

# Centre sets aside ₹57,381 cr. to offset 'global headwinds'

The **Economic Stabilisation Fund** from supplementary grants to provide fiscal space amid global uncertainties, says Finance Minister; Lok Sabha clears grant with around ₹2 lakh crore cash outgo

**T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan**  
NEW DELHI

**A**mid the \$100-per-barrel oil shock and fears of energy shortage and supply chain disruptions arising out of the West Asia conflict, the Centre has allocated ₹57,381 crore for an Economic Stabilisation Fund that would provide it fiscal space to address global headwinds, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said in the Lok Sabha on Friday. She was replying to the debate on the Second Supplementary Demand for Grants the government placed before Parliament.

The Lok Sabha on Friday passed the Centre's demand for a net cash outgo of ₹2.01 lakh crore, including the ₹57,381-crore allocation. Ms. Sitharaman

## Emergency response

The Lok Sabha on Friday passed the Centre's Second Supplementary Demand for Grants

■ Approval sought for gross additional expenditure of around **₹2.81 lakh crore**

■ Savings and receipts aggregates to around **₹80,000 crore**

■ Around **₹2.01 lakh crore** net cash outgo for additional expenditures

said the Centre would meet its fiscal deficit target for 2025-26 even after taking these fresh allocations into consideration. The Centre had sought approval for spending around ₹2.81 lakh crore extra in the current fiscal. With additional receipts of around



I want to highlight the point that the proposed Economic Stabilisation Fund will provide fiscal headroom to allow India to respond to the global headwinds

**NIRMALA SITHARAMAN**  
Union Finance Minister



₹80,000 crore estimated in the supplementary, the net additional cash spending will be ₹2.01 lakh crore.

### 'Strong framework'

The Minister said policy initiatives undertaken post COVID-19 "made sure that the economy recovered

well" and helped the government strengthen the macroeconomic framework. This has enabled the country to absorb economic shocks without deviating from the fiscal consolidation road map, she said.

"But I want to highlight the point that the proposed Economic Stabilisation Fund will provide fiscal headroom to allow India to respond to the global headwinds, such as the recent crisis, unanticipated supply chain disruptions, unexpected shocks to sub-sectors in the Indian economy and any other event that may have significant fiscal implications," Ms. Sitharaman said.

**CONTINUED ON**

» **PAGE 8**

**'SLIGHT CONCERN'**

» **PAGE 9**

# ₹57,381 cr. allocated to offset global headwinds

In her Budget speech on February 1, Ms. Sitharaman had stated that the government was targeting a fiscal deficit target of 4.4% of India's Gross Domestic Product.

The Finance Minister on Friday said the extra expenditure would not entail the Centre's fiscal deficit target being missed.

"I wish to reiterate that with all these extras that we are coming up with, whether it is technical supplementaries or cash supplementaries, I don't want any Member of Parliament to wonder if I will be able to reach the fiscal deficit number that I have said while placing the Budget," she said.

"The commitment given to this House, inclusive of the second supplementary demand for grants, will be within the fiscal deficit target that had been presented in this Parliament on February 1, 2026," she added.

# Maharashtra govt. tables Bill to ban 'unlawful conversions'

It proposes stringent provisions for conversions carried out through coercion, fraud, inducement, or marriage; objective to protect right to freedom of religion, says Minister while introducing Bill

**Vinaya Deshpande Pandit**

MUMBAI

The Maharashtra government on Friday introduced the Freedom of Religion Bill, 2026 in the Assembly during the ongoing Budget Session. "The objective of the Bill is to protect the right to freedom of religion. It also aims to prohibit unlawful religious conversions carried out through coercion, fraud, inducement, or marriage." Minister of State for Home Pankaj Bhojar said while introducing the draft law.

It proposes stringent provisions, including imprisonment of up to 10 years and a fine of up to ₹7 lakh, for forcible conversion. The Bill, which was cleared by the Cabinet last week, has courted controversy, with several civil society members seeking pu-



Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis (centre) arriving for the ongoing Budget Session of the Assembly in Mumbai on Friday. PTI

blic consultation, citing apprehensions about the curtailment of the rights of women and minorities.

Similar laws passed by States such as Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, and Uttarakhand have been challenged by civil rights groups in the Supreme Court.

The Bill has defined "allurement" as "any gift, gratification, easy money

or material benefit either in cash or kind; employment; free education in school or college run by any religious body or institution; promise to marry; better lifestyle, divine healing; portraying practice, rituals, and ceremonies or, any integral part of a religion in a detrimental way vis-a-vis another religion; and glorifying one religion

vis-a-vis another religion".

**'Police must file plaint'**

As per the Bill, it will be mandatory for the police to register a complaint filed by the converted person, their parents, brothers, sisters or any other person related by blood, marriage or adoption. "Any marriage solemnised with the sole purpose of unlawful conversion shall be declared as null and void by the court on a petition presented by either party to the marriage against the other party thereto," the Bill stated.

Children born out of a relationship due to unlawful conversion will be deemed to belong to the religion of the mother before such marriage or relationship. Custody of such a child will be with the mother unless the court decides otherwise, it added.

# Price pressures

India must find sources of sustainable energy to curb inflation

The new series of the Consumer Price Index (CPI), the second data release of which was issued on Thursday, does not yet have enough historical data for robust comparisons, but does include enough information to provide clues about the future. Retail inflation in India quickened to a 10-month high of 3.2% in February 2026, largely driven by food inflation and precious metal prices. This rise is something that the government should take note of early, avoiding any complacency that might have crept in due to the low inflation levels of the last year or so. Food has a lower weight in the new series as compared to the old one, but is nevertheless a major driver of inflation with a 36.75% weight in the overall CPI. Inflation in food and beverages rose to 3.35% in February from 2.1% in the previous month, driven by quickening price levels in the meat, oils, and fruits and nuts categories. Notably, inflation in tomato prices stood at more than 45%. Thankfully, this was accompanied by a contraction in prices of the two other staples – onions and potatoes – by 28% and 18%, respectively. A large part of the low inflation last year was due to a statistical base effect that is now gone. Looking ahead, there are various factors that could result in rapidly rising food inflation. The first is that climate scientists are predicting the return of the El Niño effect in the middle of the monsoon this year. A weak monsoon will naturally raise food prices. The second impact will depend on how long the conflict in West Asia continues. Sustained natural gas supply constraints will hurt fertilizer production, affecting food output and, eventually, prices.

The other factor that has driven inflation up, and which will likely remain a major driver in the near future, is the price of gold and silver. Gold jewellery saw inflation rise to 48.2% in February from an already-blistering 46.8% in January. Inflation in silver jewellery stood at more than 160% in both January and February. With global uncertainty and anxiety skyrocketing, the demand for safe-haven precious metals is not going to let up any time soon. Rising oil prices and LPG and LNG shortages are already raising input prices for industry, which will eventually be passed on to consumers. The Reserve Bank of India's Monetary Policy Committee has a tough job in its next meeting in April. Inflation is being driven by supply constraints, so trying to reduce demand by raising interest rates will not only have a minimal impact on inflation but could also further hurt growth when fuel constraints are already impacting it. The onus lies with the government and its efforts to expedite alternative sources of fuel.

# 193 INDIA bloc MPs submit notice for removal of CEC

The 10-page notice lists seven charges against Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar, including 'discriminatory conduct' and 'deliberate obstruction of investigation into electoral fraud'

**Sobhana K. Nair**

NEW DELHI

**T**he INDIA bloc MPs on Friday submitted a notice in both the Houses of Parliament seeking the removal of Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Gyanesh Kumar.

This is the first time that such a notice has been formally submitted in Parliament.

The 10-page notice lists seven charges against Mr. Kumar – ranging from

“partisan and discriminatory conduct in office” to “deliberate obstruction of investigation of electoral fraud”, and “mass disenfranchisement”. Opposition parties have accused the CEC of aiding the ruling BJP on several occasions, particularly during the special intensive revision (SIR), which they allege is being used to benefit the ruling party. They have cited examples from West



The rules require at least 50 MPs to sign the notice if it is moved in the Rajya Sabha and 100 if moved in the Lok Sabha. ANI

Bengal, Bihar, and other States where the SIR has been done.

The Trinamool Congress is considering releasing the transcript of its delegation's meeting with the Election Commission on February 2. After that meeting, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee had told reporters that Mr. Kumar had “humiliated” the delegation.

Article 324(5) of the

Constitution states: “Provided that the Chief Election Commissioner shall not be removed from his office except in like manner and on the like grounds as a Judge of the Supreme Court and the conditions of service of the Chief Election Commissioner shall not be varied to his disadvantage after his appointment.”

Under the Judges (Inquiry) Act, 1968, if notices for

such a motion are submitted in both Houses on the same day, no inquiry committee may be constituted unless the motion is admitted in both Houses. Once admitted, a committee must be constituted jointly by the Speaker of the Lok Sabha and the Chairman of the Rajya Sabha.

The rules require at least 50 MPs to sign the notice if it is moved in the Rajya Sabha and 100 if moved in the Lok Sabha.

The Opposition's notice exceeds these requirements, with 130 signatures in the Lok Sabha and 63 in the Rajya Sabha.

According to sources, the Trinamool Congress, which spearheaded the effort, debated whether to move the notice in only one House.

“[But] Opposition members of both Houses wanted to sign the notice to register their protest against the CEC's recent actions,” a senior leader said.

# Paid menstrual leave may hurt women's careers: SC

CJI distinguishes between creating a legally enforceable statutory right and a spontaneous act or policy from employers towards their women employees; court encourages voluntary initiatives

**Krishnadas Rajagopal**

NEW DELHI

**T**he Supreme Court on Friday expressed apprehensions that a law making paid leave during menstrual pain compulsory may damage the careers of young women and deprive them of equal opportunities.

“The moment you introduce this as a law and make it a compulsory condition, you may not be able to assess the amount of damage you may do to their career. Nobody may give them big responsibilities. In judicial services, people may not assign trials to them,” Chief Justice of India Surya Kant, heading a Bench comprising Justice Joymalya Bagchi, voiced doubts.

The court, at the same time, encouraged “voluntary” initiatives in this regard by States like Odisha, Karnataka, and Kerala,



which give leave to students in State-run universities and institutions up to 60 days annually for menstrual pain, and private entities.

Chief Justice Kant distinguished between creating a legally enforceable statutory right and a spontaneous act or policy from employers towards their women employees.

## Plea seeks directions

The court was hearing a petition filed by advocate Shailendra Mani Tripathi seeking a direction to the government to enact a uniform law for paid men-

strual pain leave to working women and students in consonance with their fundamental right to dignity under Article 21 of the Constitution. Mr. Tripathi said a judicial order was necessary to fill up this legal vacuum in the Maternity Benefit Act, 1961.

Mr. Tripathi said various private entities and NLIU Bhopal and MNLU Aurangabad had implemented menstrual leave policies. Punjab University has also approved and granted menstrual leave to the students.

Justice Bagchi said the court was in principle in

complete agreement with the petitioner's cause, and the “cause for affirmative action was recognised”. But it had to keep an eye on the “practical reality of the job market”. “We see from the rights’ regime, but look at it also from the business model. Will an employer be happy with the competing claims from the other gender?” Justice Bagchi asked.

Mr. Tripathi's petition had stressed the fact that India had signed and ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which recognises the need for non-discriminatory practices and for treating women with dignity.

“Countries like the United Kingdom, Wales, China, Japan, Taiwan, Indonesia, South Korea and Zambia have different policies or laws on the grant of menstrual leave,” the petition had said.

# OBC creamy layer: Why SC ruled against 'hostile'

Shyamlal Yadav

New Delhi, March 13

THE SUPREME Court on Wednesday ruled that income cannot be the sole criterion to decide the "creamy layer" among Other Backward Classes (OBCs), and settled the long-pending question of equivalence between public sector undertakings (PSUs) and private sector employees and those in the government sector. Those included in the creamy layer are not entitled to OBC reservation benefits.

## What the top court said

The Division Bench of Justices PS Narasimha and R Mahadevan held: "The object of excluding the creamy layer is... not to create artificial distinctions between equally placed members of the same social class.... unequal treatment of similarly placed OBC candidates would not only be legally erroneous but constitutionally impermissible."

The Bench was hearing petitions arising due to an October 14, 2004, letter issued by the Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT) with regard to the creamy layer criterion, clarifying an Official Memorandum (OM) issued on September 8, 1993. The OM noted who is classified as OBC and who belongs to the creamy layer among them.

## Creamy layer in OBC quota

The concept of creamy layer within the OBCs was introduced following the landmark 1992 SC ruling in *Indra Sawhney v. Union of India*, also known as the Mandal verdict.

For those in government jobs, the creamy layer specifies groups such as persons occupying constitutional posts; Group-A/Class-I officers of All India Services, Central services and state services; Group-B/Class-II services of Centre and state; employees of PSUs; officers of Armed Forces; professionals and those from trade and industry; property owners; and an income/wealth test. In a nutshell, if either parent is a direct recruit of Group-A, or is promoted before the age of 40, their children cannot take advantage of the OBC quota. Similarly, if both parents are Group-B direct recruits, their children will be covered under the creamy layer. The criterion for those not in the government sector was set at Rs 1 lakh per annum in 1993. It was revised in due course and since 2017, this income limit is Rs 8 lakh.

## *DoPT's clarification*

Para 9 of DoPT's October 2004 clarification said that "the creamy layer status of sons and daughters of persons employed in organisations where equivalence or comparability of posts vis-à-vis posts in Government has not been evaluated is determined as follows: Income of the parents from the salaries and from the other sources (other than salaries and agriculture land) is determined separately. If either the income of the parents from the salaries or the income of the parents from other sources (other than salaries and agricultural land) exceeds the limit of Rs 2.5 lakh per annum [as it was then] for a period of three consecutive years, the sons and daughters of such persons shall be treated to fall in creamy layer."

The court noted that while the OM had excluded income from salary and agricultural income from the income/wealth test for determination of creamy layer status, the October 2004 letter directed inclusion of salary income of PSU and private sector employees. This resulted in hostile discrimination between wards of government servants and those of PSU and private sector employees, "thereby attracting the rigour of the equality doctrine under Articles 14, 15 and 16." **FULL REPORT ON**

# Blast rocks Tehran as Iranians take out rally calling for 'Israel's demise'

Senior Iranian officials, including Pezeshkian, Larijani and Araghchi, attend the rally despite looming threat; Israel reports striking over 200 targets in Iran in 24 hours; IRGC warns of a stronger crackdown on anti-govt. protests than in January

## Associated Press

DUBAI

A large explosion rocked an area of Iran's capital where thousands were gathered on Friday for an annual state-organised rally to support the Palestinians and call for Israel's demise. Israel had warned that it would target the area in central Tehran.

There were no immediate reports of casualties. But the decision to proceed with the mass demonstration that was attended by some senior government officials, and Israel's threat to target the area, underscored the fierce determination on both sides nearly two weeks into a



Iranians take part in a protest marking the annual al-Quds Day, amid the U.S.-Israeli conflict with Iran, in Tehran on Friday. REUTERS

war that has rattled the global economy and shows no sign of letting up.

Iran has continued to launch widespread missile and drone attacks on Israel and neighbouring Gulf states. Smoke could be

seen rising from two locations around Israel's Tel Aviv, after blasts were heard following air raid sirens and a warning that missiles were fired from Iran. Iran's Revolutionary Guards earlier said they

had launched missiles and drones at Israel in coordination with Hezbollah.

The explosion in Tehran rocked the Ferdowsi Square area midday, where thousands had gathered for an annual Quds Day rally in which they chanted "death to Israel" and "death to America".

Senior security official Ali Larijani told Iranian media covering the rally that the suspected Israeli attack was a "sign of its desperation".

President Masoud Pezeshkian, Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi, judiciary chief Gholam Hossein Mohseni Ejei and national police chief Ahmad-Reza Radan also attended the rally.

Israel had earlier announced another wave of strikes in Iran targeting infrastructure, and said its air force had hit more than 200 targets in the last 24 hours, including missile launchers, defence systems and weapons production sites.

IRGC warned that any new anti-government protests would be met with a stronger response than in January.

Meanwhile, the U.S. State Department offered a \$10-million reward for information about Mojtaba Khamenei and other top officials. In an interview with *Fox News*, U.S. President Donald Trump said the war would end "when I feel it in my bones".

CHARTERED PLANE LEAVES KOCHI WITH SOME IRAN SAILORS, BODIES OF OTHERS KILLED IN U.S. ATTACK NEAR SRI LANKA

# Will try our best: Iran envoy on safe passage for India-bound fuel ships

Two LPG tankers are reported to be transiting Strait of Hormuz

Shubhajit Roy  
New Delhi, March 13

**SIGNALLING HEADWAY** in Delhi's efforts to persuade Tehran to let India-bound fuel ships transit the Strait of Hormuz, Mohammad Fathali, Iran's Ambassador to India, said Friday "we will try our best to remove the problems" and "I think you can expect good news in the near future".



Mohammad Fathali (right), Iran's envoy to India, and Abdul Majid Hakeem Ilahi, Supreme Leader's representative, in New Delhi. ANI

**2 INDIANS KILLED AS DOWNED DRONE FALLS IN OMAN CITY P 6**

The *Reuters* news agency reported that Iran had allowed two Indian-flagged LPG carriers to sail through the Strait of

Hormuz. Quoting sources, it identified the vessels as *Shivalik* and *Nanda Devi*.

»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

As BRICS chair, condemn attacks on Iran: Tehran's message to New Delhi

Along with Iran, grouping also has the UAE, Saudi Arabia as members

Shubhajit Roy  
New Delhi, March 13

TEHRAN IS learnt to have reached out to Delhi to take the lead in issuing a statement on behalf of the BRICS, currently chaired by India, condemning the US and Israeli strikes against

Iran in the last two weeks.

This has put Delhi in a diplomatic pickle since it has stayed away from taking sides in the ongoing conflict.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has spoken to leaders of the countries in the region

»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

# Will try our best: Iran envoy on passage for India-bound ships

Another report by *Reuters* said a chartered plane arranged by Iran departed Kochi late Friday, carrying some sailors from a naval vessel that had docked in India, as well as the bodies of crew members killed in a US submarine attack off Sri Lanka.

Speaking to reporters in New Delhi after an event to mark the Al-Quds Day, Fathali, on being asked whether Iran would allow India-bound ships safe transit through the Strait of Hormuz, said, "Yes. Because India and I are friends. You can see the future, and I think after two or three hours... Because we believe that. We believe that Iran and India are friends. We have common interests, we have common faith."

"Suffering of the people of India is our suffering and vice versa. And for this reason, the Government of India helps us, and we should help the Government of India because we have a common faith and common interest."

Sources in the government said there have been "multiple conversations at multiple levels" and "layers of conversation" between India and Iran over the past 24 hours. And, the negotiations are "delicately poised" since the lives of so many Indians are at stake.

Sources said it is "work in progress" and the intent is to get as many Indians out of the blocked waterway – there are

around 800 Indian seafarers on 28 ships stranded in the Strait of Hormuz.

While Iran maintains Tehran has not closed the Strait, sources said that insurance companies have not been guaranteeing the movement of ships in the last two weeks because of the volatile situation.

Fathali said, "We have a good relation with the Government of India, and our officials talked yesterday with the Indian government and its officials. I think we should pray to Allah to remove all the obstacles in different fields. As for your question, we will try our best to remove the problems. I think you can expect good news in the near future."

Asked about the phone conversations between leaders of India and Iran over the last few days, he said they have had "good conversations".

"And Mr (Narendra) Modi and Mr (Masoud) Pezeshkian believe that they should try their best. Because several times we have announced that we don't want war, but we are ready for war. Iran re-entered the negotiations with the United States, but unfortunately they disturbed and destroyed the negotiations. Now we are saying to all the governments that Iran doesn't want war, but Iran is ready for war," Fathali said, adding, "Iran prefers peace."

CHARTERED PLANE LEAVES KOCHI WITH SOME IRAN SAILORS, BODIES OF OTHERS KILLED IN U.S. ATTACK NEAR SRI LANKA

# Will try our best: Iran envoy on safe passage for India-bound fuel ships

Two LPG tankers are reported to be transiting Strait of Hormuz

Shubhajit Roy  
New Delhi, March 13



Mohammad Fathali (right), Iran's envoy to India, and Abdul Majid Hakeem Ilahi, Supreme Leader's representative, in New Delhi. ANI

2 INDIANS KILLED AS DOWNED DRONE FALLS IN OMAN CITY P 6

SIGNALLING HEADWAY in Delhi's efforts to persuade Tehran to let India-bound fuel ships transit the Strait of Hormuz, Mohammad Fathali, Iran's Ambassador to India, said Friday "we will try our best to remove the problems" and "I think you can expect good news in the near future".

The Reuters news agency reported that Iran had allowed two Indian-flagged LPG carriers to sail through the Strait of

Hormuz. Quoting sources, it identified the vessels as Shivalik and Nanda Devi.

»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

## As BRICS chair, condemn attacks on Iran: Tehran's message to New Delhi

Along with Iran, grouping also has the UAE, Saudi Arabia as members

Shubhajit Roy  
New Delhi, March 13

TEHRAN IS learnt to have reached out to Delhi to take the

lead in issuing a statement on behalf of the BRICS, currently chaired by India, condemning the US and Israeli strikes against

Iran in the last two weeks.

This has put Delhi in a diplomatic pickle since it has stayed away from taking sides in the ongoing conflict.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has spoken to leaders of the countries in the region

»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

# Condemn attacks on Iran: Tehran to Delhi

targeted by Iran, condemned the attacks and thanked them for looking after the Indian community “in these difficult times”.

On Thursday night, Modi spoke to Iran’s President Masoud Pezeshkian and expressed “deep concern over the escalation of tensions and the loss of civilian lives as well as damage to civilian infrastructure”.

In a post on X following the phone call, Modi said he “urged for dialogue and diplomacy” and “reiterated India’s commitment to peace and stability”.

External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar also spoke to his Iranian counterpart Seyed Abbas Araghchi Thursday night — their fourth conversation since the outbreak of hostilities on February 28. In a post on X Friday, Jaishankar said they “discussed bilateral matters as also BRICS related issues”.

The BRICS grouping has Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (the original five), along with Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Indonesia. Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which host US bases and personnel, have been targeted by Iranian missiles and drones. The fact that all three countries are in the BRICS has made diplomatic navigation difficult for India.

India, which holds the rotational presidency of the grouping for 2026, is expected to host the summit of BRICS leaders

later this year.

A readout by the Iranian government in Persian said Araghchi “briefed” Jaishankar on the situation arising from the “aggressions and crimes committed” by the US and Israel’s “Zionist regime” against Iran and its “consequences on the stability and security of the region and the world”. He emphasised the “firm will” of the Iranian government, people and armed forces to exercise the “legitimate right to self-defence against the aggressors”.

Araghchi, the Iranian readout stated, emphasised the need for international and regional forums and organisations to “condemn military aggression against Iran”. Underlining the “importance of the role and position of BRICS” as a forum for developing multilateral cooperation, he considered it necessary for this institution to play a “constructive role” at the “current juncture to support the stability and security of the region and the world”.

According to the Iranian readout of the phone call, Jaishankar, while announcing India’s readiness to develop bilateral and multilateral cooperation in regional and international forums, also emphasised the importance of “finding a way to strengthen stability and sustainable security in the region as a collective need”.

# U.S. grants waiver to other nations to buy Russian oil

## Press Trust of India

WASHINGTON

Amid rising oil prices, the Trump administration has announced a temporary authorisation to other countries to purchase Russian oil currently stranded at sea, as there were no immediate signs of an early end to the United States' war on Iran.

The U.S. had granted a similar waiver from sanctions to India to buy Russian oil as part of efforts to cool down oil prices that have been on the rise since the outbreak of war on February 28.

"@POTUS is taking decisive steps to promote stability in global energy markets and working to keep prices low as we address the threat and instability posed by the terrorist Iranian regime," U.S. Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent



The narrowly tailored, short-term measure applies only to oil already in transit, says U.S. Treasury Secretary. REUTERS

said in a post on X on Thursday.

On March 5, the U.S. had issued a 30-day waiver allowing India to buy Russian oil, having previously imposed heavy sanctions related to the war in Ukraine.

"To increase the global reach of existing supply, @USTreasury is providing a temporary authorisation to permit countries to pur-

chase Russian oil currently stranded at sea," Mr. Bessent said.

He said this narrowly tailored, short-term measure applies only to oil already in transit and will not provide significant financial benefit to the Russian government, which derives the majority of its energy revenue from taxes assessed at the point of extraction.



# US refueller deployed for combat mission crashes in Iraq, 6 killed

Reuters

Washington, March 13

ALL SIX crew members aboard a US military refueling aircraft that crashed in western Iraq are confirmed to have been killed, the US military said on Friday.

A US military refueling aircraft crashed in western Iraq on Thursday, in an incident the military said involved another aircraft but was not the result of hostile or friendly fire.

The deaths add to the seven US service members who have already been killed as part of US operations against Iran which began on February 28.

“The circumstances of the incident are under investigation. However, the loss of the aircraft was not due to hostile fire or friendly fire,” a statement from US Central Command said.

A US official told *Reuters* that the second aircraft involved in the crash, which landed safely, was also a military refueling aircraft known as the KC-135.

The United States has deployed a large number of aircraft into the Middle East to take part in operations against Iran and the incident highlights the risk of not just operations, but of refueling aircraft in the air.

The KC-135, built by Boeing

## • WHAT IS THE KC-135 STRATOTANKER



A F-16 fighter jet being refuelled by a KC-135 Stratotanker. FILE

**BUILT BY** Boeing in the 1950s, the KC-135 Stratotanker has long been the backbone of the US Air Force's aerial refueling fleet.

**CRITICAL IN** enabling other aircraft to refuel midair, allowing them to carry out long missions without landing.

**ACCORDING TO** the Congressional Research Service, the Air Force had 376 KC-135 aircraft in service last year. A typical KC-135 operates with a crew of three.

in the 1950s and early 1960s, has served as the backbone of the U.S. military's air refueling fleet

**THE AIRCRAFT** is gradually being phased out as the next-generation Boeing KC-46A Pegasus tankers enter service

**BESIDES REFUELLING** missions, KC-135s have also been used for medical evacuations, transporting wounded personnel, and for surveillance operations.

**HAS PREVIOUSLY** been involved in several accidents, with the most recent before the latest crash occurring on May 3, 2013. **REUTERS**

and is critical to allowing aircraft to carry out missions without having to land.

# Indian-flagged LPG carrier crosses the Strait of Hormuz: tracking data

The *Shivalik*, with a cargo-carrying capacity of more than 54,000 tonnes, had departed from Ras Laffan, Qatar, on March 7 and was originally destined for the U.S.; three Indian cargo ships are located in the Gulf of Oman and 23 in the Persian Gulf

**M. Kalyanaraman**  
CHENNAI

The *Shivalik*, an Indian-flagged LPG carrier with a cargo-carrying capacity of more than 54,000 tonnes, has crossed the Strait of Hormuz as on Friday night, according to marinetraffic.com, an online portal that tracks merchant ships movement. As per the website, the ship had departed from Ras Laffan, Qatar, on March 7 and was originally destined for the U.S. The Indian Navy has denied reports that the *Shivalik* is being guided by naval vessels.

The LPG carrier is owned by the Shipping Corporation of India.

The *Shivalik*'s 55,000 tonnes of cargo could amount to nearly one day of India's LPG imports. The *Shivalik* and the *Sahyadri*, another LPG carrier, were inducted into the SCI's fleet in August-September of 2025. The *Shivalik* was among the 24 ships that were stranded upstream of the Strait of Hormuz since the conflict started on February 28.

At a briefing on Friday, a



senior government official said that of the 28 Indian-flagged ships in the Persian Gulf-Gulf of Oman region that had stopped moving with the start of the West Asia conflict on February 28, one oil tanker bound for Africa, *Jag Prakash*, had started moving.

The *Jag Prakash*, an oil products tanker with a carrying capacity of 48,000 tonnes cargo and owned by Great Eastern Shipping Company, was among the four ships stranded east of the Strait of Hormuz. This means that, unlike the *Shivalik*, it did not have to cross the

strait that the newly elected Iranian Supreme Leader Mojtaba Khamenei has said must remain closed. The *Jag Prakash* loaded at Sohar port in Oman, and its original destination was Tanzania.

Three more Indian-flagged cargo ships with 76 seafarers aboard are still located in the Gulf of Oman, while the 23 ships inside the Persian Gulf west of the Strait of Hormuz continue to remain stranded, according to officials.

Shipping industry leaders have been expecting relief and indications from

the government advising ships to move at sea after Prime Minister Narendra Modi spoke to Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian on March 12. But the government had said the same day that it was premature to expect Iran to allow Indian ships to cross the strait.

At a media briefing on Friday, Rajesh Kumar Sinha, Special Secretary, Shipping and Waterways Ministry, said there were 23,000 Indian nationals working in the Persian Gulf region on merchant ships, ports, and offshore vessels. The Directorate General of Shipping was in constant touch with them and all relevant stakeholders, he said. Four Indian sailors have been killed in attacks since the beginning of the war.

## In the crosshairs

Crossing the volatile strait carries risks that shippers are unwilling to bear. When the conflict started, some 600 ships were reportedly stranded in the region because of fear of attacks.

*Shenlong*, the crude oil carrier carrying one mil-

lion barrels of oil that docked in Mumbai on Wednesday, had crossed the strait on March 8. Reports have described the perilous journey it undertook to cross the strait in a region where GPS spoofing and jamming are commonly deployed as war tools. Such measures can confuse ships by giving false locations. The ship had apparently gone into "digital darkness" and used manual navigation to safely cross the strait.

When equipped with the Automatic Identification System (AIS) that identifies the vessel and can make the ship easy to track, it puts the carriers in danger of attacks, says Richard Meade, editor-in-chief of *Lloyd's List*, a maritime information journal.

"We have observed 77 transits across the Strait of Hormuz since March 1, half of whom were 'shadow fleet'. Iranian ships carrying fuels continue to cross the strait. Seventeen were 'dark transits', which means the AIS of the ship was switched off, and some of them were mainstream fleet vessels such as *Shenlong*," he said.

# Amid oil supply crunch, the big winner – Russia



SUKALP SHARMA

THIS WAR has no winners, except maybe one that is not even fighting in it.

As Iran effectively chokes off the Strait of Hormuz in its escalating response to the US and Israel's attacks, Russia is making a windfall on the back of the reduced supply of crude oil as well as its spiralling prices. According to a *Financial Times* report, Moscow is estimated to have earned around \$150 million a day in extra oil revenue since the effective closure of the narrow transit passage for a fifth of the world's energy supplies.

“Till a few days back, millions of barrels of Russian crude were languishing on the high seas with few willing buyers, thanks to US efforts to starve Moscow of oil revenues that could fund the Ukraine war. Now, America's own war against Iran has taken precedence. After issuing a 30-day “waiver” to Indian refiners last week for buying Russian crude that is already sitting in tankers on water, the US has now extended it to other countries too.

“To increase the global reach of existing supply, @USTreasury is providing a temporary authorization to permit countries to purchase Russian oil currently stranded at sea. This narrowly tailored, short-term measure applies only to oil already in transit and will not provide significant financial benefit to the Russian government, which derives the majority of its energy revenue from taxes assessed at the point of extraction,” US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent posted on social media platform X.

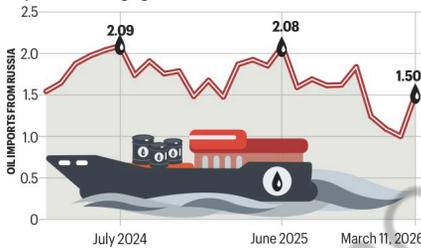
## How does Russian oil waiver work?

The easing of sanctions, which will be in place for a month, means that the US will have no problem if countries import Russian crude that was loaded on or before 12:01 am eastern daylight time, or 9:31 am India time, on March 12.

While this move could help other countries secure some oil supplies, it is likely to help New Delhi as well as the India-specific waiver was for oil loaded on tankers before March 5.

## • Uneven flow

In recent months, India significantly cut down oil imports from Russia, its largest supplier. Now, amid the US waiver, imports are rising again. (FIGURES IN MILLION BARRELS PER DAY)



According to industry watchers, the US could be forced to ease sanctions further on Russian crude if the disruption to the global oil supplies via the Strait of Hormuz persists for an extended period.

Experts see these moves from Washington as part of Donald Trump's effort to prevent a further and sustained spike in international oil prices — and the consequent rise in domestic fuel prices in the US — given the midterm elections later this year.

“So far, there is only one winner in this war — Russia. It steadily undermines Ukraine's position by flouting international law. It gains new resources to finance its war against Ukraine as energy prices rise,” European Council President António Costa said earlier this week at the European Union Ambassadors Conference in Brussels.

And while Bessent said in his X post on Friday that the temporary easing of sanctions on Russian oil on water will not provide significant financial benefit to Moscow, he said earlier that the financial gains Russia would accrue would be “unfortunate”.

## How has Russia benefited?

The West Asia war has led to a spurt in crude oil prices, which remain extremely volatile. At noon on Friday, benchmark Brent crude was around \$100 per barrel, almost 37% higher than nearly \$73 per barrel just before the US and Israel launched military strikes on Iran on February 28. So, like any other oil producer who is able to sell crude in this market, Russia gains from



An oil tanker hit by an Iranian strike at Khoral-Zubair port in Iraq, Wednesday. AP

Millions of barrels of Russian crude were languishing on the high seas. It is now in high demand as the war chokes energy flows & price spirals

India, which has been facing a slowing economy and expanding budget deficit owing to its Ukraine war expenditure.

## How is India affected?

With the conflict — now into its second week — suspending traffic through the Strait of Hormuz, India's Russian oil imports have shot up. In the first 11 days of the month, India imported 1.5 million barrels per day (bpd) of Russian oil, up around 50% from February levels, as per ship tracking data from Kpler. These volumes could increase if regular West Asian oil volumes through the strait are not resumed soon. Around 2.5-2.7 million bpd of India's crude imports — accounting for around half of the country's total oil imports — have crossed the strait in recent months; the longer-term average is around 40%. This oil is mainly from Iraq, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Kuwait.

India had, in recent months, significantly cut down its oil imports from Russia, its largest oil supplier, amid trade negotiations with the US, as Washington made it a prerequisite for scrapping its 25% additional penal tariff (see chart).

In February, India had imported just over one million bpd of Russian crude, almost half of the 2025 peak of over 2 million bpd. Loadings of Russian crude for Indian ports, which averaged 1.7 million bpd last year, was just 0.7 million bpd in February. India is the world's third-largest consumer of crude oil and depends on imports to meet over 88% of its oil requirement.

But now the US is counting on India to buy more Russian oil. On Wednesday, Ambassador Sergio Gor said: “India has been a great partner in maintaining stable oil prices around the world. The United States recognizes ongoing purchases of Russian oil are a part of this effort. India is one of the largest consumers and refiners of oil and it is essential for the United States and India to work hand in hand for market stability for Americans and Indians.”

A senior government official had said last week that India never stopped buying Russian crude, and the “waiver” appeared to be more for Washington's own legal and procedural requirements.

“What the waiver does is reduce some of the uncertainty around the trade and could potentially open the door for other Asian buyers who had stayed away (from Russian oil) since 2022,” said Ritolia.

higher oil prices. But that's not all. The price of Russian crude grades — mainly its flagship Urals — have appreciated more given the availability in an otherwise tight market and buyer interest.

Russian oil used to trade at a discount to crude benchmarks. The discounts have now largely disappeared, and there are reports of Russian oil even selling at a premium in some cases. Add to that the fact that the easing of sanctions by the US has made large volumes of Russian crude kosher for international buyers.

Around 130 million barrels of Russian crude was estimated to be on ships on water as of early March. Some of those volumes would have already been gobbled up by India and China, the biggest buyers of seaborne Russian crude. Additional volumes are likely to have come on water over the past couple of weeks as well.

“From a market perspective, Russian crude currently acts as one of the best supply hedges for Asian refiners. With persistent risks around the Strait of Hormuz and Middle East supply routes, refiners in Asia are naturally looking for barrels that are more secure and priced competitively, and Russian crude fits that role,” said Sumit Ritolia, Lead Research Analyst, Refining & Modeling at Kpler, a commodity market analytics firm.

All this means Russia could rake in billions of dollars more as the war continues. And the longer the West Asian oil flows remain constricted, the more it benefits Rus-

## Surge price

At this stage, the US waiver on buying Russian oil does not change much for countries such as India, China and Turkey, which were already buying despite sanctions.

But now, increased competition for Russian barrels could lead to even higher prices.

# US Navy could escort vessels in the Strait with international coalition, says Bessent

Reuters

London, March 13

THE US Navy, perhaps with an international coalition, will escort vessels through the Strait of Hormuz when it is militarily possible, US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent told *Sky News* in an interview on Thursday.

“My belief, that as soon as it is militarily possible, the US Navy, perhaps with an international coalition, will be escorting vessels through,” Bessent said.

The plan to escort ships would go ahead as soon as the US has “complete control of the skies and... (Iran's) rebuilding capabilities for the missiles completely degraded,” he said.

US and Israeli strikes on Iran and the subsequent response by Tehran have widened regional tensions and paralyzed shipping through the Strait of Hormuz, disrupting vital Middle East oil and gas flows and sending energy prices higher.

Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps says it will block oil shipments from Gulf unless the



**“My belief, that as soon as it is militarily possible, the US Navy, perhaps with an international coalition, will be escorting vessels through the Strait”**

**SCOTT BESSENT,**  
US TREASURY SECRETARY .

**US and Israeli attacks cease.**

“There are tankers coming through now, Iranian tankers, some Chinese flag tankers... So we know that they have not mined the straits,” Bessent said.

China pledges \$200,000 for victims of Iran school bombing

**Press Trust of India**  
*Beijing, March 13*

CHINA ON Friday said it will provide \$200,000 in emergency humanitarian assistance to the students killed in an airstrike on an elementary school in Iran in the ongoing joint US-Israel attacks on the country.

China expresses deep condolences regarding the deaths of students in the recent attack on an Iranian elementary school and extends sincere sympathies to their families, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Guo Jiakun said at a media briefing.

Red Cross Society of China has decided to provide the Iranian Red Crescent Society with USD 200,000 in emergency humanitarian assistance, he said.

“China is willing to continue to offer necessary support to Iran in the spirit of humanitarianism to help the Iranian people overcome the difficulties,” Guo said.

China condemns all indiscriminate attacks against civilians and non-military targets. Targeting schools and harming children constitute a severe violation of international humanitarian law, he added.

FPIs HAVE NET SOLD INDIAN SHARES WORTH \$5.73 BILLION SO FAR THIS MONTH

# Why FPIs are dumping Indian stocks, pulling rupee down

Siddharth Upasani  
New Delhi, March 13

At a time of global market volatility, investors tend to cut down on the risks they are exposed to and withdraw from emerging markets, such as India. Staying invested in a foreign asset where the currency is weakening can hurt returns for foreign investors in terms of their own currency, such as the US dollar.

This, in essence, is why Foreign Portfolio Investors (FPIs) have continued to dump Indian shares amid the war in West Asia and volatile crude oil prices, dragging down the Indian rupee, which hit a new all-time low of 92.48 per dollar on Friday.

Foreign investors have sold Indian shares on a net basis every day since Israel and the US attacked Iran on February 28.

So far this month, FPIs have net sold Indian shares worth \$5.73 billion. This is the most that foreign investors have pulled out from Indian markets in 14 months, even though less than half the month is over.

The last time FPIs sold more was in January 2025, when net outflows amounted to just over \$9 billion. Since the start of 2025, FPIs have been net sellers of Indian shares in 10 out

of 15 months.

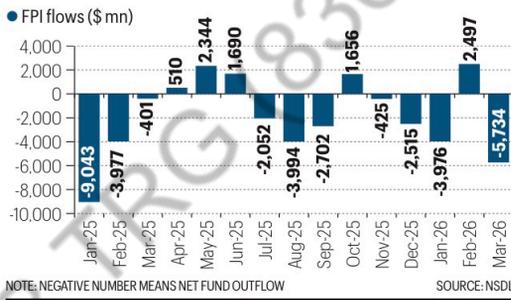
Sale of Indian assets denominated in the rupee lowers demand for the Indian currency and cuts its value.

As such, the continued sale of Indian shares and other assets such as government bonds by foreign investors leads to the rupee's fall as it constitutes an outflow of foreign money from India — similar to the impact of a widening trade deficit from more expensive oil.

"We downgrade India to neutral as the equity market enters a delicate phase," Hou Wey Fook, CIO of Singapore-based DBS Bank, said on Friday. "While growth, policy support and demographics remain supportive, rising risks warrant a more cautious view. AI disruption is weighing on the IT services sector, while export-oriented industries face intensifying competition from China and Southeast Asia, particularly in autos and auto components amid rising costs and EV pressures," he said.

The exit of foreign money from Indian shares has not been limited to the stock market. Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) — seen as a more stable form of foreign investment than in the

## • FPI outflows at 14-month high



stock market — into India saw net outflows in three of the last four months of 2025 as per latest available data from the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) — well before the conflict began

in West Asia.

In fact, the Economic Survey for 2025-26, which was tabled in Parliament on January 30, had warned that the paradox of 2025 had been that India's "strongest macroeconomic performance in decades has collided with a global system that no longer rewards macroeconomic success with currency stability, capital inflows, or strategic insulation". As a result, the

rupee's valuation did not accurately reflect India's "stellar economic fundamentals", which was causing investors to pause. The rupee, which fell below 90 and 91 per dollar in December, breached 92 earlier this month. And if crude oil prices remain elevated and average \$100 per barrel in 2026-27, economists expect the rupee to weaken further.

According to a scenario analysis by QuantEco Research's economists, if oil averages \$100 per barrel in the next fiscal, the rupee could weaken to as much as 98.5 per dollar.

While the fall in Indian stock markets has been sharp — Sen-

sex and Nifty 50 dropped more than 5% this week, marking their biggest weekly fall in nearly four years — it has been lower than in some other markets, such as South Korea's Kospi, which have been riding high on the AI wave.

While the Sensex and Nifty 50 are down around 9% since February 26, the Kospi has crashed by more than 13% over the same period despite gaining ground in recent days.

"What makes the South Korean selloff stand out is its severity," Dave Chia and Stefan Angrick of Moody's Analytics said in a note. "The drop after the outbreak of the conflict is broadly comparable to the decline seen after US President Donald Trump announced his 'Liberation Day' tariffs last April. In most other APAC economies, equity losses have been far less pronounced. The main exceptions are Thailand and Indonesia." According to Japanese investment bank Nomura, Thailand is the most vulnerable Asian country to the shock from Iran's closure of the Strait of Hormuz, followed by South Korea and India. Analysts expect Indian markets to stay volatile in the near term as tensions in West Asia keep energy prices elevated and sentiment fragile.

---

# Rupee settles at new record low of 92.3 against U.S. dollar

**Ashokamithran T.**

MUMBAI

The rupee depreciated to a fresh low of 92.3 a dollar after the Iran's new Supreme Leader Mojtaba Khamenei said that the Strait of Hormuz (SoH) would remain closed, keeping oil prices

sticky at over \$100 a barrel.

Rupee traders sold to hedge their holdings from further depreciation.

"Rupee was once again saved by RBI as the fall was limited to just 29 paise despite fourth continuous day of a 300 point (Today 500 points) fall in Nifty," said

Anil Bhansali, Executive Director and Head of Treasury, Finrex Treasury Advisors LLP.

India is fighting hard to manage the show by sourcing oil and gas from various countries and has been successful till now with no shortage of either

petrol or diesel reported, although there have been reports of some LNG shortage, he said.

The rise in prices would also affect the country's CAD as well as fiscal deficit and if the war continued for long, this would carry on next year as well, Mr.

Bhansali added.

"Crude oil prices surged yesterday, with WTI rising above \$97/bbl and Brent approaching \$102/bbl, driven by escalating geopolitical tensions in West Asia and concerns over prolonged supply disruptions through the Strait of Hor-

muz. The rally followed the first public statement by Khamenei, who reiterated that keeping the Strait of Hormuz closed should remain a strategic tool to pressure the U.S. and Israel," said Kaynat Chainwala, AVP Commodity Research, Kotak Securities.

---

# U.S. launches fresh probe into India, 59 other economies over 'forced labour'

## The Hindu Bureau

NEW DELHI

The U.S. has launched a fresh investigation into 60 countries, including India, to look into whether these countries have failed to ban the import of goods made using forced labour, the office of the U.S. Trade Representative announced late on March 12.

The new investigation is under Section 301(b) of the Trade Act, 1974. This is the same section under which

the USTR launched a different investigation on March 11 on India and 15 other nations to examine whether they use excess manufacturing capacity to export to the U.S. to the detriment of American firms.

While the first investigation was on 16 countries, the second one's scope covers 60 of the U.S.' largest trading partners.

According to the U.S. Trade Representative Jamieson Greer, the investigations will determine

whether foreign governments have taken "sufficient steps" to prohibit the import of goods produced with forced labour and how the "failure to eradicate" these abhorrent practices impacts U.S. workers and businesses.

If the results of the investigation warrant it, the U.S. can use this to levy tariffs on countries it has found have failed to take sufficient steps to ban the import of goods made using forced labour.

"Despite the international consensus against forced labour, governments have failed to impose and effectively enforce measures banning goods produced with forced labour from entering their markets," Mr. Greer said. "For too long, American workers and firms have been forced to compete against foreign producers who may have an artificial cost advantage gained from the scourge of forced labour."



## India and Seychelles carry out joint military exercise

The ongoing 11th edition of the **India-Seychelles Joint Military Exercise LAMITIYE-2026**, being conducted at the **Seychelles Defence Academy** from March 10 to 22, witnessed professional exchanges and joint training aimed at strengthening defence cooperation between the two countries. The exercise marks the first tri-services edition, bringing together personnel from the Indian Army, Navy and Air Force alongside the Seychelles Defence Forces. The training focuses on enhancing interoperability in sub-conventional operations in semi-urban environments, particularly within the framework of United Nations peacekeeping missions.