

Permanent commission, pensionary benefits for eligible women officers: SC

Ananthkrishnan G
& Vineet Bhalla
New Delhi, March 24

THE SUPREME Court Tuesday directed the armed forces to grant permanent commission to eligible women officers, and ordered full pension and consequential benefits for those who had already been released, treating them having completed 20 years of qualifying service required to earn a pension. Their pensions will be fixed accordingly, with arrears payable from January 1, 2025, it said.

A bench led by CJI Surya Kant and comprising Justices Ujjal Bhuyan and N K Singh, in three separate but related judgments, also highlighted “systemic” flaws and structural bias in how Short Service Commission Women Officers were evaluated for permanent commission across the Army, Navy and Air Force. The verdicts are the latest chapter in a long legal battle for gender parity in the armed forces. This glass ceiling was shattered by the top court’s landmark verdicts in 2020 in the cases of ‘Secretary, Ministry of

Defence vs Babita Puniya’ and ‘Union of India vs Annie Nagaraja’ cases, which mandated that women be considered for PC on par with men. However, when the military subsequently convened selection boards to implement these rulings, many women were rejected, due to which they moved courts to challenge the fairness of the evaluation process itself.

The three verdicts Tuesday are the culmination of protracted legal battles across multiple courts for the officers of each force. In the Air Force case, the women officers approached the Armed Forces Tribunal (AFT) and the Delhi High Court after being denied permanent commission and released in 2021 under a newly introduced 2019 policy, but both forums dismissed their pleas. In the Army case, after the top court’s Babita Puniya ruling opened the doors for women, the appellants were evaluated by regular selection boards but rejected on comparative merit; AFT dismissed their challenge in 2024, prompting their appeal to the top court.

The Navy officers’ legal jour-



The apex court said the Navy failed to disclose its evaluation criteria and vacancy calculations to the officers. EXPRESS FILE

ney was perhaps the most arduous. Following the court’s Annie Nagaraja ruling, they were rejected by a December 2020 selection board. Their subsequent challenge was remanded by the apex court in 2022 because the Navy had submitted evaluation criteria to the AFT in a “sealed cover”. When the AFT subsequently ordered yet another fresh selection board, the female officers approached the Supreme Court seeking finality.

Across all three cases, the primary similarity that emerged is the military’s reliance on Annual

Confidential Reports (ACRs) — yearly performance evaluations — to determine an officer’s merit for PC. The Supreme Court noted that these ACRs were written years ago, during a time when government policy explicitly barred women from receiving a permanent commission. Because assessing officers knew these women would only serve a limited tenure, they graded them casually, reserving the highest marks for male officers whose long-term career progression depended on them.

The bench noted that “the

cumulative consequence was a systemic pattern in which women officers... consistently received lower gradings, not due to lack of merit, but due to the absence of any perceived career horizon”. While the flawed ACRs were a common thread, the court also addressed specific arbitrary practices unique to each branch of the military.

Female Army officers argued they were systematically denied “criteria appointments” — roles involving higher command responsibilities — and career-enhancing courses, which negatively impacted their overall scores. In the case of the female Air Force officers, the dispute centred on a 2019 human resource policy that introduced new minimum performance criteria, including mandatory grades in in-service courses. The court noted that the Navy failed to disclose its evaluation criteria and vacancy calculations to the officers before the selection boards convened. This, it ruled, “violated basic norms of fairness and transparency.”

FULL REPORT ON
WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

What will be the fallout of West Asia war on economy, Opposition asks government

The Hindu Bureau

NEW DELHI

The Opposition on Tuesday questioned the Union government in the Lok Sabha on the effect of the ongoing war in West Asia on the Indian economy even as it accused the Centre of giving up its strategic autonomy to the U.S.

The ruling BJP, on the other hand, said the Opposition was criticising the government without facts or substance.

Congress MP Manish Tewari, participating in a debate on the Finance Bill 2026 in the Lok Sabha, said the proposed trade agreement with the U.S. will open the Indian market for U.S. agricultural products.

He said there has been a massive fall in the rupee, with no steps taken to check its drop. There has been an exodus of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and Foreign Portfolio Investment (FPI) from the country, and the economy is not kicking off, he said. **“What will be the burden**



Manish Tewari

of the ongoing war in West Asia on India, and what will be situation in the country after April 30, when the second phase of Bengal elections gets over,” Mr. Tewari asked the government.

BJP MP Navin Jindal accused the Opposition of criticising the government without any “facts or substance”.

He said India had become the fastest-growing economy due to the government’s consistent efforts. The Opposition is engaged only in protests and disruptions without realising that the welfare programmes undertaken by

the government would benefit their constituents too, he said.

Mr. Jindal said that in its 11 years of rule, the NDA government encountered numerous problems - COVID, geopolitical tensions, war - but faced every crisis boldly to bounce back on the path of progress.

Congress MP Deepender Singh Hooda targeted the Modi government over the falling value of the Indian rupee [presently at ₹93] against the U.S. dollar. He said that when international crude prices were \$147 per barrel in 2009, the rupee was still at ₹48 against the dollar. “In 2014 when we left the government, the value of rupee was ₹60 to a dollar,” he said, adding, “They [the BJP] keep talking about fastest-growing large economy. I have done some research and found out that we are the fastest-falling currency.”

The JD(U) MP from Bihar, Ramprit Mandal, sought special steps for the State’s industrialisation.

PM flays attack on ships, backs peace in West Asia

India's goal is to restore peace in the region through dialogue and diplomacy, says Modi; Congress leader Kharge says PM's statement comes too late and raises more questions than it answers

The Hindu Bureau

NEW DELHI

A day ahead of the all-party meeting to discuss the war in West Asia and its impact on India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi told the Rajya Sabha on Tuesday that the country's goal was to restore peace in the region through dialogue and diplomacy.

The Opposition, dissatisfied over the decision by Chairman C.P. Radhakrishnan not to allow any clarifications after Mr. Modi's statement, said the statement was "an exercise in obfuscation". "Mr. Modi's statement comes too late and raises more questions than it answers," Leader of the Opposition in the Rajya Sabha Mallikarjun Kharge said in a statement.

Mr. Modi said the situation had created a severe energy crisis across the world. "For India too, this situation is worrisome. Our trade routes are being



Prime Minister Narendra Modi speaks in the Rajya Sabha on the West Asia conflict on Tuesday. ANI

affected. Routine supplies of essential goods such as petrol, diesel, gas, and fertilizers are disrupted," he said, adding that ensuring safety and livelihood of Indians living in the region was a major concern for India.

Mr. Modi said the country was in touch with Iran, Israel, and the U.S. "Our goal is to restore peace in the region through dialogue and diplomacy. We have spoken with them about de-escalation and reopening of the Strait of

Hormuz. India has opposed attacks on civilians, civil infrastructure, and energy and transport-related infrastructure," the Prime Minister said and maintained that India had suggested dialogue as the only path to resolving this problem.

He said the government was working to ensure that farmers received adequate fertilizers in the coming sowing season.

The Prime Minister said the current crisis had shaken the global economy.

"Continuous efforts are being made to ensure that India suffers the least possible impact. The fundamentals of our economy are strong, and the government is closely monitoring the rapidly changing situation. The government is working with a strategy to address short-term, medium-term, and long-term impacts," he said.

Soon after Mr. Modi's speech, Opposition members sought clarifications. However, Mr. Radhakrishnan gave ruling that the statement is on international diplomatic relations, and urged members to understand the gravity of the situation. "The Prime Minister has now likened the situation to being 'COVID-like'. The nation cannot forget the tragic suffering during the pandemic, when over 40 lakh lives were lost and countless citizens were left struggling for basic necessities like oxygen," Mr. Kharge said.

SC status only for Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs: top court

Conversion to any other religion will lead to complete loss of Scheduled Caste status, regardless of birth, says Supreme Court Bench as it invokes Clause 3 of Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order

Krishnadas Rajagopal

NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Tuesday held in a judgment that a person professing any religion other than Hinduism, Buddhism, or Sikhism should not be considered a member of a Schedule Caste community.

The court concluded that conversion to any other religion would result in “immediate and complete loss of Scheduled Caste status from the moment of conversion, regardless of birth”.

A Bench of Justices Prashant Kumar Mishra and Manmohan invoked Clause 3 of the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950, which mandates that “no person who professes a religion different

Identity question

The top court said that a person professing a religion other than those mentioned in Clause 3 cannot be part of a scheduled caste

- Clause 3 of the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950, mandates that ‘no person who professes a religion different from Hinduism shall be deemed to be a member of a Scheduled Caste’
- The Sikh religion was added to the ambit of Clause 3 in 1956
- The provision was further amended in 1990 to include persons professing Buddhism
- The top court observed that the bar in Clause 3 is ‘categorical and absolute’



from Hinduism shall be deemed to be a member of a Scheduled Caste”. The Sikh religion was added to the ambit of Clause 3 in 1956. The provision was further amended in 1990 to include persons professing Buddhism.

“This bar under Clause

3 of the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950 is categorical and absolute,” Justice Mishra, who authored the judgment, interpreted the 1950 Order.

The court was hearing an appeal filed by Chinthada Anand, who was born a Hindu-Madiga (Scheduled

Caste) but converted to Christianity to become a pastor.

Mr. Anand had filed a case under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act of 1989 after he alleged that he had suffered repeated attacks and caste slurs.

The Andhra Pradesh High Court, in a decision in April last year, quashed the criminal proceedings on the ground that Mr. Anand could no longer claim protection under the 1989 Act as he professed Christianity and had been a pastor for about a decade. The High Court was of the view that the caste system was not recognised in Christianity.

CONTINUED ON

» **PAGE 10**

Long delays, burdened courts: We need a national mission for negotiated justice



CRAJ KUMAR

IN HIS seminal work *On Crimes and Punishment*, the Italian criminologist Cesare Beccaria wrote, "Crimes are more effectually prevented by the certainty than the severity of punishment... The certainty of a small punishment will be more impressive than the fear of a more terrible one, but moderated by the hope of impunity." His perspectives on criminal justice remain important to this day. The efficacy of justice systems is not only dependent on punishment, but also on certainty, predictability, and quick resolution of disputes.

More than 5 crore cases are still open in Indian courts, the Centre told Parliament last year. About 4.76 crore are pending in district and subordinate courts, over 63 lakh in high courts, and over 92,000 in the Supreme Court. More than 80 per cent of India's judicial backlog is in district courts, where the common person interacts most directly with the justice system. The backlog reached record levels during the pandemic and has continued to rise despite reforms, such as the e-Courts project, launched to expand and digitise the judicial system, as well as institutional initiatives like fast-track courts and Lok Adalats.

We need to recognise that this is not an administrative issue, but a structural one.

For victims, long legal battles can mean a second trauma. For pre-trial detainees, delayed trials mean years of imprisonment before they are found guilty or acquitted. For individuals involved in civil disputes, such as property or divorce cases, protracted legal battles can result in substantial financial losses.

Delays are bad for the economy as well. A slow justice system makes it harder to enforce contracts, raises the cost of doing business and dissipates investor confidence. It sends the wrong signal to the investors about the country's investment climate. A slow judicial process makes the

• PLEA BARGAINING & PENDENCY – COMPARING INDIA & THE WORLD

| JURISDICTION | PLEA USAGE (%) | TRIAL SHARE | DISPOSAL SPEED | PENDENCY IMPACT |
|----------------|-----------------------|-------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|
| India | -01% | -99% | Years (3-10+) | Severe backlog (~85-90%+) |
| United States | 90-95% | 2-5% | Weeks-months | Managed caseload |
| United Kingdom | ~70%+ | Low | Early-stage disposal | Controlled flow |
| China | High (majority cases) | Low | Weeks-months | Reduced pressure |
| Italy | 20-30% | Moderate | Reduced trial time | Moderate relief |
| Germany | 15-25% | Moderate | Shorter trials | Measurable relief |
| France | 15-20% | Moderate | Faster minor case disposal | Partial relief |

legal system appear weaker to citizens. This, in turn, creates a crisis of legitimacy.

Plea bargaining is a relatively new concept in India's formal criminal justice system. People traditionally thought that negotiated settlements were less fair or left room for extortion. The 2005 amendment to the Code of Criminal Procedure formally introduced plea bargaining into the Indian criminal justice system. It allowed the accused to take responsibility for the crime on their own terms, usually by agreeing to a deal that includes lower charges or a lighter sentence. When practised in a way that is fair and legal, this can serve the interests of both the state and the accused by allowing the case to proceed more quickly and efficiently.

However, after 20 years, plea bargaining has been adopted in less than one per cent of cases. The effective use of this mechanism remains impeded for several reasons, including procedural hesitation, absence of institutional incentives, and lack of understanding among prosecutors, defence lawyers, and litigants. This is unfortunate because experiences from around the world, including the US, England, Canada and Australia, show that negotiated dispute resolution mechanisms are some of the best ways to deal with large volume of cases. In fact, more than 90 per cent of criminal cases in the US are settled through plea deals instead of full trials.

Plea-bargaining comprises the core of the justice system in

several countries, with the understanding that it does not diminish the equity of the justice system. India needs to draw from these global experiences and make them work in our own constitutional and institutional setting.

The country should consider incorporating this practice for at least five good reasons.

One, given the sheer number of pending cases, it would be impossible to deal with them on an individual basis. Neither a judiciary capable of withstanding greater workloads nor improved infrastructure alone will be sufficient to have any effect.

Two, the outcome of a trial can be highly uncertain, costly, and time-consuming. Plea-bargaining presents an alternative to both parties to arrive at a mutual agreement.

Three, negotiated settlements enable the police, prosecutors, and courts to carry out their jobs effectively. It allows them to devote their time and resources to complicated and serious crimes.

Four, victims are happier to settle their cases by plea-bargaining than through a long legal battle. Crimes often disrupt people's lives. Victims would prefer that cases be resolved quickly with the confession of the guilty.

Five, effective plea bargaining makes the justice system work better as a whole.

In a recent speech, the Attorney General for India, R Venkataramani, observed, "There is a new

People need to be aware of how the law may be used for their benefit. Litigants need to understand that entering a plea bargain is not an admission of defeat nor an unfair deal but a wise tactical decision

need for a national protocol for plea bargaining... which can, in a very healthy way, advise, guide and counsel practitioners as well as victims... so that the protocol can work in a more transparent and objective way."

India must plan to set up a national mission for negotiated justice to make plea bargaining and pre-trial settlement mechanisms more common. This could be called the Sahmati Samadhan Nyaya Mission. There would be a few important parts to such a mission.

Prosecutors must be trained, and institutional readiness must be ensured. Prosecutors need to be able to negotiate fair and open plea deals that protect the public's interests while ensuring that cases are settled in a reasonable timeframe.

The way lawyers are paid should be reformed. Prosecutors and defence lawyers must have a professional interest in reaching a settlement through negotiations.

Judges should encourage early settlement methods. Courts can exercise judicial discretion in deciding which cases are appropriate for plea-bargaining and can encourage the setting up of structured negotiations before the trials start.

People need to be aware of how the law may be used for their benefit. Litigants need to understand that entering a plea bargain is not an admission of defeat nor an unfair deal but a wise tactical decision.

Strong protections and oversight systems need to be put in place to ensure that plea bargains are treated with the weight and gravity they deserve. Coercion, extortion and exploitation must be removed from the system.

If done right, plea bargaining can be a tool to timely justice. It frees up time for more important business in the courts. The courts can devote time to constitutional issues and serious criminal trials while routine and minor cases are settled quickly.

It's been almost 300 years since Beccaria made the compelling case that justice systems work best when results are certain, timely and predictable. Plea bargaining gives India a way to do just that, and it is finally time to let it reach its full potential.

The writer is founding vice-chancellor, OP Jindal Global University

Govt: No permission, payment needed for vessels to cross Strait

Sukalp Sharma

New Delhi, March 24

NO PAYMENT is being made for the safe transit of Indian tankers out of the Persian Gulf through the Strait of Hormuz, and no permission is required from Iran for the passage, although given the prevailing situation in West Asia, movements are being made based on safety assessments, a senior government official said Tuesday.

There has been considerable speculation that for ships to transit the fraught waters of the Strait of Hormuz they are being required to seek specific permissions from Tehran.

There was also speculation that certain vessels have had to pay millions of dollars to Iranian authorities to cross the Strait. Iran has dismissed such claims.

“No permission is required to sail through the Strait...

There is freedom for navigation through the Strait. Since the Strait is narrow, only the entry and exit lanes are demarked which need to be followed by shipping lines... it is the decision of the charterer and shipping company when to sail or when not to sail,” Shipping Ministry Special Secretary Rajesh Kumar Sinha said, adding that no fees is being paid for the passage of the ships.

Two India-flagged LPG tankers – Pine Gas and Jag Vasant – crossed the Strait on Monday, and are on their way to India. There are now 20



Two India-flagged LPG tankers, Pine Gas and Jag Vasant, crossed the war-hit Strait of Hormuz on Monday, and are on their way to India. PTI

India-flagged vessels with 540 Indian seafarers in the Persian Gulf, waiting to cross the Strait.

Of these, there are five LPG tankers with 2.3 lakh tonnes of LPG, while another empty LPG tanker has begun loading the fuel.

Other vessels stuck in the Persian Gulf include four crude oil tankers, one LNG tanker, one chemical products, three container ships, two bulk carriers, and three vessels undergoing routine maintenance.

INTERESTS, OBJECTIVES CONVERGE ON MOST FUNDAMENTAL ISSUES: COLBY

Trump dials Modi, both say keeping Hormuz open vital

India supports de-escalation, restoration of peace at the earliest: PM

Shubhajit Roy

New Delhi, March 24

A DAY after he paused for five days his threat of striking Iran's energy sites and announced initiation of talks behind the scenes with Tehran, US President Donald Trump called up Prime Minister Narendra Modi Tuesday and discussed the situation in West Asia "including the importance of keeping the Strait of Hormuz open".

This was their first phone conversation since the start of the war on February 28 when the US and Israel launched attacks on Iran.

Modi, in a post on X, said, "Received a call from President Trump and had a useful exchange of views on the situation in West Asia. India supports de-escalation and restoration of peace at the earliest. Ensuring that the Strait of Hormuz remains open, secure and accessible is essential for the whole world. We agreed to stay in touch regarding efforts towards

»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

MORE REPORTS, P9,16,18



An Indian Navy warship escorts two Indian-flagged LPG vessels, *Jag Vasant* and *Pine Gas*, which transited through the Strait of Hormuz. PTI

War hits rice bowl: MP's basmati exports to West Asia are stalled

Anand Mohan J

Bhopal, March 24

WHEN THERE was no war, the rice mills of Madhya Pradesh's Raisen district would hum through the night in March. The Pusa basmati, long-grained, fragrant, destined for the dinner tables of Tehran and Riyadh, would tumble through milling machines in the industrial clusters of Mandideep, Satlapur and Obedullaganj, getting sorted into cream and

»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

US to deploy elite airborne troops, Pak PM says ready to host Iran talks

Ariba Shahid, Rami Ayyub

& Alexander Cornwell

Islamabad, Jerusalem,

March 24

PAKISTAN'S PRIME Minister said Tuesday he was willing to host talks between the US and Iran on ending the war in the Gulf, a day after President Donald Trump postponed threats to bomb Iranian power plants, saying there had been "productive" talks.

However, the US was expected to deploy thousands of troops from the elite 82nd Airborne Division to the Middle East, two people familiar with the matter told Reuters Tuesday, adding to the massive military buildup in the region and fueling fears of a prolonged conflict.

»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

Business as Usual

By EP UNNY



Happening today

● The Government has called an all-party meet on the West Asia crisis. Defence Minister Rajnath Singh is likely to chair it.

US airborne troops

In a post on X, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif said Pakistan welcomed and fully supported ongoing efforts to pursue dialogue to end the war.

“Subject to concurrence by the US and Iran, Pakistan stands ready and honoured to be the host to facilitate meaningful and conclusive talks for a comprehensive settlement,” he said.

On the ground, there were no signs of conflict abating in the Gulf or Lebanon, where Israel is carrying out a parallel operation against the militant group Hezbollah, which has fired at Israel in support of its patron Iran.

An Iranian missile was intercepted over Lebanese airspace for the first time Tuesday, three senior Lebanese security sources said.

Airstrikes hit a headquarters of Iraq’s umbrella group for Iran-backed Shi’ite militias and a residence belonging to its leader Tuesday, killing at least 15 fighters in an escalation of US-Israeli strikes on one of Tehran’s main regional allies.

Iran denied that any talks had taken place following Trump’s comments on Truth Social Monday. Iran’s parliament speaker Mohammad

Baqer Qalibaf – described by an Israeli official and two other sources familiar with the matter as the interlocutor on the Iranian side – dismissed reports of direct talks as “fake news”.

Three senior Israeli officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, said Trump appeared determined to make a deal, although they viewed it as unlikely that Iran would agree to US demands. They said these were likely to include curbs on Iran’s nuclear programme and ballistic weapons development.

Three senior sources in Tehran said Iran’s negotiating stance had only hardened since the start of the war, under the growing influence of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, and that it would demand significant concessions from the US.

Iranian missiles triggered air raid sirens in Tel Aviv. There were no reported deaths.

Israel’s military said its fighter jets had carried out a wave of strikes in central Tehran Monday, targeting command centres including facilities associated with the IRGC’s intelligence arm and the Intelligence Ministry. It said it had hit more than 50 other targets overnight, including ballistic missile storage and launch sites. – REUTERS

India, U.S. needn't agree on all issues to work together: Pentagon official

Suhasini Haidar

NEW DELHI

India and the U.S. desire an Indo-Pacific in which no one power can dominate, a senior Pentagon official, who did not make any reference to the Quad while detailing the Trump administration's policy for the region, said on Tuesday.

The official, U.S. Assistant Secretary in the Department of War (formerly Department of Defense) Elbridge Colby, is visiting Delhi amidst the war in West Asia, and spoke a day ahead of his talks with Ministry of Defence officials in the Defence Policy Group on Wednesday. While his speech praised India as an "essential partner" in the region, he



Elbridge Colby

said both countries had differences but did not need to agree on everything to "cooperate effectively".

"America's objective is to build a partnership between two great republics that will form critical pillars of maintaining a favourable and stable balance of power in this critical region," Mr. Colby told an audience of diplo-

rats and foreign policy thinkers in Delhi. "A strong, confident India is not only good for the Indian people. It is good for Americans as well."

Strategic position

Mr. Colby added that India's importance in the Indo-Pacific region stems from its size and economic potential, and also from its geography and strategic position. "India possesses a long tradition of strategic autonomy and a growing capacity to shape events well beyond its borders. It is the largest republic in the world. Its success thus carries profound symbolic and political weight. It has formidable, self-reliant and capable military forces," he said.

Mr. Colby's comments come close on the heels of a controversial speech by U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Christopher Landau earlier this month, where he had said the U.S. would not support India's economic rise as it did with China in the 2000s.

While Mr. Colby's remarks may be an attempt at damage control, he is expected to face some difficult questions on U.S. strategy during his meetings in Delhi, as the visit comes three weeks into the U.S.-Israel war with Iran, and the resultant energy and fertilizer shortages in India. In addition, reports that the U.S. and Iran could use Pakistan as a mediator or as a venue for talks have been a cause for concern.

Iran, Israel trade strikes despite Trump's claims of negotiations

Israel carries out a 'large wave' of air strikes across Iran's territory, hitting what it calls military 'production sites' and energy infrastructure; Iranian missiles and drones strike Tel Aviv, wounding four; Tehran reports more than 1,500 dead in the war

Associated Press

DUBAI

Air strikes battered Iran, and Iranian missiles and drones targeted Israel's Tel Aviv and sites across the West Asia on Tuesday, even as President Donald Trump said the United States was in talks with the Islamic Republic to end the war.

With thousands more U.S. Marines on their way to the Gulf, both sides firing barrages and Iran denying any negotiations are taking place, the war's tempo remained high a day after Mr. Trump delayed his self-imposed dea-



Retaliatory strike: Israeli emergency service personnel gather at the site of an Iranian missile strike in Tel Aviv on Tuesday. AFP

decline for Iran to reopen the Strait of Hormuz. Tehran's chokehold on that crucial waterway has snarled international shipping, sent fuel prices skyrocketing,

and threatened the world economy. Pakistan offered to host diplomatic talks, but Iran remained defiant, vowing to fight "until complete victory".

Israel's army on Tuesday said it had conducted a "large wave" of air strikes across several areas of Iran, which had earlier launched a "direct hit" on a building in an upscale area of Tel Aviv. It added that it carried out an extensive series of strikes on Iranian "production sites," without providing more information.

Iranian media reported that Israeli-U.S. strikes targeted two gas facilities and a pipeline. "As part of the ongoing attacks carried out by the Zionist and American enemy, the gas administration building and the gas pressure regulation station on Kaveh Street in Isfa-

han were targeted," the *Fars* news agency said. It added that an attack also targeted the gas pipeline of the Khorramshahr plant. Iran's death toll has surpassed 1,500, its Health Ministry has said.

Iran also fired multiple waves of missiles at Israel. In Tel Aviv, a missile with a 100 kg warhead slammed into the city centre, blowing out windows of an apartment building. Four persons suffered minor wounds, rescue service workers said. Late on Tuesday, Israeli emergency services said a woman was killed in the north of the country following rocket fire from Lebanon.

Ex-Guardsman Zolqadr is Iran's new security chief

Stanly Johny

Mohammad Baqer Zolqadr, a veteran commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), has been appointed as the new Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council.

Mr. Zolqadr, who currently serves as the secretary of Expediency Discernment Council, an advisory body to the Supreme Leader, replaces Ali Larijani, who was assassinated by an Israeli strike on March 17.

"Zolqadr has been appointed to the top security chair by a direct presidential decree and with the endorsement of Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Mojtaba Khamenei," state-run Press TV reported.



Mohammad Baqer Zolqadr

He previously served as deputy chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces for Basij, a paramilitary organisation, and held senior positions in the judiciary.

Larijani, one of the most influential non-clerical politicians in Iran, had emerged as the face of the country's defiance after the U.S. and Israel started a war on Iran on February 28, assassinating Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.

Mr. Zolqadr, who fought the 1980-88 war against Saddam Hussein's Iraq, headed the IRGC Joint Staff for eight years during the presidency of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani.

In 2005, after Mahmoud Ahmadinejad became President, Mr. Zolqadr was named Deputy Interior Minister for security and police. He became an adviser to Chief Justice Sadeq Larijani in 2010, and appointed the deputy Judiciary chief for strategic affairs on 14 May 2012. He became the Secretary of the powerful Expediency Council in 2023, when Ebrahim Raisi was the President.

As the secretary of the Security Council, Mr. Zolqadr will play a key role in decision making at a time when Iran is at war against the U.S. and Israel.

NASA to spend \$20 bn on moon base, cancel orbiting lunar station

Reuters

Washington, March 24

NASA IS cancelling plans to deploy a space station in lunar orbit and will instead use its components to construct a \$20 billion base on the moon's surface over the next seven years, its new chief Jared Isaacman said on Tuesday.

Isaacman, who was sworn in at the agency in December, made the announcement at the opening of a day-long event at NASA's Washington headquarters at which he outlined a raft of changes he is making to the agency's flagship moon program Artemis.

"It should not really surprise anyone that we are pausing Gateway in its current form and focusing on infrastructure that supports sustained operations on the lunar surface," Isaacman told delegates at the event.

The Lunar Gateway station, largely already built with contractors Northrop Grumman and Lanteris Space Systems, owned by Intuitive Machines, was meant to be a space station parked in a lunar orbit. Repurposing the craft for a lunar sur-



It should not really surprise anyone that we are pausing Gateway in its current form and focusing on infrastructure that supports sustained operations on the lunar surface"

JARED ISAACMAN

NASA CHIEF

face base is not

"Despite some of the very real hardware and schedule challenges, we can repurpose equipment and international partner commitments to support surface and other program objectives," Isaacman said.

STRIKES, DEMOLITIONS EXPAND AMID HEZBOLLAH CLASHES

Israel's military to occupy swathe of southern Lebanon: Defence Minister

Says land up to Litani river will be in Israel control for 'defensive buffer'

Reuters

Tel Aviv, Beirut, March 24

ISRAEL WILL occupy southern Lebanon up to the Litani River to create a "defensive buffer", Defence Minister Israel Katz said on Tuesday, spelling out for the first time Israel's intent to seize territory amounting to nearly a tenth of Lebanon.

At a meeting with the military chief of staff, Katz said Israeli forces would "control the remaining bridges and the security zone up to the Litani," a river that meets the Mediterranean about 30 km north of Israel's border.

Lebanese armed group Hezbollah said it would fight to prevent Israeli troops from occupying southern Lebanon, calling such a move an "existential threat" to the Lebanese state.

Senior Hezbollah lawmaker Hassan Fadlallah said any Israeli occupation south of the Litani would be met with resistance.

"We have no choice but to confront this aggression and cling to the land," he told Reuters.

Israel has destroyed five bridges over the river since March 13 and accelerated the demolition of homes in Lebanese villages near the border,

part of what it says is a campaign against Hezbollah. Under international law, attacks on civilian infrastructure, including homes and bridges, are generally prohibited.

Katz has previously warned Lebanon's government it



Israeli soldiers stand beside military vehicles near the Israeli side of border with Lebanon, Tuesday, REUTERS

would lose territory if it failed to disarm Hezbollah, the militant group backed by Tehran that drew Lebanon into the US-Israeli war on Iran when it fired into Israel on March 2.

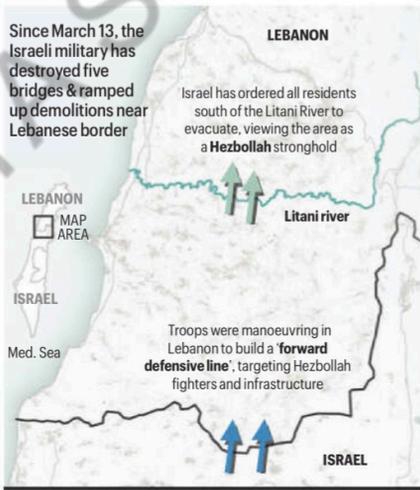
The Israeli military declined to comment on Katz's remarks. It has previously said ground troops were carrying out limited, targeted raids near the border. Israel has repeatedly invaded Lebanon in recent decades, and occupied the south until 2000.

Katz had said there could be no homes or residents in areas of southern Lebanon where there was "terror", referring to Hezbollah, whose fighters have continued to launch rocket and drone attacks into Israel and battle Israeli troops.

For the second time this week, Katz compared the approach to that taken by the Israeli military in Gaza, saying buildings near the border were being cleared "to create a defensive buffer and push the threat away from communities".

• The Israeli Incursion Into South Lebanon

Since March 13, the Israeli military has destroyed five bridges & ramped up demolitions near Lebanese border



Trump's Iran deadline was almost up, then he found an offramp

Tyler Pager, David E Sanger & Farnaz Fassihi
March 24

PRESIDENT TRUMP seized on initial contacts between Iranian and American officials to back away on Monday from his threat to strike power plants in Iran, declaring that the countries had begun "productive conversations" for the first time since the war began more than three weeks ago.

Iranian officials publicly denied that any negotiations about terms to end the war were underway, and American officials said the contacts were in a very early stage and not substantive.

But Trump used the opening of even an early dialogue as an offramp from the threat he issued Saturday to attack Iran's power plants in retribution for the closure of the Strait of Hormuz. Iran had vowed not to capitulate, and the 48-hour deadline Trump had set would have expired on Monday.

The President said he would now extend his deadline to Friday to give the talks time to proceed, setting off a flurry of diplomacy by a number of nations seeking to nurture the talks. It remained unclear, though, how seriously the White House was taking the potential for a breakthrough in a conflict that has seen both sides escalate for weeks.

"We're doing a five-day

period," Trump told reporters on Monday about his pause on hitting Iranian power plants, targets that are forbidden under most circumstances under the Geneva Conventions. "We'll see how that goes, and if it goes well, we're going to end up with settling this. Otherwise, we'll just keep bombing our little hearts out."

Even as Trump retreated from one military option, US and Israeli officials said they were continuing to carry out other strikes against Iran and more American military assets were headed to the region.

Officials said Trump was still weighing more aggressive operations,

including one to seize Kharg Island, Iran's main oil export hub, and another to send ground forces into Iran to secure highly enriched uranium.

Trump provided few details of the conversations with Iran beyond saying Jared Kushner, his son-in-law, and Steve Witkoff, his special envoy, were leading the negotiations. He said they were communicating directly with one of Iran's leaders, without naming the person.

Iranian officials denied Monday that they were negotiating with the US, and Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, the speaker of Iran's Parliament, wrote on social media that Trump's comments were an attempt to "escape the quagmire in which the US and Israel are trapped." NYT