



MILAN concludes

INS Vikrant, India's indigenous aircraft carrier, during the closing ceremony of the Exercise MILAN 2026, Indian Navy's premier multilateral maritime exercise, in Visakhapatnam. PTI

Cases stall as judicial officers busy with SIR in West Bengal

Shiv Sahay Singh

KOLKATA

Judicial work in the district and metropolitan courts across West Bengal has been severely affected after hundreds of judicial officers were deployed to process nearly 50 lakh claims and objections under the special intensive revision (SIR) of electoral rolls ahead of the February 28 deadline.

Except for urgent matters and bail hearings, trials and regular proceedings – including in special courts such as those dealing with Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) cases – have been affected as judges undertake verification work.

Committees have been formed at the Calcutta High Court and district levels to reassign urgent cases to alternative courts, but litigants and judicial officers remain uncertain about

Judicial crunch

SC has directed judiciary to verify about **50 lakh** claims and objections in West Bengal

- Calcutta HC has deployed **294 judicial officers** for verifications

- Trials as well as other hearings before district courts and metropolitan courts in the State have **stalled following the deployment**



when normal functioning will resume. Now that it has fallen to the judiciary to examine claims and objections, judicial officers have reached out to administrative complexes for the verification work.

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Cases stall in Bengal as judges busy with SIR

These judicial officers are provided log-in credentials to study the claims and objects.

A District Judge asked how judges could participate in SIR work unless they are made electoral returning officers. **The judge said that even trials for cases under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act have been kept in abeyance due to SIR work.**

Several important cases where the trial process has been or likely to be affected include the South Calcutta Law College case (June 2025), the sexual assault of a medical student at Durgapur Medical College (October 2025) and the sexual assault and murder of a 13-year-old at Rampurhat at Birbhum (September 2025).

Retired IAS officer and former Rajya Sabha MP Jawhar Sircar said that involving judicial officers in the SIR was not a “well thought-out process”. “It is a knee-jerk reaction though there is nothing *mala fide* about the order,” Mr. Sircar said.

The former bureaucrat who has served as the Chief Electoral Officer, West Bengal said that under the Representation of the People Act, 1950, the District Magistrates or the District Electoral Officer are the ones with whom real authority lies as far as election processes were concerned.

When administrative jobs are thrust upon judicial officers they “may be out of depth” because judges are used to function in a particular format, and issue judicial and quasi judicial orders over pending disputes, he said.

Mr. Sircar argued that had the judicial officers been engaged in the process about a month ago the solution may have worked, but now only two or three days were left to meet the February 28 deadline.

West Bengal is witnessing an unprecedented situation where the final electoral roll may be released in phases.

The Supreme Court had on February 20 highlighted a trust deficit between the West Bengal government and the Election Commission of India and directed that judicial officials of the State would look into claims and objections.

Govt. to procure business jets for defence dignitaries and chiefs of armed forces

Saurabh Trivedi

NEW DELHI

The Defence Ministry has issued a Request for Information (RFI) to procure long-range business jets for senior defence dignitaries and chiefs of the armed forces.

A senior Ministry official said the government plans to replace the existing fleet of business jets with the Indian Air Force (IAF) that has been in service for 20 years. The replacement is planned in a phased manner and is expected to take time.

The decision to get a new fleet comes against the backdrop of the crash of a VSR Ventures-owned aircraft on January 28 that claimed the lives of Ajit Pawar, Maharashtra's Deputy Chief Minister, and four others.

Sources said the RFI sought inputs from Indian and foreign vendors for the jets along with associated equipment for the IAF. The first part of the RFI outlines the broad operational characteristics and key



Four Embraer jets were inducted into the Indian Air Force in 2005 for VIP use and communication duties. FILE PHOTO

technical parameters the aircraft must meet. The second part specifies the methodology for vendor response submission, including compliance requirements and prescribed formats.

The government will assess options in domestic and global markets before proceeding with the acquisition.

On September 21, 2005, four Embraer Legacy 600 business jets were inducted into the Air Headquarters Communication Squadron of the IAF, with three

aircraft delivered initially and the fourth arriving a few months later. The aircraft were named Meghdoot, Vayudoot, Nabhdoot, and Gagandoot, and have since been used for VIP and communication duties.

The existing Embraer fleet requires a take-off distance of 1,800 metres and a landing distance of 1,400 metres, allowing operations from most airfields in India and abroad. The jets are equipped with self-protection suites to guard against missile threats.

Loose connection made satellite miss orbit: panel

The apex committee says the signal meant to activate a key valve in the engine's oxidiser line never reached it; this valve is crucial for firing the engine to raise the orbit of NVS-02

Jacob Koshy

NEW DELHI

After nearly a year's delay, the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) made public the report of a committee constituted to analyse why the NVS-02 satellite, which was launched aboard a GSLV rocket on January 29 last year, could not be placed in its intended orbit.

The apex committee, as it is called, concluded that the main reason for what happened was that the signal meant to activate a key valve in the engine's oxidiser line never reached it. This valve is crucial for firing the engine to raise the spacecraft's orbit.

Faulty connection

The committee said the most likely explanation was that at least one connection in the electrical connector – in both the primary and back-up lines



Off track: The NVS-02 navigation satellite aboard the launch vehicle GSLV-F15 in Sriharikota on January 29, 2025. ANI

– came loose or failed, preventing the signal from getting through.

NVS-02, the second spacecraft in the NVS series, was placed successfully into an 'elliptical transfer' orbit on January 29, 2025 at 00:53 UT but its subsequent transfer to a circular orbit was unsuccessful. This was also a special occasion being the 100th launch from the Sriharikota launchpad. The spacecraft was separated from

the launch vehicle (GSLVF15) following which a series of autonomous activities on the satellite were carried out, including deploying the solar panel and stabilising the orientation for power generation.

The NVS-02 was to be the second satellite in the NVS series, and part of India's Navigation with Indian Constellation (NavIC).

The committee, an ISRO statement said, gave a set of recommendations to

“enhance” the redundancy and reliability of pyro system operations for future missions. These were “successfully implemented in CMS-03 spacecraft launched on November 2, 2025 by LVM-3 M5, and the pyro systems performed satisfactorily placing the satellite in the intended orbit.”

The CMS-03, or GSAT-7R, is an indigenously designed and developed satellite, weighing approximately 4,400 kg – India's heaviest communication satellite – and is critical to the Navy's space-based communications and maritime domain awareness.

The Hindu reported this week that a committee that includes K. Vijayraghavan, former Principal Scientific Adviser, and S. Somanath, former Chairman, ISRO, will probe “systemic issues” underlying the successive failures of ISRO's Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle (PSLV).

Bill to replace UGC, AICTE is with Ministries, says govt.

Abhinay Lakshman

NEW DELHI

The draft Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan (VBSA) Bill, 2025, to overhaul the higher education regulatory framework in India, was circulated among 39 Union Ministries and departments as part of inter-ministerial consultations, the government has informed the Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) looking into the Bill, *The Hindu* has learnt.

The Bill proposes the setting up of a 12-member umbrella commission - the Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan - to replace the University Grants Commission (UGC), the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), and the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE).

Unlike the UGC, the new commission will not have the power to disburse grants. The Bill hands over the funding power to “mechanisms devised by the Ministry of Education”.

The 31-member JPC is headed by BJP MP D. Purandeswari. In a communi-



The draft Bill seeks to overhaul the higher education regulatory framework. ISTOCK

cation to the JPC ahead of its first meeting on Thursday, the government explained the background to the Bill and its provisions.

Separate councils

The Bill intends to subsume the UGC, AICTE, and NCTE, by repealing the laws under which these bodies were set up. The commission will include separate regulatory standards, and accreditation councils.

The VBSA Bill was introduced by Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan in Parliament in December 2025, even as

MPs from across Opposition parties opposed it.

They said the Bill represented “executive overreach”, subjected higher educational institutes to “pervasive executive control, graded autonomy, intrusive compliance requirements, severe penalties, and closure powers”; and went against the principles of federalism.

Soon after the Bill’s introduction, the government said it would be examined by a JPC, which was constituted earlier this month.

Sources told *The Hindu* that the government, in its communication to the panel, explained the rationale behind separating the grant of disbursement powers from the regulatory authority, saying that this was needed to remove potential conflict of interest, and to ensure transparency.

At the JPC meeting on Thursday, officials of the Education Ministry and the Ministry of Law and Justice (Legislative Department) are expected to brief the panel members on the VBSA Bill.

Education outlay in Haryana shows downward trend as debt, welfare expenditures rise

Ashok Kumar
GURUGRAM

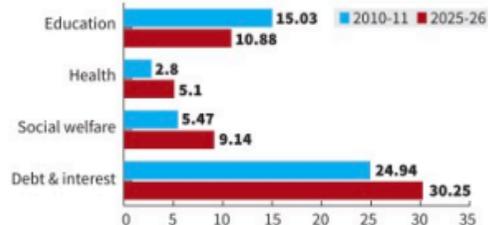
Budgetary trends in Haryana over the past 15 years reveal that the allocation for education has steadily declined as a share of the total budget, even as provisions for social welfare have grown significantly. At the same time, the share of debt and interest payments in total expenditure has also seen a sharp rise.

The government spends more than half of the total budget for social welfare on two populist schemes – the Old Age Samman Allowance Scheme, implemented in 1966, and the Deen Dayal Lado Lakshmi Yojana, promised by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) ahead of the 2024 Assembly election.

Of the total budget of ₹18,751.78 crore towards social empowerment, nu-

Fiscal priorities

Share in total budget from 2010-11 to 2025-26 (in %)



SOURCE: HARYANA BUDGET DOCUMENTS

trition and welfare of Scheduled Castes and Backward Classes in 2025-26, the two schemes together were allocated ₹10,210 crore. The total allocation for education was ₹22,312.46 crore.

In 2010-11, the expenditure on education was ₹5,946.29 crore out of the State's total expenditure of ₹39,554.83 crore, whereas ₹2,176.15 crore was ear-

marked for social welfare programmes.

The allocation for education also includes the capital and revenue outlay on sports, arts and culture.

0.77% GDP on health

Though the health budget has seen an increase over the past 15 years, it is still below the national average of 5.7%, according to a Reserve Bank of India (RBI)

report – State Finance: A Study of Budgets of 2025-26. Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Delhi fare better than Haryana on the health front with spending percentages of 5.8%, 6.1%, 7.6%, and 12.9% respectively.

As per the performance audit on Public Health Infrastructure and Management of Health Services, 2022-23, Haryana spends 0.77% of its Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) on health.

The total number of beneficiaries under the Old Age Samman Allowance Scheme in February this year stood at 20,05,367 – 10,44,069 men and 9,61,298 women.

The monthly pension has recently been hiked to ₹3,200 per month.

Similarly, 8 lakh women from families with an annual income of less than

₹1.80 lakh are given ₹2,100 per month under the Lado Lakshmi Yojana.

The BJP, in its Assembly election manifesto, had promised the monthly assistance to all women. As per electoral data, there are 95 lakh women in the State.

As per the RBI report, the national average for expenditure on education, sports and arts and culture as a percentage of the total expenditure is 13.1%.

Except Punjab, which allocated 9.3% towards education, Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Delhi have higher spending rates at 17.5%, 13.0%, 16.4%, and 19% respectively.

The allocation for technical education, skill development and industrial training, as a percentage of the total expenditure, has also decreased in Haryana

from 1.08% to 0.6% over this period.

State of institutions

Compared with high-income States such as Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra, none of the universities and higher educational institutions in Haryana figure in the QS World University Rankings 2026 or find a mention in the top 150 higher educational institutions in the NIRF ranking, according to the Haryana Vision Document, 2047.

In contrast, Tamil Nadu was home to 18 of the NIRF 2024's top 100 institutions while Maharashtra had 10 universities in the QS World University Rankings for 2025.

The vision document, released in December last year, also highlights a 4.9% dropout rate and notes the adverse impact on mar-

ginalised communities.

It also contrasts the proportion of government schools with Internet – 69.3% – with that in private schools – 94.5%.

As per an RTI reply, around 50% regular teaching posts are vacant in government and government-aided colleges in Haryana.

On the technical education front, the Vision-2047 document calls for the need to address the high vacancy rate of ITI instructors, which currently stands at 50%.

Experts voice concern

Rupamanjari Sinha Ray, Associate Professor, Economics & Public Policy, Management Development Institute (MDI), Gurugram, said: "The capital outlay for education is a cause for concern for Haryana."

She said the govern-

ment could, in order to meet the needs of the health and education sectors, consider raising funds for social expenditure through corporate social responsibility funds.

For infrastructure projects, the State could aim for public-private partnerships as it has done in the power transmission sector, she added. Ms. Ray, along with Sunil Ashra, Professor, Economics & Public Policy, MDI, had prepared a report titled 'Evaluation of Finances of State of Haryana' at the request of the Sixteenth Finance Commission last year.

Haryana spends significantly less on education and health as a percentage of its social service expenditure than other high-income States despite having a much higher per capita income than the national average, the report stated.

U.S. slaps 126% levy on Indian solar imports

Tariffs were slapped on India, Indonesia and Laos following an ongoing probe; In FY23, India exported \$1 billion worth photovoltaics to the U.S.

Jacob Koshy

NEW DELHI

The Trump administration slapped 126% levy on solar cell imports from India following a 'preliminary' determination that subsidised exports from Indian firms were hurting the competitiveness of U.S. solar firms and contravened World Trade Organization agreements on subsidies.

The tariffs were collectively imposed on February 24 on India, Indonesia and Laos following a probe by the U.S. Department of Commerce on a complaint by the Alliance for American Solar Manufacturing and Trade, a coalition of leading U.S. solar firms.

Indian firms under the U.S. Commerce Ministry's radar included Mundra Solar Energy Pvt. Ltd. and Mundra Solar PV Ltd. – both part of Adani Group – Premier Energies Photovoltaic Private Ltd., Waa-ree Energies Ltd. and Waa-ree Solar Americas. The department set initial rates of 86%-143% for Indonesia and 81% for Laos.

Framework deal

This levy comes after New Delhi and Washington agreed on a framework for the India-U.S. trade deal to cut tariffs on India's exports to 18% from 50% earlier. After this, the U.S. Supreme Court quashed Trump tariffs, calling them unconstitutional. Presi-



Dark days: Staff inspecting solar panels on assembly lines at an Adani Group factory in Gujarat's port city of Mundra. AFP FILE

dent Trump then came up with a new 15% baseline duty on several imports.

On February 24, per a notice on the U.S. Commerce Ministry site, it was Adani firms that were specifically named with a duty rates of 125.87% though these rates, as of now, apply to all Indian exporters.

May be impacted

The Hindu didn't receive comments from the firms as of press time. However, given the U.S. is the biggest export destination for solar parts, Indian exports could likely be 'impacted.' The implications of the order were still being studied, a spokesperson for Solex Energy Ltd., a Surat-based solar firm told *The Hindu*. "There will be an impact as the U.S. is a major export destination. How much... still needs to be determined. Some months sees a surge in exports and less in others, so

it could well be, we won't see an impact beyond the immediate quarter," the person explained.

Currently duties of up to 40% are imposed on such export of solar cells.

These duties are additional to existing tariffs. The final determination in the CVD investigations are now scheduled to be issued on July 6, 2026. The U.S. Commerce Department is conducting concurrent anti-dumping duty probe of solar cells from India, Indonesia and Laos.

According to data cited by U.S. authorities, Indian firms in 2022 exported 232 mega watts (MW) worth of solar cells which rose to 2049 MW in 2023 and 2297 MW in 2024.

In 2022-23 \$1,000 million worth photovoltaics were exported and that rose to \$1,939.92 million in 2023-24. Exports stood at \$954 million in April-December 2025.



South Korea's Colonel Jang Do-young with US Colonel Ryan Donald at the Defence Ministry in Seoul on Wednesday. AP

US, South Korea to hold joint military drills as tensions with North Korea rise

Associated Press
Seoul, February 25

THE US and South Korean militaries said on Wednesday they will conduct their annual springtime exercises next month to bolster their countries' combined defence capabilities against a backdrop of a deepening diplomatic freeze with nuclear-armed North Korea.

The Freedom Shield drills are set for March 9-19, according to the announcement.

North Korea has long described the allies' joint exercises as invasion rehearsals and used them as a pretext to dial up its own military demonstrations and weapons testing activity. The allies say the drills are defensive in nature.

The announcement came as North Korea is holding a major political conference where authoritarian leader Kim Jong Un is expected to outline his key domestic, foreign policy and military goals for the next five years. North Korean state media have not so far reported any direct comments by Kim on relations with Washington and Seoul at the ruling Workers' Party congress.

IRAN SPREADS TERRORISM AND DEATH AND HATE, SAYS U.S. PRESIDENT

In State of the Union, Trump lays out case for possible attack on Iran

Reuters
Washington, February 25

US PRESIDENT Donald Trump briefly laid out his case for a possible attack on Iran in his State of the Union speech to Congress on Tuesday, saying he would not allow the world's biggest sponsor of terrorism to have a nuclear weapon.

Even while assembling a massive military force in the Middle East, Trump has done little to explain to the American public why he might be leading the US into its most aggressive action against the Islamic Republic since its 1979 revolution.

In his speech, Trump pointed to Tehran's support for militant groups, its killing of protesters and the country's missile and nuclear programs as threats to the region and the United States.

"The (Iranian) regime and its murderous proxies have spread nothing but terrorism and death and hate," the Republican president said about 90 minutes into his annual address to a joint session of the Senate and House of Representatives.

He accused Iran of restarting its nuclear program, working to build missiles that "soon" would be capable of reaching the United States and of being responsible for roadside bombings that have killed US service members and civilians.

Iranian state media have claimed that Tehran is developing a missile capable of reaching the Middle East.

The run-up to Trump's address was overshadowed by the



Donald Trump delivers the State of the Union address to a joint session of Congress at US Capitol in Washington, on Tuesday. REUTERS



You (Trump) have killed Americans. You are the murderer who killed Americans. You should be ashamed of yourself"

ILHAN OMAR,
DEMOCRATIC REPRESENTATIVE.

buildup of US military forces in the Middle East and preparations for a possible conflict with Iran that could last for weeks if

• Longest State of the Union address in history

Drumbeat for war gets louder

Trump outlined a rationale for a military strike against Iran, citing Iran's killing of protesters and claiming he could not let 'the world's number one sponsor of terror' to have a nuclear weapon.

Attempt to regain upper hand on immigration issue

Trump used the speech to try and reclaim the narrative on immigration. Trump avoided mentioning the work done by the controversial ICE agency, choosing instead to highlight crimes carried out by immigrants in graphic terms.

Changing priorities

Trump's speech offered a window into his administration's changing priorities from almost a year ago, the last time he spoke to a joint session of Congress. Unlike last time, Trump refused to mention

China, his proposal to annex Greenland and his desire to reclaim the Panama Canal, choosing instead to focus on pushing for new election law changes ahead of the midterm elections.

Doubling down on tariff claims

Trump continues to speak out against the US SC's ruling against tariffs, claiming tariff revenues were saving the US and history would vindicate him.

Election 'cheating' bogey raised ahead of mid-terms

The president used the speech to reprise his attack on the integrity of US elections, claiming cheating was rampant and accusing the democrats of electoral fraud in the 2020 elections. The timing of these renewed claims is noteworthy with the mid term elections set to be held in November. REUTERS

Quotes Shehbaz: '35 million would have died...'



"In my first 10 months, I ended eight wars... including Pakistan and India, which would have been a nuclear war. Thirty-five million people, said the Prime Minister of Pakistan, would have died if it were not for my involvement"

killed in the January unrest is nothing but the repetition of a series of big lies," Iran's foreign

ministry spokesperson Esmaeil Baghaei said in a post on X on Wednesday.

Sri Lanka's ex-intel chief arrested over Easter attacks

Meera Srinivasan
COLOMBO

Sri Lanka's Criminal Investigation Department on Wednesday arrested former intelligence chief Maj. Gen. Suresh Sallay in connection with the deadly Easter Sunday bombings of 2019 that killed around 270 people and injured several hundred, police said.

Speaking to *The Hindu*, a senior official confirmed that the arrest was made under Sri Lanka's Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), "based on adequate evidence". The official described the arrest of the former head of the State Intelligence Service (SIS) as "a major breakthrough" in the case, which has been ongoing for nearly seven years, even as victims' families relentlessly demand justice.

It is the first high-profile arrest in the case since President Anura Kumara Dissanayake assumed office in 2024. Securing justice for victims of the bombings was among his key pre-poll pledges.

On April 21, 2019, a network of nine suicide bombers – part of an Islamist radical group – carried out coordinated serial blasts targeting luxury hotels and churches in and around Colombo and the eastern city of Batticaloa on Easter Sunday.

The incident shook the relative peace on the island, a decade after the end of a gruesome civil war. Official documents and cases filed show a discrepancy in the death toll, with figures quoted ranging from 259 to 296.

Mr. Sallay was appointed head of the SIS in late 2019 after Gotabaya Raja-



Sri Lankan soldiers look on inside the St Sebastian's Church at Katuwapitiya in Negombo in April 2019, following a bomb blast. AFP

paksa won the presidential election in November that year, on a plank of national security. Mr. Sallay was the first military officer to be made chief of Sri Lanka's main intelligence agency. His name came under sharp focus in 2023 after a documentary by British broadcaster Channel 4 linked him to the Islamist bombers, based on a whistleblower's testimony. Mr. Sallay denied the allegations, and Sri Lanka's Ministry of Defence then said it "categorically refutes" the "outrageous allegations".

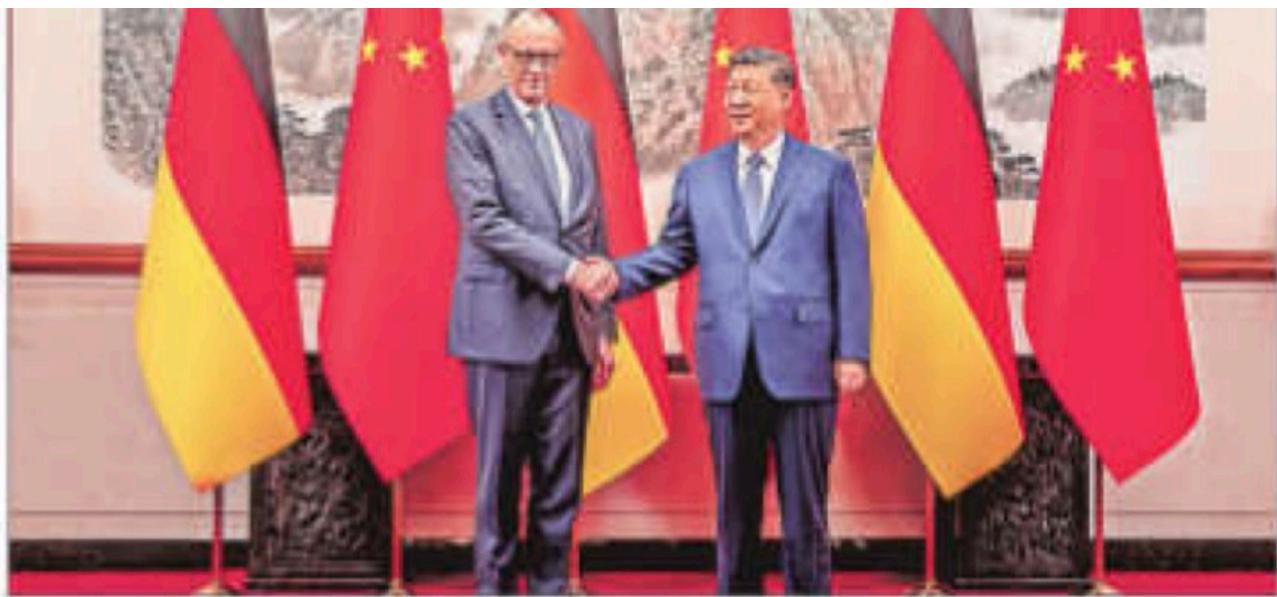
Human rights activist Ruki Fernando, who has been advocating for victims' families, said that if there was sufficient evidence, Mr. Sallay must be held criminally accountable following due process. "Those of us closely following proceedings have always felt that the ongoing case, the main one before the Special Trial-at-Bar [set up for extraordinary criminal proceedings], does not address all dimensions of the case. Suresh Sallay's arrest shows us that the case apparently goes beyond the network of suicide bombers," he told *The Hindu*. So far, the case includes over 23,000 charges and 25 accused.

The Special Trial-at-Bar has been hearing the sensitive case – the deadliest terror attack in Sri Lanka since the end of the war in 2009 – five days a week under tight security. Last week, Mr. Fernando took to social media to express concern about being prohibited from witnessing the court proceedings, citing logistical and security reasons.

'Fair trial'

While some, including victims' families, in Sri Lanka have expressed disappointment over the pace of the case, Mr. Fernando said: "It is very important that there's no undue delay, but it is equally important that there is no haste. Only a fair trial and adherence to due process will ensure that the rights of the accused and the aggrieved parties are not compromised."

Further, underscoring his "principled opposition" to the PTA, Mr. Fernando, who was himself arrested under the law in 2014, said: "The PTA does not allow for due process. That is precisely why many of us are opposed to the legislation, regardless of whether it is an activist or someone else arrested under the law."



China's President Xi Jinping with German Chancellor Friedrich Merz at the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse in Beijing on Wednesday. REUTERS

Germany's Merz hails China ties as he seeks reset with Beijing

Associated Press

Beijing, February 25

GERMAN CHANCELLOR Friedrich Merz called Wednesday for deepening ties with China, while pushing for fairer trade rules between the two countries and seeking Chinese help on Ukraine.

Merz, who arrived in Beijing late morning for a whirlwind two-day visit, acknowledged differences during meetings with the country's top leaders and called for collaboration "wherever possible."

"We have a few issues that we need to talk about today in the course of my visit," he told Chinese Premier Li Qiang. "But I think there is also great potential for further growth of both our economies."

Both Europe and China have been buffeted by US Presi-

dent Donald Trump's tariffs, and Europe further by his demands that it take more responsibility for its own security and cede control of Greenland to the US.

Merz, on his first trip to China since taking office last May, has championed building a stronger Europe both economically and militarily to assert itself in an emerging new world order.

Before landing in the Chinese capital, Merz indicated he would press for a fair economic playing field for German companies and China's assistance in bringing about an end to Russia's war in Ukraine.

He stressed that for all the differences Europe has with China, "the big global political problems can no longer be tackled today without involving Beijing."