by around 50% US tariff on exports, which government officials said will be pared to 18% this week.

The wider-than-expected goods trade deficit was driven by a sharp rise in gold and silver imports, which pushed up total imports by 12% m-o-m to \$71.24 billion, while exports fell 5% to \$36.56 billion, Commerce Ministry data showed Monday.

The rise in imports was driven by gold and silver shipments, a trade ministry official said. Gold imports in January rose to \$12.07 billion from \$4.13 billion in December. Inflows into Indian gold ETFs, which need to be backed by physical gold, nearly doubled in January to Rs 240.4 billion.

REUTERS

January trade deficit widens before U.S. tariff relief kicks in

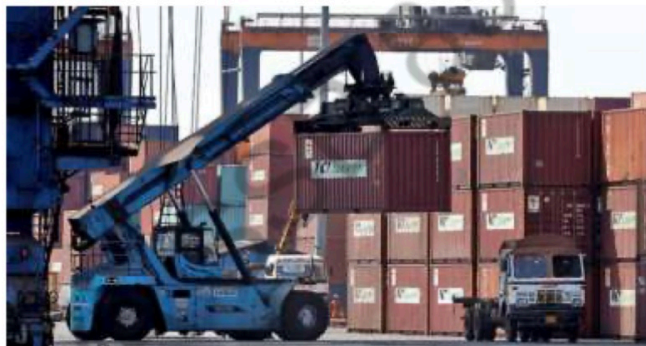
Sharp rise in gold and silver imports pushed up total imports by 12% month-on-month to \$71.24 bn, while exports fell 5% to \$36.56 bn; trade delegation to visit Washington next week for talks

Reuters

NEW DELHI

India's merchandise trade deficit widened to a three-month high of \$34.68 billion in January, marking the final month impacted by around 50% U.S. tariff on Indian exports, which government officials said will be pared to 18% this week.

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Goods surge: Shipments to the U.S. rose to \$72.46 billion in the first 10 months of the fiscal year. REUTERS

the commerce ministry showed on Monday.

U.S. President Donald Trump said earlier this month that he would slash tariffs on Indian goods to 18% from 50%, sparking re-

lief among exporters and policymakers.

Mr. Trump said that India had agreed to cut Russian oil purchases and intended to more than double its annual imports

of U.S. goods.

A trade delegation will travel to Washington next week to finalise a trade agreement, Rajesh Agrawal, India's trade secretary, told reporters on Monday.

The two nations are currently working on a trade pact on the basis of an interim framework, concluded earlier this month.

Merchandise exports to the U.S., India's largest export market, fell 4.5% month-on-month to \$6.58 billion in January. Shipments to the U.S. rose to \$72.46 billion in the first ten months of the fiscal year, data showed.

AI Summit important for cooperation to unlock potential: U.K.

Press Trust of India

LONDON

The U.K.'s focus during the AI Impact Summit in New Delhi will be on championing how artificial intelligence can supercharge growth, unlock new jobs, improve public services, and deliver benefits for people around the globe, the British government has said.

The U.K. delegation, led by Deputy Prime Minister David Lammy and AI Minister Kanishka Narayan, is keen to highlight how AI can improve everyday life in every corner of the world and make the case for AI as an engine of renewal that can help doctors diagnose faster, teachers personalise learning, councils deliver services in minutes, and businesses create the next generation of good jobs. "This summit is an important moment in determining how we can work together with our international partners to unlock the full benefits and potential of AI, while baking in robust and fair safety standards that protect us all," Mr. Lammy said in a pre-summit statement.

"AI is the defining technology of our generation, and we're determined to make sure it delivers for everyone," said Mr. Na-



David Lammy

rayan, the first Indian-origin MP from Wales.

"It can cut waiting times, transform public services, create new jobs and give hard-working communities a fresh start - and that's exactly the message we're taking to the summit. It is central to our plans for delivering national renewal, but its benefits can't and shouldn't be reserved by the few," he said.

The U.K.'s Department for Science, Innovation and Technology said India and Britain were "natural tech partners", with software giants such as Infosys, Tata Consultancy Services, and Wipro expanding their operations across the U.K.

India is an important market for British businesses generally, with U.K. firms generating more than 47.5 billion pounds in revenue from their business in India, it said.

Araghchi in Geneva for talks as IRGC begins drills near the Strait of Hormuz

Stanly Johny

Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi arrived in Geneva for a second round of nuclear talks with the U.S. and technical discussions with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) amid heightened tensions in the Persian Gulf, as Washington has sent a second aircraft carrier to the region, threatening to use force against the Islamic Republic if diplomacy fails.

While the U.S. and Iran are expected to hold talks, mediated by Oman, in the Swiss city on Tuesday, the naval forces of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) have started military drills near the Strait of Hormuz, a key chokepoint that connects



Iranian mockup imitating a U.S. aircraft carrier being encircled by speedboats during a drill near the Strait of Hormuz. FILE PHOTO

the Persian Gulf with the Arabian Sea through the Gulf of Oman.

"I am in Geneva with real ideas to achieve a fair and equitable deal. What is not on the table: submission before threats," Mr. Araghchi wrote in a social media post. IAEA chief Rafael Grossi later said he had

"in-depth technical discussions" with Mr. Araghchi ahead of Tuesday's "important negotiations".

Mr. Araghchi had met Steve Witkoff, U.S. President Donald Trump's West Asia envoy, and other officials for nuclear talks on February 6 in Muscat, Oman's capital, and agreed

to continue discussions.

Meanwhile, the IRGC on Monday started "live-fire intensive drills" named 'Smart Control of Hormuz Strait' under the supervision of chief commander Major General Mohammed Pakpour. The drills aim to test the readiness of the IRGC Navy's operational units and review support programmes and scenarios in the face of "possible security and military threats" in the strategic Strait of Hormuz, reported state-run Press TV.

"A rapid, decisive, and comprehensive response by the IRGC's operational forces in the face of anti-security plots in the maritime arena is at the core of the operational exercises of the units participating in the drill," it said.

BNP's Tarique Rahman to be sworn in as Bangladesh Prime Minister today

Kallol Bhattacharjee

DHAKA

The new Members of Parliament of Bangladesh will be sworn in at 10 a.m. on Tuesday, the Bangladesh Election Commission announced, adding that a "Constitution Reform Commission" will also be administered the oath. This event will be followed by the formation of the new government in the afternoon, when the Cabinet led by BNP Chairman Tarique Rahman will be sworn in. Around 1,200 local and foreign guests are expected to attend the swearing-in ceremony of Bangladesh Nationalist



Tarique Rahman

Party Chairman Tarique Rahman and his Cabinet on Tuesday afternoon, the BNP's media wing said.

The announcement of the swearing-in of both the MPs and the members of the Constitution Reform Commission has surprised many newly elected law-

makers. Speaking to *The Hindu*, a newly elected MP said that the Bangladesh EC had not informed them about the swearing-in of the Constitution Reform Commission. According to one version, the entire Parliament will function as the Constitution Reform Commission for 180 days. There is evident unease among the newly elected MPs about how the responsibilities of the Constitution Reform Commission will align with their regular parliamentary duties.

Among those who have confirmed their attendance at the ceremony of the incoming government are Lok Sabha Speaker Om

Birla; Prime Minister of Bhutan, Tshering Tobgay; Pakistan's Planning Minister Ahsan Iqbal; President of Maldives, Mohamed Muizzu; and Indo-Pacific Under Secretary of the United Kingdom, Seema Malhotra. The Foreign Minister of Nepal's interim government, Bala Nanda Sharma, and Sri Lanka's Health Minister Nalinda Jayatissa will also attend the event. Several other countries, including Qatar, Malaysia, and Brunei, will send high-level delegations to the ceremony.

The event will be held on the premises of Bangladesh's Parliament, Jatiyo Sansad.

PM may visit Israel on Feb 25, hold talks with Netanyahu

In second visit since 2017, PM may address Knesset, meet business leaders

Shubhajit Roy
New Delhi, February 16

AT A time when India has supported the Gaza peace plan but has stayed away from the Board of Peace led by US President Donald Trump, Prime Minister Narendra Modi is expected to visit Israel around February 25, sources have told *The Indian Express*.

Announcing Modi's visit to the country next week, Israel PM Benjamin Netanyahu, addressing the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organisations, said on Sunday, "Parliament address on the anvil. Who's coming here next week? Narendra Modi... Tremendous alliance between Israel and India, and we are going to discuss all sorts of cooperation. Now, you know, India is not a small country. It has 1.4 billion people, India is enormously powerful, enormously popular."

While the programme around the visit is being worked out, Modi is expected to address the Israeli Knesset (Parliament) and is likely to meet top Israel business leaders and the Indian diaspora.

This would be his second



PM Narendra Modi greets his Israeli counterpart Benjamin Netanyahu during his first visit to the nation in 2017. FILE

visit to Israel, the first being in July 2017, when Modi became the first Indian PM to do so, but did not visit the West Bank. In a separate visit in February 2018, he visited Ramallah and met Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas.

PM Modi had expressed immediate and initial support to Israel against Hamas within hours of the attacks on October 7, 2023 and had expressed solidarity against terrorism. Later, the central government had sought to nuance its stance by talking about the two-state solution to assuage the concerns of Palestinians as well.

In the last two years, India had expressed concern at the killings of innocent civilians and had called for humanitarian aid to be sent to Gaza. After Trump brokered the ceasefire between Israel and Hamas, which went into effect in October last year,

India had supported the Gaza peace plan, but chose not to join the Board of Peace.

Now, the Indian approach has been to move forward in the relationship with Israel, after the war in Gaza ended after two years — and a fragile ceasefire is in place.

India and Israel have deep strategic ties, especially in defence and security cooperation, and the PM's visit is expected to give a fillip to these areas of cooperation. Modi and Netanyahu are also expected to exchange notes on how to push the India-Middle-East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), which is important to both countries and Israel is part of the corridor as well.

In the last year or so, several senior Israeli ministers have visited India, including Minister of Tourism Haim Katz, Minister of Economy and Industry Nir Barkat, Minister of Agriculture

E. EXPLAINED

Visit amid Gaza ceasefire

PM Narendra Modi's visit comes months after the fragile ceasefire in Gaza. While India has supported the Gaza peace plan, it has stayed away from joining the Board of Peace, led by US President Donald Trump. India's approach has been to move forward in the relationship with Israel, given that both nations share deep ties in defence and security.

and Food Security Avigdor Lieberman, and Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich. The two countries have also signed a Bilateral Investment Treaty (BIT) during Smotrich's visit and then a Terms of Reference (TOR) leading to an FTA when Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal visited Israel in November.

In November, both nations also signed a pact to enhance defence, industrial, and technological cooperation, enabling the sharing of advanced technology to promote co-development and co-production. External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar visited Israel in December, during which he met Netanyahu, President Isaac Herzog, Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar and Barkat to prepare for Modi's bilateral visit.