

22 India-bound ships on Hormuz evacuation list

Of these, 20 vessels have been assessed as critical to India's energy security, carrying over 5 lakh tonnes of LNG, LPG and 16.76 lakh tonnes of crude oil; many agencies join hands for evacuation

M. Kalyanaraman

CHENNAI

Twenty-two India-bound vessels in the Persian Gulf region have been identified for evacuation for safe passage through the Strait of Hormuz by the Indian government.

Of these, 20 vessels have been assessed as critical to India's energy security, carrying some 2.15 lakh metric tonnes of LNG, 3.21 lakh tonnes of LPG and 16.76 lakh tonnes of crude oil. These vessels are both Indian-flagged and foreign-flagged but all are bound for India.

Among the 20 energy-critical vessels, 10 are Indian-flagged. The 20 vessels include three LNG carriers, 10 LPG carriers, and seven crude oil tankers.



Indian-flagged vessel *Jag Laadki* carrying approximately 81,000 MT of crude oil, berthed at Adani Port, Mundra on Wednesday. ANI

Marshall Island, Liberia, Greece, Malta and Portugal are some of the other flags these ships carry.

In addition, two Indian-flagged container vessels have also been identified for evacuation to ensure safe passage through the Strait of Hormuz.

Coordination is ongoing

with the Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways; Directorate of Naval Operations (DNO); Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas (MoPNG); and the Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region for the evacuation of the vessels from the Persian Gulf region.

Two LPG carriers and

one oil tanker – *Shivalik*, *Nanda Devi* and *Jag Laadki* – were evacuated earlier, escorted by the Indian Navy from the Gulf of Oman region. The three ships have reached India. The two LPG ships were carrying some 97,000 tonnes of the fuel. Navy sources had told *The Hindu* that the escorting will continue in future as well.

Shivalik has been partially discharged at Mundra and is awaiting commencement of ship-to-ship operations by the charterer, IOC. *Nanda Devi* has doubled-banked with *BW Birch* for ship-to-ship transfer at Vadinar. Cargo operations are expected to start soon.

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22 India-bound ships on Hormuz evacuation list

Crude carrier *Jag Laadki* that was escorted by the Indian Navy reached Mundra Port earlier on Friday. It was carrying approximately 81,000 metric tonnes of Murban crude oil from the United Arab Emirates. The vessel narrowly escaped damage when the Fujairah terminal where it was loading was attacked.

Some 23,000 Indian seafarers are stranded in the Persian Gulf, of whom 658 are on Indian-flagged vessels. Some 472 seafarers have been evacuated by various shipping companies from the Gulf region so far, as per the government.

In total, 22 Indian vessels are in the Persian Gulf region, west of the Strait of Hormuz; two in the Gulf of Oman, east of the strait; one in the Gulf of Aden; and two in the Red Sea. Of these, the government-owned Shipping Corporation of India owns six, of which five are in the Persian Gulf and one in the Gulf of Aden.

No Indian ship has been attacked so far in the conflict in West Asia. But three Indian seafarers have died, four have been injured, and one reported missing in foreign-flagged vessels.

Government sources said that seven West Asia-bound vessels were waiting at major ports and five in other ports in India.

(With inputs from Saptaparno Ghosh)

China-bound Russian oil tanker diverted to India

Aqua Titan, carrying 7.7 lakh barrels of crude, makes U-turn in Southeast Asia, to reach Mangalore port on Friday; analyst says ship is a part of the 'dark fleet' mostly controlled by the Russian state

Debayan Tewari

Anil Kumar Sastry

CHENNAI/MANGALURU

A crude oil tanker that set sail from Primorsk in Russia for Rizhao port in China has changed course in Southeast Asia and is now heading towards the New Mangalore port with 1.1 lakh tonnes (7.7 lakh barrels) of Urals crude, showed ship-tracking data. The ship is expected to reach Mangaluru on March 20.

According to marine-traffic.com, *Aqua Titan*, a Cameroon-registered tanker, left the Russian port on January 18. It anchored at Port Suez and departed on February 21, showed vesselfinder.com.

Sources in the New Mangalore Port Authority (NMPA) told *The Hindu* that *Aqua Titan's* arrival would boost the confidence of the refiner, Mangalore Refinery and Petrochemicals Ltd. (MRPL). They said with one tanker already discharging Russian Urals crude at the Single Point Mooring (SPM) on Wednesday, the NMPA would receive at least three more tankers by month-end.

Ships originating from



A tanker discharging crude oil at the Single Point Mooring of New Mangalore Port dedicated to MRPL off Mangaluru. FILE PHOTO

Primorsk usually take the route via Suez Canal to reach India's west coast on the Arabian Sea. But ship-tracking website Equasis said the *Aqua Titan* was seen in North Europe and West Europe in January, South Asia in February, Southeast Asia and Singapore Strait in March, indicating that it circumvented India and then made a U-turn in Southeast Asia to head to India.

Usually, chartered ships do not change course midway. But the *Aqua Titan* is a sanctioned vessel. "This is a highly sanctioned fleet owned by the Russian government... so the transparency is even worse. Essentially, the dark fleet vessels are controlled by the Russian state in the end," said

Erik Grundt, senior analyst, Rystad Energy, an energy intelligence company based in Norway.

Apparently, the vessel made a U-turn in mid-March after the U.S. said India could import Russian crude for 30 days.

Saudi crude on the way

With the closure of the Persian Gulf, Saudi Arabian crude is now being diverted through the Yanbu Port that houses King Fahd Industrial Port on the Red Sea, NMPA sources said. Yanbu, located on the Western Coast of Saudi Arabia, has the East-West Petroline Terminal. Though longer, the route avoids the volatile Strait of Hormuz thereby offering a safe passage to tankers.

While one oil tanker with 1.36 lakh tonnes of crude left Yanbu on Tuesday, another was being loaded with 2.6 lakh tonnes of crude for Mangalore. With crude from two Russian tankers and two from Saudi Arabia, the MRPL will have enough stock. The refiner, with an installed capacity of refining 18.2 million tonnes of crude per annum, roughly requires about 1.5 million tonnes of crude a month.

So far in March, the NMPA has handled two tankers at the SPM and three coastal crude vessels at the main port, sources said.

Ever since the conflict began in West Asia affecting supply of petroleum products to India, the Mangalore port has waived cargo charges both for crude and LPG tankers, they added. For one lakh tonne crude, the cargo charges would come to around ₹34 lakh. Vessel-handling charges, however, would continue to be collected. For LPG Tanker *Shivalik* that was supposed to arrive at New Mangalore Port with 26,000 tonnes of LPG, the port had promised to waive ₹50 lakh cargo charges.

Plastic goods prices to rise 60% as war impacts polymer

Prices of polymer, derived from crude oil and natural gas, have risen by 50-60% creating margin pressure; plastic manufacturers managing with stocks procured prior to W. Asia war outbreak

Lalatendu Mishra

MUMBAI

Plastic product prices are expected to rise by 50-60% from April if the West Asia crisis continues to impact supply of key raw material, mainly crude oil, industry officials said. They said the prices of polymer, derived from crude oil and natural gas, have risen by 50-60% in the last few days, creating margin pressure.

Plastic manufacturers said they are yet to fully pass on the additional financial burden to customers as they are managing with the inventory procured well before the war broke out. But stocks are fast depleting, they said.

“Manufacturers are procuring raw material based on the order on a day-to-day basis and pricing the supplies based on the raw material price,” said Sunil Shah, president, All India Plastics Manufacturers’ Association (AIPMA).



Burden of cost: The price of a small water bottle, which is ₹2 now, is expected to go up to more than ₹3. R. VENGADESH

“The cost of a small water bottle is about ₹2 and if prices rise it would cost more than ₹3. It all depends on the bottled water brand to either absorb that cost or pass it on to buyers. Similarly, the price of a 20-litre plastic water bottle, which is about ₹110 now, can go up sharply,” industry officials said.

Confirming that polymer prices had gone up over the last few weeks, Arvind M Mehta, chairman, All India Plastics Manufacturers

Association said despite the price hike, exports could continue. “For exports, we are positive because our international competitors will have the same raw material price,” Mr. Mehta said. The increasing cost of packaging materials has also threatened to inflate the price of food items in the retail market. Rice producers in Kangayam, a rice mill hub in Tamil Nadu, said the bags they used to pack 26 kg of rice used to cost ₹23 a

piece. Now, it is ₹29 a piece. “We have local suppliers who get the packing material in rolls and stitch it for us according to our requirement. There is a delay in getting those bags too. We buy another type of bag from Gujarat. The prices of both these varieties of bags have shot up,” said Palaniswamy, president of the Kangayam Rice Mill Association.

The oil mill owners in Kangayam said they pack edible oil in plastic bottles or pouches. A bottle that used to cost ₹10 is now sold for ₹15. The oil mills have told their bulk buyers that they may increase the end product prices if this continues for a month. In Tiruppur, leading brands and all hosiery manufacturers for the domestic market have announced that hosiery products will be priced ₹7 more apiece as the cost of inputs have shot up.

(With inputs from Soudariya Preetha in Coimbatore)

Stranded Indian students use Armenia, Azerbaijan to exit war-ravaged Iran

Officials say 150-odd Indians have crossed Iran-Azerbaijan border to return home in the past 24 hours; parents in Kashmir express happiness over opening of route, but anxious over slow pace

Suhasini Haidar

Peerzada Ashiq

NEW DELHI/SRINAGAR

Stranded Indian students, mostly from Kashmir, are being allowed to use the twin routes of Armenia and Azerbaijan to exit the war-torn country of Iran and head for New Delhi.

However, the slow pace of evacuation has left several parents anxious over their wards' safety.

According to officials, about 151 Indians have crossed the Iran-Azerbaijan border to return to India in the past 24 hours.

Parents in Kashmir have expressed satisfaction over the opening of the Azerbaijan route.

"Earlier only those students whose medical colleges were close to Armenia managed to exit Iran. The Azerbaijan corridor could prove helpful in the fast evacuation of stranded students. However, the pace is slow," said Khalid Jamal, a relative of a



Parents of Kashmiri students in Iran have been demanding urgent evacuation of their children from the war-torn country. IMRAN NISSAR
stranded student.

It is for the first time since diplomatic ties with Azerbaijan were strained during Operation Sindoor that India has decided to reach out to Baku to improve the relations. Meanwhile, officials said the two countries are in touch to address the issue of stranded students.

Official sources said the pace of evacuation could be slow because Azerbaijan has restricted the num-

bers of those fleeing Iran, apparently "to conduct thorough checks".

Officials said about 10 stranded nationals of a particular nationality are allowed to cross in a day.

According to parents in Kashmir, around 250 Kashmiri students were stranded at the Azerbaijan border and many were complaining of chest infections and influenza.

"Several students were not receiving medicine.

Many do not have money with them. A group of around 18 students with tickets for March 14 was allowed. Besides, those having tickets for the 18th, 19th, and 20th were also allowed. However, students with tickets for the 15th, 16th, and 17th remain stranded," said Suhail Muzamil Qadri, father of a stranded student.

'Not allowed to cross'

Tracking the evacuation of the stranded, Dr. Mohammad Momin Khan, vice president of the All India Medical Students Association, said, "Several students are stuck at the border. They are not being allowed to cross. Several have also suffered financial losses as their flight tickets got wasted due to the uncertainty."

Over 1,000 students from J&K are believed to have enrolled in different professional courses in Iran. Scores of students have returned to J&K over the past few days.

India's future demographic challenges

A new report by the International Institute of Migration and Development and the Population Foundation of India titled 'Unravelling India's Demographic Future: Population Projections for States and Union Territories, 2021-2051', underscores the demographic risks that are beginning to surface nationwide. India's population is projected to increase from 1,355.8 million in 2021 to 1,590.1 million in 2051, with an average annual increase of 0.5%, suggesting a prolonged period of slower population expansion. These figures fall below earlier estimates, strengthening the case that India is unlikely to face the threat of population explosion that once dominated political and academic debates. These projections point to a turning point, where India is poised to move beyond a youth-led, fast-expanding population into an era of a more urban, steadily ageing, and balanced demographic structure.

A problem for schools

The projections point out that the pre-primary school-going population (0-4 years) is expected to dwindle from 113.5 million in 2021 to 8.6 million by the middle of this century. Since most regions in the country are now close to universal primary school enrolments, the demand for new schooling facilities could ease out, especially in the government sector. A sustained drop in fertility could leave the country with an escalating number of 'uneconomic schools' (schools with lesser enrolment rates that cannot justify their economic costs), raising the threat of teachers losing their jobs, a trend that the State of Kerala has seen play out for more than three decades.

Evidence from different parts of the country suggests that declining fertility rates have already started influencing schooling requirements, with classrooms adjusting to smaller cohorts. Data from the Unified District



S. Irudaya Rajan

Chair, International Institute of Migration and Development, Kerala



J. Retnakumar

Senior Research Fellow, International Institute of Migration and Development, Kerala

The growing elderly population is set to exert increasing pressure on healthcare and social security, thereby putting a strain on the state's finances

Information System for Education and the Ministry of Education highlights a significant reduction in the number of government schools over the last decade, with schools dropping from 11.07 lakh in 2014-15 to 10.18 lakh in 2023-24, amounting to a reduction of close to 90,000 schools across the country. This decline has been accompanied by a sharp increase in private schools; their numbers grew from 2.88 lakh to 3.31 lakh over the same period, an increase of 43,000 schools.

While falling birth rates have led to a reduction in enrolments and closure of government schools, smaller families and improved capacity to afford education have propelled the demand for private schools. Many parents choose private schools in the hope of giving their wards the education they never had in life, nudged by social pressure and a common perception that government schools generally fall short on quality compared to private schools.

Greying population

As the demographic dividend largely depends on the working age population (15-59), a relatively higher proportion of this specific group can lead to faster economic growth, a dynamic evident in the development phases of several countries, including China, Japan, and South Korea. India has one of the world's largest workforces, rising from 833.8 million (65.2%) in 2021 to a projected peak level of 1,009.0 million (65.5%) in 2041, before declining to 998.1 million (62.8%) by 2051. There is an impending concern that the demographic dividend window will close after 2041, highlighting the urgency of leveraging it before its contribution to economic growth starts to diminish.

Nevertheless, close to six out of every 10 persons in the country are expected to be part of the workforce by 2051, which is an encouraging sign.

However, India's population is ageing. In 2021, India's elderly

population (60+) stood at 130.5 million or 9.62% of the population. By 2051, this number is projected to touch 325.3 million (20.5%), highlighting that there will be a profound increment in the ageing population. The median age, a measure that splits the population evenly by age, is projected to climb from 28 years in 2021 to 40 by 2051, signalling India's shift towards a more advanced stage of demographic transition. The growing elderly population is set to exert increasing pressure on healthcare and social security, thereby putting a strain on the state's finances.

Policy signals

The declining child population is expected to offer a better teacher-pupil ratio and expand infrastructural facilities in schools. Further, declining birth rates reduce demand for maternity care, allowing the healthcare system to rationalise the use of resources and offer better quality care. Though fertility levels have been falling, continued investments are required for family planning and to prevent unintended pregnancies, as well as to reduce infertility and ensure the reproductive rights of women.

India needs to overhaul its education and skill development system to cope with modern-day challenges. It should also equip the younger generation to seize new opportunities before our demographic leverage disappears in the coming decades. The decline in the working-age population can be offset by bringing in more women to formal work (gender dividend) and by expanding access to better-quality employment. With the rapid growth of the elderly population, India's financial and healthcare systems, especially geriatric care, must be redesigned to support the growing needs of elderly citizens. At the same time, this creates a strong potential for a thriving silver economy, and could help in unlocking a second demographic dividend in the future.

Sri Lanka to welcome and support refugees: Minister

Meera Srinivasan

COLOMBO

Sri Lanka is ready to receive and support all those forced to flee the country during the civil war and now living as refugees in Tamil Nadu, Cabinet Minister and Leader of the House Bimal Rathnayake told *The Hindu*, urging the Governments of India and Tamil Nadu to refrain from using refugees as “a tool for political propaganda”.

The Minister made the remarks when queried about the government’s current position on refugee-returnees from Tamil Nadu, in the wake of Chief Minister M.K. Stalin’s letter – dated February 15, 2026 – to Prime Minister Modi seeking the Union government’s intervention on issues concerning Sri Lankan Tamils living in India for over four decades. Apart from requesting New Delhi to rescind administrative instructions barring consideration of citizenship applications from Sri Lankan Tamils, Mr. Stalin sought an executive clarification waiving passport and visa requirements, where appropriate, for citizenship or long-term visa applications based on verified identity documentation issued by the Tamil Nadu government. According to Mr. Stalin’s letter, around 89,000 individuals reside in and outside camps across Tamil Nadu. Nearly 40% of them were born there.

Pointing out that 18,542 persons returned from Tamil Nadu to Sri Lanka in the 16-year period from January 2009 to June 2025, Mr. Rathnayake said: “We are certainly ready to welcome those who wish to return. However, if some of



Bimal Rathnayake

them, born in India, or who have lived, studied, and worked there for decades, or married an Indian, decide to seek Indian citizenship, we cannot argue with that position. It is their reality and their right to seek citizenship there.” Further, in a message to political actors in India, he said: “My humble request to the Government of India and the Government of Tamil Nadu is that please don’t use the refugees as a tool for political propaganda around elections.”

‘Humane solution’

A prominent voice in the Anura Kumara Dissanayake administration, Mr. Rathnayake, who is a polit bureau member of the leftist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) or People’s Liberation Front, had visited refugee camps in Tamil Nadu in 2007, and pushed the Sri Lankan government to pass a law granting citizenship to 28,500 persons living in the camps. In May 2025, when former Jaffna MP and senior lawyer M.A. Sumanthiran highlighted the arrest of a 75-year-old Sri Lankan Tamil refugee returning from India, on charges of leaving the island without a valid passport, Mr. Rathnayake said the government would address the matter.

Mr. Stalin’s letter to PM Modi drew wide attention

in Sri Lankan media and among politicians. Mano Ganesan, Opposition MP and leader of the Tamil Progressive Alliance – representing the Malaiyaha Tamils – called for a “permanent, humane solution”. “Sri Lankan refugees living inside and outside settlements in India need clarity, not decades of uncertainty. Give them a dignified choice... a generation born, educated and integrated in India deserves justice. Others deserve freedom of choice,” he said in a social media post.

Last week, speaking in New Delhi at a screening of *Frontline* journalist R.K. Radhakrishnan’s documentary on refugees, Mr. Sumanthiran, General Secretary of the Ilankai Tamil Arasu Katchi (ITAK), said that while the diminishing number of Tamils in Sri Lanka may not favour the Tamil polity trying to strengthen its constituency, “this is an exceptional situation.” Those who wish to remain in India must have the option, he said, adding that “in international law, nobody should be a stateless person.”

Authorities said a total of 246 persons from 46 families returned from India to Sri Lanka between July 2025 and February 2026, with no arrests reported during the time. S. Sooriyakumari, president of OfERR (Organisation for Eelam Refugees’ Rehabilitation) Ceylon, a non-profit organisation working with Sri Lankan refugee communities, said the Sri Lankan government must clear administrative hurdles, facilitate easy paperwork, and ensure smooth reintegration of those returning.

Mass funeral for victims of Kabul rehab centre; Afghanistan & Pak declare pause in fighting for Eid

Associated Press
Kabul, March 18

AFGHANISTAN AND Pakistan announced Wednesday a temporary pause in fighting ahead of the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Fitr. Both countries said Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar requested the pause in hostilities.

The announcement came two days after Afghan officials said an airstrike by Pakistan hit a drug rehabilitation hospital in Kabul and killed hundreds of people. Authorities in Kabul held a mass funeral for some of the victims of the strikes.

Pakistan has rejected Afghanistan's accusation that it targeted the Omid Addiction Treatment Hospital, insisting its strikes in Kabul and eastern Afghanistan Monday had been against military facilities. It has dismissed Afghan claims of hundreds of casualties as propaganda.

Islamabad was the first to declare the provisional halt of strikes. Afghan government spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid made a similar announcement later Wednesday.

In a statement, Pakistan's Information Minister Attaullah Tarar said the pause in strikes would take effect at midnight Wednesday and remain in place until midnight Monday.

"Pakistan offers this gesture in good faith and in keeping with the Islamic norms," he said. However, he added, "in case of any cross-border attack, drone attack or any terrorist incident inside Pakistan," the operations will immediately re-



Bulldozers dig graves for victims of an airstrike on a drug rehabilitation hospital in Kabul on Wednesday. AP

sume with renewed intensity.

Eid al-Fitr marks the end of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

Monday's attack in Kabul was the deadliest in an escalating conflict between the two neighbors, now in its third week. Afghan officials have put the death toll at 408 people, with 265 wounded.

The toll could not be independently verified.

The conflict between Afghanistan and Pakistan has seen repeated cross-border clashes as well as airstrikes inside Afghanistan, including several in the capital, since it began in late February, despite international calls for a ceasefire.

Pakistan accuses Afghanistan of providing a safe haven for militants who carry out attacks inside Pakistan, especially for the Pakistani Taliban. The group is separate but closely allied with the Afghan Taliban,

who took over Afghanistan in 2021 in the wake of the chaotic withdrawal of US-led troops. Kabul denies the charge.

Bulldozers dug pits in a Kabul cemetery ahead of Wednesday's mass funeral, which Health Ministry spokesman Sharafat Zaman said was for more than 50 people whose remains could not be identified.

Light rain fell as ambulances lined up outside the cemetery and began unloading dozens of plain wooden caskets. Some contained the remains of more than one person, Zaman said.

The 2,000-bed Omid hospital was hit at around 9 p.m. on Monday. It had been renamed and expanded in size roughly a year ago from a previously existing treatment facility as part of the Taliban government's efforts to stamp out a significant drug addiction problem in the country.

OVER 900 KILLED; 8,00,000 FORCED TO FLEE THEIR HOMES, SAYS LEBANON

Israel intensifies strikes on Beirut; Iran seeks new Hormuz protocol

Airstrikes target several buildings in Lebanon belonging to Hezbollah

Reuters
Beirut, March 18

ISRAEL STEPPED up airstrikes on Beirut on Wednesday, killing at least 10 people and destroying a 10-storey building near the city centre in the third week of its war with Iran-backed Hezbollah, Lebanese authorities said.

In a further escalation, Israeli warplanes began striking bridges over the Litani River that link southern Lebanon to the rest of the country, destroying at least two of them, Lebanese state media said. The Israeli military said it would target bridges on the Litani to prevent Hezbollah transferring fighters and weapons, and reiterated a warning for residents to leave the south.

The Hezbollah-Israel conflict has become the deadliest spillover of the US-Israeli war on Iran since the Iran-backed group fired at Israel in support of Tehran on March 2, with more than 900 people killed in Lebanon and 1 million displaced.

Thousands have also been wounded. Dr Wael Mroueh, the head of the Jabal Amel University Hospital in the southern port city of Tyre, said, "Victims

are coming without lower extremities, (needing a) craniotomy, with open wounds and all those things together."

Araghchi: Need new protocol for Hormuz

Iran's stance against the development of nuclear weapons will not significantly change, Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi told *AlJazeera* in remarks relayed by Iranian media on Wednesday, cautioning that the new supreme leader is yet to publicly express his view on the matter.

The foreign minister said he believed that after the war end, countries that border the Gulf should draft a new protocol for the Strait of Hormuz, to ensure that safe passage through the narrow waterway is carried out under certain conditions aligned with Iranian and regional interests.

Iran shut the vital energy gateway, through which a fifth of global oil and liquefied gas passes, saying it "won't even allow a litre of oil" to reach the US, Israel and their partners.

On Tuesday, Iran's parliament speaker said on X that the Strait of Hormuz' situation won't return to its pre-war con-



An explosion at a building in central Beirut after an Israeli strike on Wednesday. AP

ditions. Asked about Iranian strikes in the Gulf not only targeting US military bases but also impacting residential, the foreign minister said, "Wherever there were American forces gathering, and had facilities belonging to them, they were targeted. It is possible some of these places were near urban areas."

IAEA: Structure close to Bushehr reactor hit

The International Atomic Energy Agency confirmed

on Wednesday that a structure 350 meters from Iran's Bushehr nuclear power plant reactor was hit and destroyed. There was no damage to reactor itself nor injuries to staff, Director General of the IAEA Rafael Grossi said.

Safe corridor to free 20,000 seafarers

A proposal from the UN's shipping agency on Wednesday calls for a safe maritime corridor to free some 20,000

seafarers stranded in the Gulf by war in Iran. Hundreds of vessels dropped anchor since Tehran threatened to attack ships attempting to leave the Gulf via the Strait of Hormuz.

The proposal submitted by Bahrain, Japan, Panama, Singapore and the UAE and backed by the US called for "a framework such as a safe maritime corridor". It was submitted at a meeting of the UN's International Maritime Organization governing council in London.

Israel strikes Iran gas field, kills intel minister

Brent crude prices rose around 5% to above \$108. Stock markets veered lower.

Pars is the Iranian sector of the world's largest natural gas deposit, which Iran shares with Qatar across the Gulf.

Iran's Fars news agency reported that gas tanks and parts of a refinery had been hit, workers had been evacuated to a safe location and emergency crews were trying to put out a fire. State media later said the fire was under control.

The attack was widely reported in Israeli media to have been carried out by Israel with US consent, though neither country acknowledged immediate responsibility. The Israeli military did not respond to requests for comment.

Qatar, a close US ally which hosts the largest US airbase in the region, blamed the attack on Israel without mentioning any US role. The Qatari foreign ministry spokesperson called it a "dangerous and irresponsible" escalation that put global energy security at risk. The UAE also denounced the attack.

Iran listed an array of prominent regional oil and gas targets belonging to Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar, which it said were now "direct and legitimate targets" and should be evacuated at once before it struck them in the coming hours.



Medical aid from India delivered to the Iranian Red Crescent Society in Tehran, Wednesday. ANI

Iran's warning was directed at Saudi Arabia's Samref Refinery and Jubail Petrochemical Complex, the UAE's Al Hosn Gas Field, and Qatar's Mesaieed Petrochemical Complex, Mesaieed Holding Company and Ras Laffan Refinery.

The Israeli military also hit central Beirut, destroying apartment buildings in some of the most intense airstrikes on the Lebanese capital for decades, on Israel's other front in the war it launched with the US against Iran.

Israel killed Iran's intelligence minister Esmail Khatib on Wednesday, a day after killing powerful security chief Ali Larijani.

"No one in Iran has immunity and everyone is in the cross-

hairs," said Defence Minister Israel Katz. He and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had authorised the Israeli military "to target any senior Iranian official for whom an intelligence and operational opportunity arises, without the need for additional approval", Katz said.

It appeared to be the first time Israel has publicly stated that it would let the military target enemy officials without seeking special permission from political leaders.

In Tehran, thousands of people appeared in the streets for a funeral for Larijani and other slain figures. The crowd waved Iranian flags and carried portraits of the dead as a eulogist sang: "Martyrs are leading the way, they've become

E. EXPLAINED

Key energy fields

The South Pars in Iran and the North Field in Qatar together constitute the world's largest natural gas field, critical for global energy supplies. It supplies Iran's domestic energy and ensures Qatar remains a leading LNG exporter.

more alive, burning with love."

Iran retaliated for the killing of Larijani by firing missiles at Israel, which Israeli authorities said killed two people near Tel Aviv. Tehran said it fired overnight on Tel Aviv, Haifa and Beersheba in Israel, and at US bases in Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Mojtaba Khamenei, Iran's new supreme leader, said those responsible for Larijani's death would pay for his blood.

Several loud bangs were heard in the Saudi capital Riyadh on Wednesday and some of its residents received phone alerts for the first time warning them of a hostile aerial threat, a Reuters witness in the city said. State TV said Saudi air defences had dealt with a "ballistic threat".

—REUTERS

'Dark' transit: 90 ships cross the Strait as Iran exports millions of barrels of oil despite conflict

Associated Press

Hong Kong, March 18

ABOUT 90 ships including oil tankers have crossed the Strait of Hormuz since the outset of the war with Iran and it is still exporting millions of barrels of oil at a time when the waterway has been effectively closed, according to maritime and trade data platforms.

Many of the vessels that passed through the strait were so-called "dark" transits evading Western government sanctions and oversight that likely have ties to Iran, maritime data firm Lloyd's List Intelligence said. More recently, vessels with ties to India and Pakistan have also successfully crossed the strait as governments stepped up negotiations.

As crude prices spiked above \$100 a barrel, US President Donald Trump pressured allies and trade partners to send warships and reopen the strait, hoping to bring oil prices lower.

Most shipping traffic through the Strait of Hormuz, a waterway for global oil and gas transport that supplies roughly one-fifth of the world's crude oil, has been halted since early March, after the war started. About 20 vessels have been attacked in the area.

However, Iran has still managed to export well above 16 million barrels of oil since the beginning of March, trade data and analytics platform Kpler



Oil tankers and cargo ships line up in the Strait of Hormuz as seen from Khor Fakkan, United Arab Emirates, on March 11, 2026. FILE

estimated. Due to Western sanctions and associated risks, China has been the biggest buyer of Iranian oil.

There has been "continued resilience" in Iran's oil export volumes, said Kpler trade risk analyst Ana Subasic.

Iran has managed to profit from oil sales and also "preserve its own export artery" by using control over the chokepoint, said Kun Cao, client director at consulting firm Reddal.

Iran's oil export data estimates are largely aligned with maritime traffic data.

At least 89 ships crossed the Strait of Hormuz between March 1 and 15 – including 16 oil tankers, according to Lloyd's List Intelligence, down from roughly 100 to 135 vessel passages per day before the war. More than one-fifth of the 89 vessels were believed to be Iran-affiliated, while Chinese and

Greece affiliated ships are among the rest, it said.

Other vessels also have been getting through.

The Pakistan-flagged crude oil tanker Karachi, controlled by the Pakistan National Shipping Corp., passed through the strait on Sunday, Lloyd's List Intelligence said.

Shariq Amin, a spokesman at the Pakistan Port Trust, refused to confirm or deny which route the MT Karachi had used but he said the ship would soon safely reach Pakistan.

The India-flagged liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) carriers Shivalik and Nanda Devi, both owned by state-owned Shipping Corp. of India, also traveled through the strait around March 13 or 14, according to Lloyd's List Intelligence. LPG is used as a primary cooking fuel by millions of Indian households.



RAJAN KUMAR

BRICS should step in, restrain US-Israel

WEST ASIA continues to be trapped in a deadly conflict with no end in sight. Most recently, Iran's security chief, Ali Larijani, and the paramilitary force Basij's commander, Gholamreza Soleimani, have been killed. The conflict has claimed over 1,300 lives, energy prices have hit the roof, and global security is at stake. But the global response remains tepid and perfunctory, marked by strategic ambivalence and risk aversion. The world is drifting towards disorder in the absence of collective action, owing to leadership paralysis. European leaders have abdicated their obligations, while the leaders of the Global South are reluctant to coordinate a joint response. Every state is apprehensive of disrupting its ties with Washington and souring relations with the unpredictable US President Donald Trump.

The central dilemma facing every state is: Who will bell the cat? Every state recognises the threat to global security, but each remains averse to initiating action, fearing punitive measures by Washington and uncertain outcomes. The middle powers expect the powerful countries to assume leadership, while the powerful states fear entrapment and uncertain support from the middle powers. Two sets of actors have economic and diplomatic capabilities to change the course of the war and restore the global order: The European coun-

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tries and the leaders of the Global South. But unfortunately, while Europe does not want to disrupt its alliance with Washington, BRICS countries appear equally apprehensive of antagonising Trump and thus prefer strategic restraint.

The European states do not view this as a necessary war, and most of them ignored Trump's exhortation to join it. Kaja Kallas, EU foreign policy chief, stated that Europe feels slighted because it was not consulted and because the US has no clear objectives. Trump expressed his displeasure with most NATO members because they refused to deploy their militaries to ensure free navigation in the Strait of Hormuz. However, their action is unlikely to move beyond non-cooperation. No European state blamed Trump squarely for initiating a war. In contrast, European states and experts were quick to blame the Iranian regime. Compared to the European stance on Russia, its posture on Iran is revealing. It invoked international law and sovereignty in condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but is restrained even in using words against the US.

More striking, however, is the absence of strong statements and condemnations from the BRICS countries. The war has entered its third week, and there is a serious risk of escalation, but BRICS has not issued a joint statement condemning the US-Israel action. For an organisation whose politics

centres around countering Western hegemony and which draws legitimacy from the Global South, its inaction is woefully inadequate. In a modest statement, it called for a ceasefire and urged dialogue and consultation. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation issued a joint statement without naming or blaming anyone.

Ideally, BRICS should have taken concrete measures immediately. BRICS members — including the UAE, a US ally — have diverse interests. However, powerful actors such as China, Russia, India, and Brazil have higher stakes in global stability. BRICS states reiterate the cause of sovereignty and non-interference at every multilateral forum, but when it comes to concrete measures, their approach is lacklustre. In such a scenario, its credibility becomes suspect. It must not allow the world to hurtle towards a disorder where the powerful do what they can while the weak suffer what they must.

As the chair of BRICS, it is incumbent upon India to mobilise members. The Trump administration is not worried about the EU, given its dependence on the US. However, the combined strength of Brazil, Russia, India, and China will certainly serve as a deterrent. The question is: Will the leaders of these countries put aside their differences and coordinate action to send a powerful message? One cannot be sure.

The writer is professor, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi