

Stormy start expected for Budget Session today as LoP issues boycott threat

Revoke suspension of four AAP legislators, will take to streets if voice of Oppn. is suppressed, says Atishi; ensure deliberations are of highest standard: Speaker; CM set to present budget tomorrow

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The three-day Budget Session of the Delhi Assembly is expected to begin on a stormy note on Monday, with Leader of the Opposition (LoP) and Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) leader Atishi on Sunday threatening to boycott proceedings if the suspension of four party legislators is not revoked.

The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) reports on the State's finances and audits of revenue, economic, and social sectors of the Capital are set to be tabled on Monday. The budget will be presented by Chief Minister Rekha Gupta, who also holds the Finance portfolio, on Tuesday. Ms. Gupta will also present the Economic Survey of Delhi (2025-26).

Ahead of the session, Ms. Atishi wrote to Speaker Vijender Gupta, saying the treatment meted out to the Opposition was not in line with democratic values or established legislative procedures. "It is natural that when the ruling side says something wrong, we will question it. We will raise our voice, walk out of the House. When I spoke to the media, a privilege case



Chief Minister Rekha Gupta, who also holds the Finance portfolio, said a welfare-oriented budget has been prepared after consultations with various sections of society to incorporate their suggestions. FILE PHOTO

was filed against me. What I said in the House was twisted and turned into a breach of privilege case," she said.

"What does the BJP want? Does it want the Opposition to become completely silent and not speak at all? ...In the past year, in every session, some case or another has been made against our MLAs," she said at a press conference.

The four suspended AAP MLAs Ms. Atishi referred to are Burari MLA Sanjeev Jha, Kondli MLA Kuldeep Kumar, Tilak Nagar MLA Jarnail Singh, and Sadar Bazar MLA Som Dutt. They were suspended during the Winter Ses-

ion in January for "disrupting" proceedings of the House. Their suspension continues as the previous sitting of the House was not prorogued. Ms. Atishi said the party would take to the streets with "lakhs of people in their constituencies" if the voice of the Opposition was suppressed. The ruling BJP has 48 MLAs in the Assembly while AAP, the main Opposition party, has 22.

Developed Delhi

Ahead of the budget presentation, the Chief Minister said the document had been prepared after consultations with various sections of society, including

gig workers, traders, women, youth, and farmers, to incorporate their suggestions and expectations. Ms. Gupta said the welfare-oriented budget would present clear solutions to problems, strengthen infrastructure and lay out a road map for a developed Delhi.

Assessing the preparedness of the House ahead of the session, the Speaker said it must reflect the finest parliamentary traditions. "We approach this session with a shared commitment to upholding the dignity of the House and ensuring that deliberations are of the highest standard," he said.

14TH WTO MINISTERIAL CONFERENCE SET TO TAKE PLACE MARCH 26-29 IN CAMEROON

Why India is opposing China-led WTO deal, despite isolation risk

Ravi Dutta Mishra
New Delhi, March 22

THE RAPID expansion of support for China-backed Investment Facilitation for Development (IFD) Agreement at the World Trade Organisation (WTO), up from 70 countries in 2017 to 128 out of a total of 166 WTO members till last year, has left India at risk of political isolation ahead of next week's 14th Ministerial Conference (MC14) in Cameroon. India and South Africa are among the handful of countries opposing IFD and are drawing criticism from smaller countries facing an investment crunch.

On the face of it, IFD Agreement's purpose, as per the WTO, is to improve the investment climate and to promote global cooperation to facilitate the flow of foreign direct investment between WTO members, particularly to the developing and least developed country members, to foster sustainable development.

However, India has opposed the agreement, arguing that incorporating the IFD through a plurilateral route raises broader questions about the WTO's future, which is traditionally based on multilateralism and consensus.

Unlike traditional WTO agreements, plurilateral deals only apply to participating countries, allowing smaller groups to move ahead. New Delhi has argued that allowing them will defeat the purpose of the WTO, as some members will select subjects that affect developing as well as least de-

veloped countries, and the latter may not even have a say.

The WTO's foundational principle is that all major decisions are taken collectively by its members, each with an equal voice, and consensus is reached when no member formally objects to a proposed decision.

Plurilateral deals

With the multilateral body itself fighting to be relevant amid pressure from the US, which has brought the WTO's dispute settlement system to a halt, WTO Director-General Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala has backed IFD, stating that it could enhance the transparency of investment frameworks, cutting red tape, and promoting responsible business conduct.

"By lowering costs associated with investment flows, the IFD Agreement can help developing and least-developed country members attract and retain more investment — and more sustainable investment — to access new technologies, diversify their economies, and create better jobs," she said during a 'high-level dialogue' on September 16, as per WTO.

A WTO factsheet says that expanding investment flows, such as trade flows, depends crucially on simplifying, speeding up and coordinating processes, not primarily on liberalising policies and by aligning facilitation policies with global benchmarks and that investment facilitation measures can help economies attract, retain and expand investment, which is key for them to diversify and expand their production capac-



Experts say India's position may be tactical amid its demand for a permanent solution on public stockholding of food grains. REUTERS FILE

ities and exports.

"India and South Africa blocked attempts to include IFD in the WTO framework at the 2024 ministerial conference. That coalition may weaken, with African Union members likely to pressure South Africa to shift position. This could leave India isolated as the main opponent of plurilateral expansion. India argues that plurilaterals undermine the balance of interests in WTO negotiations between developed and developing countries.

It warns such deals could sideline issues like farm subsidies and create a two-tier WTO dominated by major economies," former trade officer and founder of think tank Global Trade Research Initiative, Ajay Srivastava said.

The proponents of the deal say the IFD Agreement explicitly excludes market access, investment protection, and investor-State dispute settlement, government procurement and

certain subsidies are also excluded from the scope of the agreement. Moreover, countries backing the agreement have said that it has dedicated a section on 'Special and Differential Treatment' which provides that the extent and timing of implementation of the provisions of the IFD Agreement shall be related to the implementation capacities of developing and LDC Members. "Where a Member continues to lack the necessary capacity, implementation of the provisions concerned will not be required until implementation capacity has been acquired," a WTO fact sheet said.

Belt & Road Initiative

A Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS) report released Saturday said IFD has strategic considerations for India beyond the institutional considerations. The 'World Trade and Development' report said a significant feature of the IFD coalition is its

overlap with Chinese connectivity and infrastructure initiatives.

Of the 128 IFD participants, 98 are also members of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Though the correlation does not imply formal linkage, this convergence highlights how multilateral facilitation disciplines may complement geo-economic strategies. By standardising regulatory procedures across participating economies, the IFD could indirectly strengthen the operational environment for large-scale cross-border infrastructure and investment networks, RIS said.

"Beyond institutional considerations, strategic implications also arise, particularly through China's expanding overseas investment footprint under the BRI, which intersects significantly with over 75% of IFD-participating countries, including several in India's neighbourhood. Incorporation of the IFD within the WTO framework could enhance regulatory coordination among participating members and potentially amplify China's economic influence in regions of strategic interest to India," RIS said.

International trade experts have said India's position of blocking IFD could be tactical amid its demand for a permanent solution on public stockholding of food grains. Indian officials said public stockpiling of food grain is the longest-pending issue, and that the promise was made by the members at the Bali Ministerial, later endorsed by subsequent conferences. FULL REPORT ON

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India watches closely as Gor visits Sri Lanka, Maldives

NEWS ANALYSIS

Sahasini Haidar

NEW DELHI

United States Ambassador to India Sergio Gor's visit to Sri Lanka – his first visit in the region in his role as U.S. Special Envoy for South Asia – is a “quiet strategic signal”, said experts, as it comes amid the war in West Asia, and U.S. action in the Indian Ocean.

While the Narendra Modi government has made no comment about the visit, Mr. Gor met National Security Adviser Ajit Doval before embarking on the six-day (March 19-24) regional tour of Sri Lanka and the Maldives, and the government is understood to be watching its outcomes carefully.

India's response to Mr. Gor's position contrasts with the last time the U.S. nominated a Special Envoy for the region. In 2009, when the Obama administration nominated Richard Holbrooke, the government had protested vociferously, calling a “broad mandate” for the envoy “risky” and “interfering”, according to diplomatic cables released by Wikileaks in 2016, and the U.S. had backtracked, appointing him and subsequently Zalmay Khalilzad only as Special Representatives for Afghanistan and Pakistan (SRAPs).

Prior to Mr. Gor, South Asia was dealt with bilaterally via U.S. Ambassadors in each capital, and by the Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia, a position currently occu-

ried by S. Paul Kapur.

This time around, Mr. Gor has a much broader mandate, with U.S. President Donald Trump appointing him as his Special Envoy to South and Central Asia in August 2025. Mr. Gor has already made visits to Central Asian capitals as Special Envoy, and also travelled to Bhutan last week, although that was in his capacity as Ambassador to Bhutan, where he is concurrently accredited. All eyes will be on whether Mr. Gor would travel next to Pakistan and Bangladesh, and whether his role as Special Envoy would also include any attempts to mediate between India and its neighbours, which it would oppose. In addition, experts and officials said Mr. Gor's visit is being tracked particularly



Sergio Gor

as South Asia appears to be drawn in to the U.S.-Israel war with Iran, with a U.S. submarine bombing the Iranian ship *IRIS Dena*, and the latest Iranian strikes towards the U.S.-United Kingdom's Diego Garcia base.

“Sergio Gor's visit to Colombo is best read as a quiet strategic signal rather than a substantive break-

through: the United States is reasserting a calibrated presence in the Indian Ocean at a moment when tensions in [West Asia] are spilling into the maritime space,” said former Foreign Secretary and Ambassador to the U.S. and China Nirupama Menon Rao, who pointed out that Sri Lanka had balanced the optics of the visit carefully.

Visiting the Colombo Port, Mr. Gor said in a post that it was “clear how this critical hub connects South Asia to global markets – and why maritime security here matters”. Sri Lankan President Anura Kumara Dissanayake also “briefed” Mr. Gor's delegation on the “ongoing conflict situation in the Middle East, as well as the challenges faced by the country in light of these deve-

lopments”. Mr. Gor's travel to Sri Lanka came two weeks after the Iranian ship *IRIS Dena* was torpedoed by a U.S. submarine close to Sri Lankan waters, and Mr. Dissanayake refused U.S. warplanes permission to land in Sri Lanka's Mattala airport during the war.

Former Sri Lankan Foreign Secretary and Ambassador to the U.S. Prasad Kariyawasam said that the visit of Mr. Gor was a positive development.

“It's very good that high-level contacts are maintained actively with the USA in the context of the war, given that U.S. is a leading maritime power in the Indian Ocean and that Iran is highly connected with Indian Ocean countries”, Mr. Kariyawasam told *The Hindu*.

Will completely close Hormuz Strait: Iran after Trump's threat

U.S. President had threatened to 'obliterate' Iran's power plants if Tehran did not fully reopen the Strait within 48 hours; hitting back, Iran's Parliament Speaker says critical infrastructure in West Asia could be 'irreversibly destroyed' if attacked

Reuters
Agence France-Presse
WASHINGTON/TEHRAN

The Iranian military on Sunday threatened to completely shut down the strategic Strait of Hormuz and attack U.S. infrastructure, including energy facilities in the Gulf, if U.S. President Donald Trump acts on threats to target the country's power plants.

Mr. Trump on Saturday threatened to "obliterate" Iran's power plants if Tehran did not fully reopen the Strait of Hormuz within 48 hours, suggesting a significant escalation barely a day after he talked about "winding down" the war, now in its fourth week.

Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent said that the U.S. may need to "esca-



Assessing damage: People inspecting the site of an Iranian missile strike in Dimona, Israel on Sunday. AFP

late" its attacks against Iran to be able to wind down the war. Asked if Mr. Trump was winding down or escalating the war, he said: "They're not mutually exclusive. Sometimes you have to escalate to de-escalate."

The strait has been ef-

fectively closed since the start of the war, sparked by U.S.-Israeli bombardment of Iran. The conflict has since spread across West Asia, with Iran responding with attacks on Israel and U.S. interests in the region.

"If the U.S.'s threats regarding Iran's power plants

PM chairs meet to review impact of conflict on India

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

As tensions continue to mount in West Asia, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday chaired a meeting of the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) to review the

situation and suggest mitigating measures.

A government statement said that the conflict's impact over the short, long and medium term were assessed.

FULL REPORT ON
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are carried out... the Strait of Hormuz will be completely closed, and it will not be reopened until our destroyed power plants are rebuilt," military's operational command Khatam Al-Anbiya said.

Iran's Parliament Speaker Mohammad Baqer Gha-

libaf wrote on X that critical infrastructure in West Asia could be "irreversibly destroyed" should Iranian power plants be attacked.

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Will completely close Hormuz Strait: Iran



A crater in a residential neighbourhood, following Iranian missile strikes in Arad, southern Israel, on Sunday. REUTERS

The military command said it would also strike Israel's "power plants, energy, and information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure", along with power plants in regional countries hosting U.S. bases and companies with U.S. shareholders.

The Islamic Republic's power grid is deeply intertwined with its energy sector. Striking major plants could trigger blackouts, crippling everything from pumps and refineries to export terminals and military command centres. While some Gulf desert states such as Saudi Arabia, Oman and the UAE have access to more than one sea to draw water from for desalination, Qatar, Bahrain and Kuwait are crowded along the shoreline of the Gulf with no other coastline.

Earlier in the day, Iranian media reports quoted Iran's representative to the U.N. maritime agency as saying that the Strait of Hormuz remains open to all shipping except vessels linked to "Iran's enemies". Ali Mousavi's comments came from an interview published on Friday by the Chinese news agency Xinhua, much before Mr. Trump's ultimatum.

Meanwhile, Iran's Parliament is mulling imposing tolls on shipping through the strait, with Speaker Ghalibaf saying maritime traffic would "not return to its pre-war status".

Traffic through the vital strait has been brought to a near-standstill since the start of the war, that has so far killed over 2,000 people. A relatively small number of vessels have been able to transit it – around 5% of its pre-war volume, according to analytics firm Kpler. Iranian forces have attacked multiple vessels, saying they failed to heed "warnings" against transiting the waterway.

In recent days, Iran has allowed some vessels from countries it considers friendly to pass, while warning it would block ships from countries it says have joined the "aggression" against it.

Meanwhile, the exiled son of Iran's last shah Reza Pahlavi called on Mr. Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to refrain from targeting Iran's civilian infrastructure, because it "belongs to the Iranian people and to the future of a free Iran."

48-hour deadline

power plants if Tehran did not fully reopen the Strait of Hormuz within 48 hours, barely a day after he talked about “winding down” the war. He made the new threat as US Marines and heavy landing craft are heading to the region.

But while attacks on electricity could hurt Iran, they would be potentially catastrophic for its Gulf neighbours, which consume around five times as much power per capita. Electricity makes their gleaming desert cities habitable, and most of them produce nearly all of their drinking water by purifying it from the sea.

In a post on X, Iran's President Masoud Pezeshkian said: “The illusion of erasing Iran from the map shows desperation against the will of a history-making nation. Threats and terror only strengthen our unity. The Strait of Hormuz is open to all except those who violate our soil. We firmly confront delirious threats on the battlefield.”

Iran's Parliament Speaker Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf wrote on X that critical infrastructure and energy facilities in the Middle East could be “irreversibly destroyed” should Iranian power plants be attacked. Iran's powerful Revolutionary Guards said it would also mean the shipping lane, where a fifth of global oil and liquefied natural

gas normally transits along Iran's southern coast, would remain shut. “The Strait of Hormuz will be completely closed and will not be opened until our destroyed power plants are rebuilt,” the Guards said in a statement.

More than 2,000 people have been killed during the war the US and Israel launched on February 28, which has upended markets, spiked fuel costs, fuelled global inflation fears and convulsed the postwar Western alliance.

“Ticking time bomb of elevated uncertainty”

“President Trump's threat has now placed a 48-hour ticking time bomb of elevated uncertainty over markets,” said IG market analyst Tony Sycamore, who expects stock markets to fall when they reopen on Monday.

Oil prices jumped on Friday, ending the day at their highest in nearly four years. Markets already under severe strain from blockaded shipping were further rattled last week when Israel attacked a major gas field in Iran, and Tehran responded with strikes on Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait.

Iranian attacks have effectively closed the Strait of Hormuz, causing the worst oil crisis since the 1970s. Its near-closure sent European gas prices sur-

ging as much as 35% last week. “If Iran doesn't fully open, without threat, the Strait of Hormuz, within 48 hours from this exact point in time, the United States of America will hit and obliterate their various power plants, starting with the biggest one first!” Trump posted on social media around 7:45 pm EDT (2345 GMT) on Saturday.

Iranian media quoted the country's representative to the International Maritime Organisation as saying the strait remains open to all shipping except vessels linked to “Iran's enemies”. Ali Mousavi said passage through the waterway was possible by coordinating security and safety arrangements with Tehran.

Ship-tracking data shows some vessels, such as Indian-flagged ships and a Pakistani oil tanker, have negotiated safe passage through the strait. But the vast majority of ships have remained holed up inside. Iran's Khatam al-Anbiya military command headquarters said on Sunday if the US hit Iran's fuel and energy infrastructure, Iran would attack all US energy, information technology and desalination infrastructure in the region.

Striking major Iranian power plants could trigger blackouts, crippling everything from pumps and refineries to export terminals and military command centres.

Iran expands risks

The US and Israel say they have seriously degraded Iran's ability to project force beyond its borders with their three weeks of intensive air strikes. But Tehran fired its first known long-range ballistic missiles with a range of 4,000 km on Friday towards a US-British Indian Ocean military base, expanding the risk of attacks beyond the Middle East.

An Iranian strike also landed near Israel's secretive nuclear reactor about 13 km southeast of the city of Dimona.

The war has been taking place alongside a confrontation on a separate front between Israel and Lebanon's Hezbollah, backed by Iran, with Israel saying on Sunday its troops had raided a number of the armed group's sites in southern Lebanon. Hezbollah said it had attacked several border areas in northern Israel. Israeli emergency services said one person was killed in a kibbutz near the border, the first fatality in Israel killed by fire from Lebanon since the escalation began. Hezbollah has fired rockets at Israel since it entered the war on March 2, prompting an Israeli offensive that has killed more than 1,000 people in Lebanon.

Israel said it had instructed the military to accelerate the demolition of Lebanese homes in “frontline villages” to end threats to Israelis, and to destroy all bridges over Lebanon's Litani River which it said were used for “terrorist activity”.

REUTERS, WITH AGENCIES

Decoding deadline, red line in Trump's new threat to Iran



DIVYA A

US PRESIDENT Donald Trump on Sunday threatened to "hit and obliterate" Iran's power plants if Tehran didn't fully open the Strait of Hormuz within 48 hours. In a post on Truth Social, Trump said, "If Iran doesn't fully open, without threat, the Strait of Hormuz, within 48 hours from this exact point in time, the United States of America will hit and obliterate their various power plants, starting with the biggest one first!"

Iran responded to Trump's warning, saying it will retaliate by targeting US and Israel-linked energy and IT infrastructure, along with desalination plants in the region, if its power plants are hit.

In a recent attack, Iran fired missiles towards Israel's Dimona, which has a nuclear research centre, and hit a building, causing significant damage. Iran said this attack comes in response to Israel's earlier attack on Natanz, the site of an Iranian nuclear facility. Both sides have also attacked oil facilities.

With civilian infrastructure coming directly in the line of fire, as clearly spelt out by both sides this time, the US-Israel-Iran war has entered its most crucial and possibly the most precarious phase.

Consequences of 'obliteration'

Trump said the US would start by striking "the biggest" power plant. One of the most significant is Bushehr, a nuclear power plant around 750 km from Tehran that is also home to an Iranian navy base and a dual-use, civilian-military airport. Though it is said to contribute merely 1-2% of Iran's power requirements, it is a key strategic site.

Just three days ago, Tehran had claimed that a projectile struck the grounds of the Bushehr plant — in close proximity to the operating power unit — also raising the spectre of a radiological incident. Although no release of nuclear material was reported following the incident, it underlines a long-time worry of Iran's neighbours — that if the power plant on the shores of the Persian Gulf is hit, it could spell disaster for the entire region.

In fact, an attack on Bushehr is the primary concern for the international com-



Satellite image from Planet Labs shows the Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant in Bushehr, Iran, last year. AP

munity. Most Gulf nations (the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia) rely on desalination for nearly all their drinking water. If a strike on Bushehr causes a radiation leak into the Persian Gulf, it could contaminate the water supply for millions across the region.

Iran's electricity capacity (over 90,000 MW) makes it one of the largest power producers in West Asia. Iran mostly relies on natural gas for its energy needs — up to 80% as per estimates. The country is heavily dependent on thermal power for its electricity. These plants are primarily fuelled by natural gas, with fuel oil used as a backup during the winter. Iran's big thermal power plants include the Damavand power plant near Tehran (2,868 MW), the Kerman plant in southeastern Iran (1,910 MW), and the Ramin steam power plant in Khuzestan province (1,890 MW), according to industry and energy databases.

These large, very visible plants can be vulnerable targets in a conflict, as opposed to underground or more modular and dispersed facilities.

Without electricity, Iran cannot process or export oil and natural gas. A disruption to Iran's energy stability might create panic in global markets. A serious attack on Iranian energy facilities, or a disruption of the Strait of Hormuz, would likely cause global oil and gas prices to soar, causing severe market volatility.

However, it is believed that Iran has a particularly good power grid and gas distribution network, not very easy to destroy.

In fact, since 2017, Iran has been exporting electricity to Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iraq.

Iraq relies heavily on Iranian electricity.

Cascading effect

Since 2017, Iran has been exporting electricity to Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iraq.

• Iraq relies heavily on Iranian electricity. A collapse of the Iranian power grid could potentially trigger a blackout and subsequent political unrest in Iraq.

• ENERGY STRESS ALREADY

Force majeure is a clause invoked to avoid liabilities due to unforeseeable circumstances that can prevent someone from fulfilling a contract. This may involve suspension or curtailment of production. Gulf oil facilities that invoked this:

- QatarEnergy, the world's largest LNG company, declared *force majeure* for its entire LNG output after attacks on the Ras Laffan hub. It led to Petronet LNG, India's biggest LNG importer, to also issue such notices to Indian Oil Corporation and Bharat Petroleum Corporation, among others
- Bahrain's BAPCO Energies, a major diesel and jet fuel exporter, after an attack earlier

this month. Leading aluminium smelter, Aluminium Bahrain, also made the declaration

- Kuwait Petroleum Corporation, exporter of naphtha (used in petrochemicals' production), citing threats from Iran

- Iraq declared *force majeure* on all oilfields developed by foreign firms, according to Reuters. Oil ministry sources said it was due to difficulties in shipping via Hormuz.

A collapse of the Iranian power grid could potentially trigger a blackout and subsequent political unrest in Iraq.

Also, Russia has often targeted Ukraine's power plants, and while the much smaller nation's grid has been severely damaged, it has not been "obliterated".

Could lead to fierce retaliation

Iran has vowed "zero restraint" if its energy facilities are targeted. Tehran has threatened to attack energy infrastructure across West Asia, including assets belonging to US allies in the region. This could draw in neighbouring countries, escalating into a full-scale regional conflict. Iran has *de facto* closed the Strait of Hormuz — which is the key choke point for about 20% of global daily oil supplies — for what it calls 'enemy-linked ships'.

Omair Anas, who teaches international relations at the Ankara Yildirim Beyazit University, Turkey, told *The Indian Express*, "Trump's warning that Iran's energy infrastructure would be obliterated looks more like aggressive posturing for a ceasefire. Though the US has the capability to destroy Iran's critical energy infrastructure, it is Trump's allies in the region, including Israel, who will face the brunt of Iranian retaliation."

Earlier this month, Trump had raised the idea of destroying Iran's power grid but also downplayed it. "We could take apart their electric capacity within one hour, and it would take them 25 years to rebuild," Trump had told reporters on March 11. "So ideally, we're not going to be doing that."

Any such action by the US on Iran's civilian infrastructure could lead this war to a point of no return, as the assassinated Ira-

nian leader, Ali Larijani, had earlier indicated. Responding to Trump's threat, he had posted a day later on X, "Well, if they do that, the whole region will go dark in less than half an hour and darkness provides ample opportunity to hunt down US servicemen running for safety."

Thus, many see the latest threat as a tactic to bring Tehran to the negotiating table again, by giving it a 48-hour deadline.

'Most serious test'

By creating disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz, Iran aims to make the aggression against it extremely expensive for the US and Israel. Iran has indicated it wants the war to stop, but not at the cost of its sovereignty or security, and it has not sought a simple ceasefire.

While the US has given a 48-hour deadline to Iran before its energy infra is targeted, reports indicate that should this gambit fail, the Trump administration is making preparations for a ground invasion, possibly to occupy the South Pars gas field on the Kharg island and open up the Strait of Hormuz by force.

Anas said the Iran-Israel war is the most serious test of any American administration since the Islamic revolution in 1979. "Even though the US President has declared success in many of his actions and air strikes on Iran, with Iran's increasingly intense retaliation, the rhetoric of early success has come into question," he noted.

Most of Trump's allies in the region and in NATO are uncertain about Trump's war plans. The more aggressively Trump goes against Iran, the more pressure he might face from his allies at home and abroad, added Anas.

Scores hurt after Iranian missiles hit Israeli towns, including 'Little India'

At least 47 people were injured after an Iranian missile struck the Israeli town of Dimona, home to a large Indian Jewish population and located close to a secretive nuclear reactor; IDF says it is probing incident after air defences fail to intercept

Agencies

TEL AVIV/JERUSALEM

Southern Israeli towns woke to widespread damage on Sunday after air defences failed to intercept two Iranian missiles overnight that injured scores of civilians in one of the worst attacks of the war so far on Israeli soil.

As daylight broke, the scale of the damage in the desert town of Arad, where one of the strikes hit a multi-storey apartment bloc, came into clearer view, with entire floors blown open by the blast. Another city Dimona, which houses a large Indian-Jewish population was also hit. It is located close to Israel's secretive nuclear reactor and several military bases, including Nevatim Air Base, one of the country's largest.

Southern Israel's Soroka hospital described the attacks as a mass-casualty event. In Arad, 31 people, including 18 children, required hospitalisation, at



War fallout: A drone view shows the damage in a neighbourhood after Iranian missile strikes in Dimona, Israel on Sunday. REUTERS

least nine of them in serious condition, the hospital said. Uri Shacham, the chief of staff of Israel's ambulance service, said at least eight buildings were damaged in the strike.

In Dimona, at least 47 people were injured in the missile attack on Saturday evening. Rescue services have listed a 12-year-old boy as seriously injured after being hit by shrapnel.

Military spokesperson Lieutenant Colonel Nadav Shoshani said both strikes had been carried out with conventional ballistic mis-

siles. The Israel Defence Forces (IDF) said the air defences engaged the missile, but the interceptors failed to knock it down.

"The incident will be investigated," it said.

Most Israelis receive alerts on their mobile phone when launches from Iran are identified. An air raid siren sounds and they then have a few minutes to go to safe rooms or public bomb shelters.

"It is a miracle that no one was killed," Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on Sunday,

standing in a crater at the impact site in Arad.

"We are going after the IRGC (Iran's Revolutionary Guards), this criminal gang," Mr. Netanyahu said.

"We're going after them personally, their leaders, their installations, their economic assets."

Tit-for-tat attacks

Israel said Iran was targeting civilian population areas.

Iran said it is targeting Dimona as a "response" to an earlier strike on the Natanz nuclear enrichment site. The IDF, however, said it was not responsible for striking Natanz earlier in the day.

Dimona has a predominant Indian Jewish population, and the community members, mostly from the State of Maharashtra, maintain strong links with India and have consistently put efforts to solidify them. This has earned the town the nickname of "Little India".

Indian shops are spread across the town, and Ma-

rathi can be heard everywhere, with the 7,500 strong Indian community making up for some 30% of the town's population.

Cricket is popular in the town, and the younger generation is very familiar with local Indian snacks like 'sonpapdi,' 'gulab jamun,' 'papri chaat,' 'bhel-puri,' which several shops sell.

Meanwhile, the Israel's military said on Sunday that Iran had fired more than 400 ballistic missiles at Israel since the start of the war, with around 92% of them intercepted.

Since the joint U.S.-Israeli strikes on Iran on February 28, Israel has come under daily missile fire from Iran. At least 20 civilians have been killed in Israel and the Palestinian territories, including one Israeli killed in an attack by Iran-backed Lebanese group Hezbollah on Sunday.

Israeli and U.S. strikes have killed at least 1,300 people in Iran, according to the Iranian government.

'Can't live like this': Cuba reels under second power grid collapse in a week

Agence France-Presse

HAVANA

Cuban authorities scrambled on Sunday to restore power to the island after the second nationwide blackout in less than a week, as the grid struggles due to an ageing infrastructure and a U.S. oil blockade.

Some parts of Havana began to have power again, but others were still dark early on Sunday, a day after the Energy Ministry reported a "total disconnection" of the national electric system in the country of nearly 10 million people.

Cubans face daily blackouts of up to 15 hours in



Dark times: A vendor uses a battery-powered lamp while waiting for customers during a blackout in Havana on Saturday. AP

Havana. "This is becoming unbearable," Ofelia Oliva, a 64-year-old Havana resident, said. "It hasn't even been a week since we experienced a similar situation. It is getting tiresome."

"I wonder if we're going to be like this our whole

lives. You can't live like this," Nilo Lopez, a 36-year-old taxi driver, said.

There have been seven nationwide blackouts since 2024. The breakdowns have intensified since Cuba's main regional ally and oil supplier, Venezuela's

socialist leader Nicolas Maduro, was captured in a U.S. military operation in January this year.

Oil embargo

U.S. President Donald Trump has threatened to impose tariffs on countries that sell oil to Cuba. No oil has been imported to the island since January 9, hitting the power sector while also forcing airlines to curtail flights to the island, a blow to the all-important tourism sector.

The latest blackout was due to an outage in a generating unit at one of the country's eight thermoelectric plants, triggering a domino effect in the system, authorities say.

Brazil's Lula warns of foreign interference in developing nations

Associated Press

BOGOTA

Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva criticised what he called the return of a colonial approach toward developing nations during a summit in Colombia on Saturday, pointing to the disposal of ex-Venezuelan leader Nicolas Maduro and the fuel blockade of Cuba.

“It’s not possible for someone to think that they own other countries,” Mr. Lula said, in an apparent reference to U.S. policy in the region, at a high-level forum with delegates from Africa and a summit of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States. “What are they doing with Cuba now? What did they do with Venezuela? Is that democratic?”

The leader also criticised the war launched by the U.S. and Israel against Iran and drew a parallel with the Iraq War. “Iran has been invaded under the pretext that it was building a nuclear bomb. Where are Saddam Hussein’s chemical weapons? Where are they? Who found them?”

Mr. Lula said that all countries present had already experienced being plundered for gold, silver, diamonds and minerals. He accused an unspecified “they” of seeking to own developing countries’ critical minerals and rare earth deposits.

“After taking everything we had, now they want to own the critical minerals

and rare earths that we have,” Mr. Lula said. “They want to colonise us again.”

Sphere of influence

Washington’s history of intervention in Latin America goes back a long way – to when President James Monroe claimed the hemisphere as part of the U.S. sphere of influence more than 200 years ago.

While large-scale U.S. involvement in the region mostly petered out after the Cold War, Mr. Trump has rekindled the legacy.

Since assuming office last year, Mr. Trump launched boat strikes against alleged drug traffickers in the Caribbean, ordered a naval blockade on Venezuelan oil exports and got involved in electoral politics in Honduras and Argentina.

And in Brazil, Mr. Trump imposed a 50% tariff on Brazilian goods last year.

While such actions have thrilled right-wing leaders across the continent, they have raised fears among left-wing politicians who have voiced grave concerns over what they see as U.S. bullying.

“We cannot allow anyone to interfere and violate the territorial integrity of each country,” Mr. Lula said.

Mr. Lula also criticised the United Nations. “What we are witnessing is the total and absolute failure of the United Nations,” said Mr. Lula, pointing to the situations in Gaza, Ukraine and Iran.