

Protest at AI summit: four more Youth Cong. members arrested

ICYC president remanded in police custody; breach of high-security event part of deep-rooted conspiracy, raids on: police; will continue fight against those who 'mortgaged our country': Kharge; Sukhu criticises 'midnight raid' at Himachal Sadan

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Delhi police on Tuesday arrested four more Indian Youth Congress (IYC) members and added charges of rioting in the FIR related to the "shirtless" protest on February 20 at the AI Impact Summit in New Delhi.

In response, Congress national president Mallikarjun Kharge said, "We will continue to fight and continue our struggle against those who have mortgaged our country."

'No terror hallmark'

IYC president Uday Bhanu Chib, whom the police arrested on Monday and dubbed the "mastermind" behind the protest at Bharat Mandapam, was on Tuesday remanded by a court in four days of police custody. Judicial Magistrate First Class Ravi of the Patiala House Courts also direct-



Indian Youth Congress members staging a demonstration on Tuesday against the arrest of its president and seven others. PTI

ed the police to supply a copy of the FIR to Mr. Chib and the other accused, rejecting the police's claim that the case was "sensitive", stating that the protest lacked the hallmarks of terrorism or insurgency.

A total of eight Youth Congress members have been arrested for their "shirts off" protest over the India-U.S. trade deal at the high-security event.

On February 22, Prime Minister Narendra Modi attacked the Opposition par-

ty over its "*nanagi rajneeti* (naked politics)" in front of industry leaders and termed it an example of the Congress's ideological bankruptcy that had lowered the dignity of a global event.

'Aggressive elements'

Addressing a press conference, Special Commissioner of Police (Crime Branch) Devesh Chandra Srivastava called the protesters "aggressive elements" and said the protest was part of a

"deep-rooted conspiracy" to breach security at an event where several dignitaries, delegates and visitors were present.

"A premeditated attempt was made to breach the security cordon in the presence of dignitaries, delegates and visitors attending the international event. The aggressive elements were immediately overpowered. During the process of restraining them, some police personnel deployed on duty sustained injuries," said the officer.

CCTV footage indicates that many IYC members conducted reconnaissance of the area before staging the demonstration, the senior officer said.

To identify all the accused and "unearth the entire conspiracy", the police are conducting raids and coordinating with police departments from other States, Mr. Srivastava said.

Earlier in the day, the

Congress staged a demonstration in Delhi against the arrests of its members and met Lieutenant-Governor V.K. Saxena, to whom they submitted a letter alleging that the police action lacked "proportionality" and calling for the "protection of democratic political expression".

Not informed: H.P. CM

Meanwhile, Himachal Pradesh Chief Minister Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu on Tuesday slammed the Delhi police's "midnight raid" at Himachal Sadan in New Delhi in connection with the February 20 protest and said that neither he nor the Resident Commissioner was informed about the action.

According to sources, a police team visited Himachal Sadan on Saturday night after receiving information that some protesters were staying there.

(With inputs from PTI)

Union Cabinet nod for 'Kerala' to become 'Keralam'

The Hindu Bureau

NEW DELHI

The Union Cabinet on Tuesday approved the Kerala government's proposal to change the State's name from 'Kerala' to 'Keralam', the name used in the Malayalam language.

The President will now refer the Kerala (Alteration of Name) Bill, 2026, to the Kerala Legislative Assembly to express its views, under the proviso to Article 3 of the Constitution of In-

dia, a government statement said.

Once these views are received, the Union government will take further action to obtain the President's recommendation to introduce the name change legislation in Parliament.

The decision was taken at a Cabinet meeting chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi at its first gathering at Seva Teerth, the new complex housing the Prime Minister's Office.

The Kerala Assembly passed a resolution seeking name change on June 2024

The move comes almost two years after the Kerala Assembly passed a resolution seeking the name change.

The resolution, dated June 24, 2024, said: "The name of our State is 'Keralam' in Malayalam Language. States were formed

on the basis of language on the 1st day of November, 1956. The Kerala Piravi Day is also on the 1st day of November. Since the time of national independence struggle, there has been a strong demand for the formation of United Kerala for the people speaking Malayalam language. But in the First Schedule to the Constitution the name of our State is recorded as 'Kerala'. This Assembly unanimously appeal to the Central Government to

take urgent steps as per Article 3 of the Constitution for modifying the name as 'Keralam'."

The matter was considered in the Ministry of Home Affairs and, with the approval of Minister Amit Shah, the draft note was circulated to the Department of Legal Affairs and the Legislative Department of the Ministry of Law and Justice, for their comments. These departments concurred with the proposal to change the name.

Amid spurt in small aircraft accidents, DGCA cracks whip

Says stricter norms for non-scheduled operators, pilots alone can't be blamed

Sukalp Sharma

New Delhi, February 24

IN VIEW of the recent spurt in accidents involving small aircraft — mostly operated by charter flight operators — aviation safety regulator Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) on Tuesday announced a slew of measures in a bid to enforce a “zero-tolerance policy” on flight safety among non-scheduled operators (NSOPs). It stressed that the pilots’ decision to divert, delay, or cancel a flight for safety reasons is final and must be respected by operators, irrespective of commercial consequences.

The DGCA also announced new public disclosure requirements for NSOPs, a public safety ranking system, strengthening of oversight through intensive audits of flight data, increased scrutiny of maintenance records of older planes, stricter liability norms for the NSOPs’ management, and sterner penalties for pilots for violation of operational limits. The announcement came after the DGCA held a high-level meeting with all NSOPs a day after an small aircraft — operating as an air ambulance — crashed in Jharkhand, killing all seven persons on board. The crash came less than a month after a chartered jet crashed in Baramati, killing then Deputy CM Ajit Pawar and four others.

NSOPs are flight service providers that provide on-demand and non-regular air transport services like charter flights, private jets, and air ambulances. Over the past few years, flight

safety in NSOP operations have been flagged as an area of concern by aviation safety experts. Weak safety oversight, poor maintenance, inadequate risk assessment, and training lapses have been cited as key reasons behind growing number of incidents involving smaller aircraft.

“This high-level interaction follows a comprehensive review of accident data from the past decade, which identifies non-adherence to SOPs, inadequate flight planning, and training deficiencies as the primary causative factors in aircraft accidents. Consequently, the regulator has announced a set of new measures...,” the DGCA said on Tuesday. “In a significant move toward transparency, the regulator is introducing a mandatory disclosure policy. NSOP operators will be required to disclose critical safety information on their websites, including aircraft age, maintenance history, and pilot experience...”

The DGCA also announced that it will increase random cockpit voice recorder audits and cross-verify flight data, fuel records, and technical logs to detect falsification of data. “Accountable managers and senior leadership will be held personally responsible for systemic non-compliances; safety lapses cannot simply be blamed on pilots... Pilots found violating Flight Duty Time Limitations or attempting to land below safety minima may face licence suspensions of up to five years. Operators failing to meet compliance standards will be penalised and licenses/permits may be suspended,” the DGCA said.

DGCA grounds 4 Learjet aircraft of VSR Ventures after audit shows lapses

Sukalp Sharma

New Delhi, February 24

THE DGCA on Tuesday announced immediate grounding of four aircraft operated by VSR Ventures, the charter flight operator whose Learjet 45 crashed in Maharashtra’s Baramati on January 28, killing the then Deputy CM Ajit Pawar and four others. This follows a special audit of VSR Ventures that was initiated after the accident; the audit revealed various non-compliances by VSR Ventures.

“The multi-disciplinary audit team observed several non-compliances of approved procedures in the organisation in the area of airworthiness, air safety, and flight operations. In view of the non-compliances observed and considering the gaps in maintenance procedures it is decided to initiate the corrective measures by immediately grounding Learjet 40/45 aircraft with registration VT-VRA, VT-VRS, VT-VRV, and VT-TRI till continued airworthiness standards are restored,” the DGCA stated.

According to the DGCA database, VSR had a fleet of 17 aircraft, including the one that crashed in Baramati. Of these 17 planes, eight were Learjets. “Deficiency reporting forms have been issued to M/s VSR Ventures Pvt Ltd in above mentioned areas to submit root cause analysis on the non-compliances for further assessment...,” the DGCA said. It did not detail the non-compliances observed in the special audit.



IAF's heavy-lift Chinook helicopter during Exercise Vayu Shakti-26, at Chandan Field Firing Range, in Jaisalmer on Tuesday. PTI

RAJASTHAN

Indian Air Force conducts full dress rehearsal of exercise 'Vayu Shakti'

THE INDIAN Air Force on Tuesday conducted a full dress rehearsal of Exercise 'Vayu Shakti', a firepower demonstration, at the Pokhran Field Firing Range in the Thar desert of western Rajasthan. The rehearsal, which showcased coordinated day-to-dusk-to-night operations, was conducted ahead of the main event scheduled for February 27. Fighter jets, transport aircraft and helicopters carried out simulated strikes on designated targets in a near-realistic combat scenario. However, Tejas fighter jet did not take part in the rehearsal following reports of technical issue. Sukhoi-30 MKI aircraft targeted enemy runways and positions, while MiG-29 jets struck a simulated convoy of tanks. PTI

Tarique Rahman govt. announces changes in armed forces and the International Tribunal

Kallol Bhattacharjee

NEW DELHI

The Tarique Rahman-led government of Bangladesh carried out changes in the armed forces as well as the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT).

The government also said it will re-examine all the legal cases filed against journalists and business persons after the uprising of July-August 2024.

In an order issued by the Army Headquarters, the serving Principal Staff Officer (PSO) of the Armed Forces, Lt. Gen. S.M. Kamrul Hasan, has been sent on deputation to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs,



Bangladesh's President Mohammed Shahabuddin with PM Tarique Rahman at the South Plaza of Parliament in Dhaka. REUTERS

where he is expected to be appointed as an ambassador abroad.

Maj. Gen. Mir Mushfiqur Rahman took charge as the new Principal Staff Officer (PSO) in a ceremony on Fe-

bruary 23 when he was handed over the responsibility jointly by PM Rahman and Army Chief General Waker uz Zaman.

That apart, Brig. Gen. Mohammed Hafizur Rah-

man, who is the current Defence Attache at the Bangladesh High Commission in New Delhi, has been promoted to the rank of Major General and transferred back to Dhaka. *The Daily Star* has reported that Lt. Gen. Mainur Rahman, general officer commanding (GOC) of the Army Training and Doctrine Command (ARTDOC), has been made the Army's CGS (Chief of General Staff).

New Chief Prosecutor

The Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs appointed Mohammed Aminul Islam as the Chief Prosecutor of the International Crimes Tri-

bunal (ICT), ending the tenure of Tajul Islam, who served as the Chief Prosecutor when the ICT delivered a death sentence to former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and former Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal on November 17, 2025.

Mr. Islam, who was appointed Chief Prosecutor on September 7, 2024, gained prominence from 2011 to 2016 when he served as defence lawyer for several leading figures of the Jamaat-e-Islami who received life and death sentences for crimes committed during the crackdown on civilians by the Pakistan military in 1971.

Pak. accuses Afghanistan of 'firing' along the border

Press Trust of India

ISLAMABAD

Pakistan on Tuesday accused the Afghan Taliban of “unprovoked firing” along the border, while warning of a severe response to any further such attacks.

The firing came just days after Pakistan launched air strikes against the alleged hideouts of the militants inside Afghanistan after recent militant attacks within the country.

Prime Minister’s spokesperson for international media, Mosharraf Zaidi, said in a post on X on Tuesday that the “Afghan Taliban regime initiated unprovoked firing along the Pakistan-Afghanistan Border in Torkham & Tirah sub-sectors”. He said that Pakistan’s security forces responded immediately



Strict watch: A soldier of Afghan Taliban forces stands guard near the Torkham border of Nangarhar province in Afghanistan. AP

and effectively to the firing, “silencing the Taliban aggression”.

He warned that “any further provocation will be responded to immediately and severely” and added that “Pakistan will continue to protect its citizens and guard its territorial integrity.” Earlier, the Afghan Taliban had vowed to respond to the air attacks.

On Sunday, Pakistan had claimed to kill 70 militants in the military strikes targeting at least seven militant hideouts in Afghanistan.

Relations between Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban have deteriorated due to the alleged failure of Kabul to stop terrorists from using its soil to attack Pakistan.

CARTELS SET UP MORE THAN 250 ROADBLOCKS; TOURISM MASSIVELY HIT

Army-cartel battle rages a day after drug lord is killed

Associated Press

Tapalpa, February 24

A DAY after the Mexican army killed the country's most powerful drug lord, the picturesque town where it happened was a study in contrasts.

Children whose classes had been suspended by the outbreak of violence played in cobblestone streets and tourist shops were open on Tapalpa's main plaza Monday. But gunshots also rang out, and just outside the town a dead man lay on the road next to a Jeep sprayed with bullets.

Meanwhile, heavily armed Mexican security forces kept up their battle with cartel gunmen following the killing that sparked a surge in violence and put the country on edge.

Cartel fighters continued to block roads as smoke rose on the outskirts of the town in the state of Jalisco.

More than 70 people died in the attempt to capture Nemesio Oseguera Cervantes and the aftermath, authorities said Monday. Known as "El Mencho," he was the notorious leader of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel, one of the most powerful criminal organizations in Mexico.

The body count taken by security officials included security forces, suspected cartel members and others. Officials did not offer details, and the circumstances of most of the deaths were unclear.

Oseguera Cervantes was the boss of one of the fastest-growing criminal networks in Mexico, known for trafficking fentanyl, methamphetamine and cocaine to the United States and staging brazen attacks against Mexican government officials. The organization responded to his death with

• HOW 'EL MENCHO' WAS TRACKED & KILLED



Follow the Money? No. Follow the Lover

● To find Mexico's most-wanted kingpin, security officials did not follow the money or the trail of drugs. Instead, they followed his lover.

● A trusted associate of Oseguera Cervantes' romantic partner was first tracked down.

● The associate escorted the lover to a cabin in Tapalpa, in the wooded mountains of Jalisco, where "El Mencho" was hiding since Friday. It provided an opening.



Action Stations

● Forces monitored the "romantic" meeting closely. Once the woman left the area the next morning, they moved in.

● With the drug lord's presence confirmed, the Mexican Army and National Guard set up a ground cordon.

● Six helicopters and special forces units were deployed across neighbouring states.

● The Mexican Air Force provided aerial reconnaissance to ensure Cervantes could not escape.



Fight To The Finish

● In the pre-dawn hours of Sunday, troops launched the operation.

● Cervantes' gunmen opened fire on the forces and the fight moved to a cabin complex in a wooded area.

● The operation culminated in a vicious firefight that killed several suspected cartel members.

● Cervantes attempted to flee with two bodyguards, but failed.

● All three were injured and put on a helicopter heading towards Mexico City.

● Oseguera died on board the helicopter.



widespread violence, including erecting more than 250 roadblocks across 20 states and setting fire to vehicles.

The capo died after a shootout with the Mexican military on Sunday. Mexican Defense Secretary Gen. Ricardo Trevilla said Monday that authorities had tracked one of his romantic partners to his hideout in Tapalpa. The cartel leader and two bodyguards fled into a wooded area where they were seriously wounded in a firefight. They were taken into custody and died on the way to Mexico City, Trevilla said.



Members of the Mexican army and the National Guard keep watch at a roundabout in Jalisco state, Guadalajara, Mexico, on Tuesday. AP

An Israel visit — its strategic, economic, regional impact

The West Asian region is staring at the possibility of its worst ever military conflict with one of the largest American military buildups in the Persian Gulf. Iran is defiant and has refused to bow down to 'unreasonable demands' from the United States. Concurrently, in Gaza, although the ceasefire has held since October 2025, the prospects of lasting peace still look remote. In addition, emerging fault lines in the region are drawing allies such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia into opposing military blocs.

In the midst of such an uncertain security situation, Prime Minister Narendra Modi is set to undertake a two-day visit to Israel (February 25-26, 2026). This will be Mr. Modi's second visit to Israel, following his historic first visit in July 2017 — the first by any Indian Prime Minister. Notably, this is a standalone visit with no engagement with Palestinian Authority leadership, highlighting India's success in "de-hyphenating" its Israel engagement.

The question, however, that arises is why this visit? What role can India play in this fragile security situation in the region? With India and Israel facing similar security threats, how can they take this very important partnership forward?

Convergence in a security partnership

Surrounded by hostile neighbours and as victims of frequent terror attacks, both countries have often sought convergence on security and defence issues. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), India has been Israel's largest defence customer for several years, accounting for about 34% of Israel's total arms exports between 2020 and 2024. The cooperation has gradually progressed from imports to joint development and technology collaboration.

Over the past few decades, Israel has provided India with a number of cutting-edge technologies, weapon and surveillance platforms such as unmanned aerial vehicles, missiles, special forces equipment and radar systems. The Barak-8 air and missile defence system, co-developed by India and Israel, is one such success story. During Israel Defence Minister Benjamin Gantz's visit to New Delhi in June 2022, there was the 'India-Israel Vision on Defence Cooperation' for enhancing cooperation in the field of futuristic defence technologies. In November 2025, India and Israel signed an agreement to deepen cooperation in defence, industry and technology, including the sharing of advanced systems to support joint development and production.

For India, there were lessons from its experience in Operation Sindoor (May 2025) — the need for a strong and impregnable air (including anti-drone) and missile defence shield under Mission 'Sudarshan Chakra'. There are inputs that there could be special focus on it during Mr. Modi's visit including the procurement and co-production of the 'Iron Beam' — a



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100kW-class high-energy laser system capable of intercepting drones, rockets, and mortars efficiently and cost-effectively. There are also reports that Autonomous Guard, an Israeli company has signed a deal with an Indian private defence firm valued at approximately \$1.9 million, which would cover the supply of advanced surveillance and threat-detection systems, specialising in sensor-based observation technologies.

The science, technology and innovation link

India has benefited immensely from Israel's success in modern technology and innovations, especially in agriculture, water and electronics. There are more than 35 Centres of Excellence (CoE) in India which are focused in high quality and high-density production of flowers, vegetables, fruits (mango, citrus, litchi, date palm, pomegranate), and beekeeping. Water management technologies too are critical, especially with many water-scarce areas in India. MASHAV, Israel's Agency for International Development Cooperation under Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, signed agreements with Haryana in June 2022 and Rajasthan in December 2024 to collaborate on integrated water resource management and capacity building. With Artificial Intelligence (AI) rapidly emerging as a key driver of modern technology, it is expected to become a focus area in future bilateral cooperation and innovation initiatives.

Israel-India bilateral trade is often overshadowed by security cooperation. It, however, remains a significant pillar of engagement. India is Israel's second-largest trading partner in Asia, with bilateral trade reaching \$3.75 billion in FY2024-2025. While merchandise trade continues to be dominated by diamonds, petroleum and chemicals, the partnership is expanding into electronics, high-tech products, communications and medical equipment.

In September 2025, during the visit of Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, India and Israel signed a Bilateral Investment Agreement. This was followed by the signing of the Terms of Reference for a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) during Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal's visit to Israel in November 2025. With India having recently concluded several significant trade deals, the FTA with Israel could gain the necessary momentum during Mr. Modi's visit. Israel is also keen to establish arrangements and exemptions for Indian infrastructure companies to participate in building critical roads and ports. Additionally, similar to India's agreement with Russia, Israel may pursue a deal to facilitate "human mobility" to attract skilled Indian talent.

Another key aspect to watch during the Modi visit is the progress of the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). Announced at the G-20 Summit in Delhi in September 2023, this intercontinental connectivity project holds strategic significance

for both countries. Although the Gaza conflict had temporarily stalled the initiative, there is now a renewed sense of urgency to advance it. Recent trade agreements with the European Union, Oman, and the UAE are expected to boost trade in both value and volume, creating the need for a shorter and safer transport route. With the Suez Canal route vulnerable to disruptions from regional conflicts, IMEC could provide an alternative, secure corridor to Europe. But achieving lasting peace in Gaza remains crucial for the project's success.

Gaza peace process and regional dynamics

Discussion on the Gaza peace process is a definite likelihood. During the recent 'Summit' of the Board of Peace, presided over by U.S. President Donald Trump on February 19, 2026, more than 50 countries participated, with some pledging \$7 billion in funding and others committing troops to the International Stabilisation Force. India attended as an observer and has not yet defined its role in the process. Given India's strong ties with both the Gulf region and Israel, discussions may include potential avenues for India's involvement in Gaza.

Both leaders are also expected to discuss regional dynamics in depth, including developments in Iran, given the potential implications of conflict for India and the wider region, particularly with regard to India's energy security. India's hosting of the 2nd India-Arab Foreign Ministers' Meeting (IAFMM), in January 2026, along with Mr. Modi's visits to Jordan and Oman (December 2025), and the visit of the UAE President in January 2026, demonstrate the careful balance that India has forged in the region. This sets the stage for a constructive and realistic discussion on various regional issues during the visit.

Ahead of the Modi visit, Prime Minister of Israel Benjamin Netanyahu tweeted this: "we will create a 'hexagon' of alliances around or within the Middle East. This includes India, Arab nations, African nations, Mediterranean nations (Greece and Cyprus), and nations in Asia ... The intention here is to create an axis of nations that see eye-to-eye on the reality, challenges and goals against the radical axes, both the radical Shiite axis, which we have struck very hard, and the emerging radical Sunni axis."

India, however, does not necessarily see things in the region from this lens. How India reacts to such a proposal, given how close India's ties are with countries in the region, will also be a thing to be watched.

Mr. Modi's visit is being closely watched, as India and Israel are at pivotal points in their journeys. Despite domestic differences, the two have built a strong strategic partnership over the past decade. Mr. Modi's address to the Knesset — a privilege usually reserved for U.S. Presidents — and his visit to a Jerusalem innovation centre highlight the visit's significance. It is far more than routine diplomacy, with potential long-term implications for both countries and the region.

The Prime Minister's visit will help deepen engagement with Tel Aviv, going far beyond routine diplomacy

India's trade strategy in a multipolar world

India's recent global trade strategy aims to boost exports and strengthen its position as a leading global trade partner. This has resulted in ambitious free trade agreements and a stronger presence in key international economic forums. In 2023, India updated its Foreign Trade Policy (FTP) with the goal of increasing exports to \$2 trillion by 2030, reinforcing a framework of strategic autonomy that supports sovereign decision-making while engaging major global powers. According to the Department of Commerce's 2025 Year-End Review, India recorded a 6.05% annual increase in total exports – merchandise and services combined – reaching \$825.25 billion.

A shift in approach

For many years, India adopted a cautious approach to free trade agreements (FTA), engaging primarily with economies that were similar in structure and stages of development. In recent years, however, New Delhi has shifted to a more proactive trade strategy, pursuing intensive negotiations and concluding comprehensive FTAs with major developed economies that were previously beyond reach. According to recent estimates, India's network of FTAs is projected to cover nearly 71% of its total export basket by 2026 – an extraordinary increase from approximately 22% in 2019. This rapid expansion reflects a decisive shift away from primarily regional trade arrangements toward deeper integration with advanced economies such as Australia, the European Union (EU), the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the United Kingdom (U.K.) and the United States, signalling India's broader strategic ambition to integrate into global value chains and high-value markets.

A major development in India's trade diplomacy is the India-EU Free Trade Agreement, signed on January 27, 2026 after nearly two decades of negotiations. Described as "historic" by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, it creates a vast free trade zone covering nearly two billion people.

The agreement reduces or eliminates tariffs on



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Free trade agreements and trade reforms are key to propelling India's exports and global presence

over 90% of traded goods, boosting market access for Indian exporters, especially in textiles, leather, pharmaceuticals, chemicals, and marine products. It enhances India's competitiveness against exporters such as Bangladesh and Vietnam. The FTA also removes tariffs on many pharmaceutical exports, strengthens regulatory cooperation, and lowers production costs by easing access to advanced European machinery and inputs. It is also expected to foster digital trade, boost investor confidence, and strengthen long-term economic resilience. Widely regarded as the "mother of all deals", the agreement represents a transformative boost to India's export ecosystem and marks a decisive shift in India's broader global trade strategy.

The deal with the U.S.

Early in February 2026, India and the U.S. signed a framework for an interim agreement on reciprocal trade, restating their commitment to advancing negotiations on a broader U.S.-India Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA). The interim framework is designed to progressively reduce tariffs across a range of products, thereby facilitating greater Indian exports to the U.S. market and enhancing overall market access.

The agreement also prioritises strategic collaboration in critical sectors such as rare earths and semiconductors. This cooperation is expected to support India's ambitions in high-technology manufacturing, reinforce its electronics export capacity, and strengthen its emergence as a reliable global hub for electronics and semiconductor-related production. By diversifying export destinations and reducing overdependence on specific markets, the pact enhances India's strategic and economic flexibility. Strategically, India's recent global trade agreements collectively signal a major shift toward enhancing its role as a leading player in the global trading system. This shift is visible across four key dimensions. First, deeper engagement with advanced economies such as the EU and the U.S. provides India with preferential access to some of the world's most

lucrative and high-demand markets. Such access is expected to significantly strengthen India's export potential and global market presence with benefits flowing to labour intensive sectors integrating the Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises into the Global Value Chains. The agreements are across continents that reinforces India's strategic attempt to diversify and not become overly dependent on any single geography.

Second, FTAs reduce barriers both exports and imports of intermediate goods, enabling Indian firms to integrate more effectively into global supply chains and improve their global competitiveness. This integration is especially beneficial for high-growth sectors such as technology, electronics, pharmaceuticals and services, all of which depend heavily on seamless cross-border movement of inputs and components.

Third, trade agreements serve as strategic instruments for enhancing India's diplomatic influence. By establishing deeper economic interdependence with major powers, India strengthens its role in global economic governance and positions itself as a more influential voice in shaping trade norms and standards.

At the core

India's evolving global trade strategy is central to its ambition of becoming an economic superpower and achieving Viksit Bharat. After opting out of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, India adopted a calibrated approach – boosting domestic manufacturing through production-linked incentives and infrastructure expansion while deepening global integration. Trade agreements with Australia, the EU, the UAE, and the U.K. aim to expand market access, attract investment, and diversify exports. By strengthening supply chains, promoting digital and services trade, and integrating into global value chains, India seeks to scale high-value exports and position itself as a leading force in global commerce.

NEW GDP SERIES WITH 2022-23 AS BASE YEAR TO BE RELEASED ON FRIDAY

Unstable, too broad: No UPI payment data in new GDP series

Siddharth Upasani
New Delhi, February 24

THE MINISTRY of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) will not use Unified Payments Interface (UPI) transaction data to calculate gross domestic product (GDP) in the new revised series that will be released this week due to the numbers being unstable and certain payment categories being too broad.

Proposed as one of the non-traditional sources of data that could be used as an alternative indicator in the estimation of Private Final Consumption Expenditure (PFCE) — one of the key components of GDP when it is calculated from the expenditure side of economic activities — for quarterly GDP figures, a sub-committee of the statistics ministry's Advisory Committee on National Accounts Statistics (ACNAS) has said it is too soon to use UPI transaction data.

"Transactions against clubbed items (e.g. Super markets) cannot be bifurcated into separate PFCE items, whereas, it accounts for substantial share

in total transaction value and volume," the report of the sub-committee on methodological improvement for the base revision of GDP, released last week, said. UPI data in value (rupees) as well as volume (number of transactions) is available from the National Payments Corporation of India, with each payment categorised by the type of merchant.

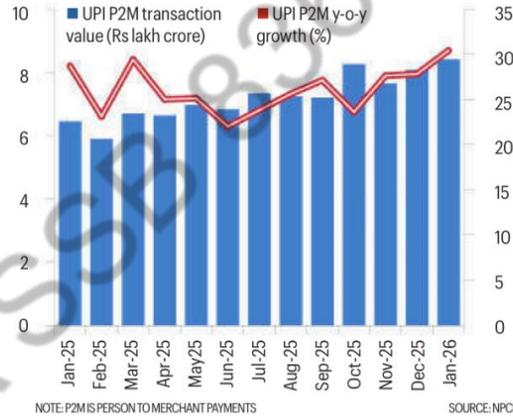
For instance, 'Grocery Stores, Supermarkets' category transactions are for a variety of goods sold in these stores.

As such, data for this category — which is sizable, accounting for 25% of all person-to-merchant transactions by volume and 9% by value in January — is not useful for the purpose of compiling private final consumption expenditure within GDP on an item-wise level.

The report also said that payments transaction data is not stable, with many people yet to move to UPI from cash.

"Once the UPI transaction data get stabilised, it may be explored for possible inclusion as an indicator in the estimation of PFCE."

•UPI payments continue to rise rapidly



GDP data for October-December 2025 and the second advance estimate for the financial year 2025-26 according to the new series with 2022-23 as the base year will be released on Friday, with MoSPI Secretary Saurabh Garg and Chief Economic Advisor V Anantha Nageswaran addressing the media on the same.

Estimating private consumption

MoSPI calculates GDP using two methods — production or income approach and the expenditure approach. While the production-side GDP figure is seen as being more reliable and accurate, changes in the various components of the expen-

diture side are crucial from a policy perspective.

One such component is PFCE, an indicator of household consumption levels, which makes up more than half of India's GDP.

"The PFCE methodology basically draws indicator from relevant sectors vis-a-vis items encompassed in production side. The reason is that, except for few items, High Frequency Indicators pertaining to item-level HH (household) consumption figures are not available. Therefore, growth rate observed in production estimates for an item/sector are taken as a proxy for the growth rate in PFCE for that item," the minutes of a June 2025 meeting of the above-mentioned ACNAS sub-committee, also released last week, said.

It was in this context that the exploration of new indicators such as UPI transaction data was proposed to "capture the consumption accurately" at an item level. The last time India's GDP series was updated was more than a decade ago, in early 2015.

FULL REPORT ON
WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

India's dependence on imported oil may hit fresh full-year high in FY26

Sukalp Sharma

New Delhi, February 24

INDIA'S DEPENDENCE on imported crude oil grew to 88.6% in the first 10 months of the ongoing financial year (2025-26), indicating that the import reliance level for the full financial year could be headed for yet another record high.

It was 88.2% in the corresponding period of FY25, according to the latest data released by the Petroleum Planning & Analysis Cell (PPAC) of the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas (MoPNG).

For the full FY25, reliance on imported oil was 88.3%.

According to industry insiders, the import dependency for the full FY26 could be a tad higher than the April-January level, similar to what happened in the last financial year.

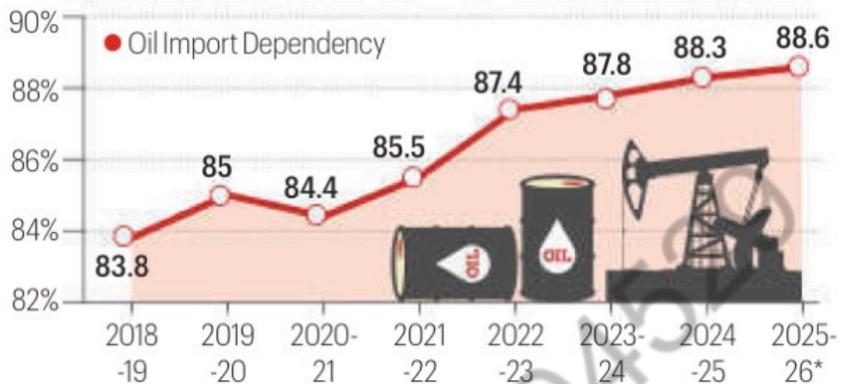
India is seen as a major growth centre for oil demand given the future potential in energy-intensive industries, growing vehicle sales, a rapidly expanding aviation sector, expected growth in consumption of petrochemicals, and a still growing population with relatively low per-capita energy consumption.

In fact, India is among the few markets where refinery capacity is expected to expand substantially over the coming years. The country currently has a refining capacity of 258 million tonnes per annum.

India's reliance on imported oil has increased over the years, with the exception of FY21 when demand was suppressed due to the pandemic. Given the country's stagnant domestic oil production, rising demand for petroleum fuels and products is expected to lead to higher oil imports in the foreseeable future.

India's heavy reliance on imported crude oil makes its economy vulnerable to global oil price fluctuations. This also im-

• India's rising reliance on crude oil import



SOURCE: PPAC

*APRIL-JANUARY

pacts the country's trade deficit, foreign exchange reserves, the rupee's exchange rate, and inflation rate, among others.

The government aims to reduce the country's reliance on imported crude oil but faces challenges due to sluggish domestic oil output amidst rising demand. In 2015, the Centre targeted to reduce reliance on oil imports to 67% by 2022.

The government has implemented several policy reforms to encourage investments in India's oil and gas exploration and production sector. It is also promoting electric mobility, biofuels, and other alternative fuels to reduce oil imports.

While there has been an increase in electric mobility adoption and the blending of biofuels with conventional fuels, it has so far not been sufficient to offset petroleum demand growth.

In numbers: India's growing reliance

India's crude oil imports rose to 206.3 million tonnes (mt) in the 10 months to January from 201 mt in the year-ago period, as per provisional data from the PPAC. Domestic oil production for the period declined slightly to 23.5 mt from 24 mt, while domestic consumption of petroleum products rose 1.6% to 202.2 mt. Of this, 23 mt of products are

estimated to have been produced from crude oil produced in India, thereby resulting in a self-sufficiency level of 11.4%.

The calculation of the extent of import reliance is based on the domestic consumption of petroleum products and excludes petroleum product exports as those volumes do not represent India's demand. Consumption of petroleum products is projected to increase by 2.8% in FY27, reaching 250.8 mt, according to PPAC projections.

If these projections hold, the country's petroleum fuel and product consumption in FY27 will hit yet another record. And the trend of growing petroleum consumption is expected to continue for the foreseeable future. In November, Paris-based International Energy Agency (IEA) had said that India will be the biggest driver of global oil demand over the next 10 years, surpassing China.

"India leads global oil demand growth over the next ten years, with almost half of the additional barrels produced globally to 2035 heading in its direction. Its oil use increases from 5.5 mb/d (million barrels per day) in 2024 to 8 mb/d in 2035 as a result of rapid growth in car ownership, increasing demand for plastics, chemicals and aviation, and a rise in the use of LPG for cooking," the IEA said in its World Energy Outlook 2025.

● DEEPSEEK COULD REMOVE TECHNICAL INDICATORS SHOWING USE OF US CHIPS, OFFICIAL SAYS; US EXPORT CONTROLS BAR BLACKWELL SHIPMENTS TO CHINA

'China's DeepSeek trained AI model on Nvidia's best chip'

Reuters

Washington, February 24

CHINESE AI startup DeepSeek's latest AI model, set to be released as soon as next week, was trained on Nvidia's most advanced AI chip, the Blackwell, a senior Trump administration official has said, in what could represent a violation of US export controls.

The US believes DeepSeek will remove the technical indicators that might reveal its use of American AI chips, the official said, adding that the Blackwells are likely clustered at its data center in Inner Mongolia, an autonomous region of China.

The person declined to say how the US government received the information or how DeepSeek obtained the chips, but emphasized that US policy is: "we're not shipping Blackwells to China."

Nvidia declined to comment, while the Commerce Department and DeepSeek did not respond to requests for comment.

The Chinese embassy in Washington said Beijing opposes "drawing ideological lines, overstressing the concept of national security, expansive use of export controls and politicising economic, trade, and technological issues."



Blackwells are likely clustered at DeepSeek's data center in Inner Mongolia, an autonomous region of China, said a US official. REUTERS

Asked about the *Reuters* report at a regular Chinese foreign ministry briefing on Tuesday, spokesperson Mao Ning

said they were not aware of the circumstances and that China had earlier repeatedly clarified its stance on Washington's

treatment of US chip exports to China. US government confirmation of DeepSeek obtaining the chips, first reported by *Reuters*, could further divide Washington policymakers as they struggle to determine where to draw the line on Chinese access to the crown jewels of American AI semiconductor chips.

White House AI Czar David Sacks and Nvidia CEO Jensen Huang argue that shipping advanced AI chips to China discourages Chinese competitors like Huawei from redoubling efforts to catch up with Nvidia's and AMD's technology.

But China hawks fear chips could easily be diverted from

commercial uses to help supercharge China's military and threaten US dominance in AI.

"This shows why exporting any AI chips to China is so dangerous," said Chris McGuire, who served as a White House National Security Council official under former President Joe Biden. "Given China's leading AI companies are brazenly violating US export controls, we obviously cannot expect that they will comply with US conditions that would prohibit them from using chips to support the Chinese military," he added. US export controls, overseen by Commerce Department, currently bar Blackwell shipments to China.