

# Challenging times, says PM on West Asia crisis

Modi warns against politicising the issue, says the region is a major centre of India's energy needs, and due to the ongoing war, a 'crisis' regarding petrol and diesel is emerging around the world

**The Hindu Bureau**

NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday noted that the situation in West Asia had created "challenging times" and called for those "politicising" the issue to refrain from doing so. He cautioned Indians against believing rumours related to the crisis.

Speaking during his monthly *Mann Ki Baat* address, the Prime Minister said that following the COVID-19 pandemic, it was expected that the world would move forward on a path of renewed progress.

"However, situations of war and conflict have continuously kept arising in different parts of the world," he said.

"At present, a fierce war has been going on in our neighbourhood for a month. Millions of our family members, near and dear ones, live in these countries, especially working in the Gulf countries."

## Deeply grateful

"I am deeply grateful to the Gulf countries for providing all kinds of assistance to more than one crore Indians there," he added.

Mr. Modi noted that the



I would once again urge all my countrymen that we must unitedly overcome this challenge. Those who are politicising even this issue should refrain from doing so. This is a matter concerning the interests of 140 crore countrymen; there is no place for self-serving politics.

**NARENDRA MODI**  
Prime Minister



West Asian region is a major centre of India's energy needs, and due to the ongoing war, a "crisis" regarding petrol and diesel is emerging around the world.

"These certainly are challenging times," he said. "I would once again urge all my countrymen that we must unitedly overcome this challenge. Those who are politicising even this issue should refrain from doing so. This is a matter concerning the interests of 140 crore countrymen; there is no place for self-serving politics."

"Therefore, those who are spreading rumours are causing a major harm to the country," Mr. Modi added. "I would also appeal to all citizens to remain vigilant and not be misled by rumours. Trust only the

continuous information provided by the government and take action based only on that."

## Key initiatives

During his address, the Prime Minister also took note of various initiatives aimed at nation-building.

One such initiative was the Gyan Bharatam Survey aimed at collecting information about manuscripts across the country.

"If you have a manuscript or information about it, do share its image on the Gyan Bharatam App," Mr. Modi said, adding, "Information related to each entry is being verified before it is recorded. I am glad that thousands of manuscripts have been shared so far."

Another initiative he highlighted was MY Bharat

Budget Quest. "It aims to connect the youth across the country with the Budget process and policymaking," the Prime Minister said. "Nearly 12 lakh youth from across the country participated in the quiz."

## Sports achievements

The Prime Minister also devoted a section of his address to India's sporting achievements in the recent past.

"When India achieved a historic victory in the T20 World Cup, a wave of joy swept across the country," he said. "We are all very proud of our team's thumping success."

"Late last month, a thrilling match was witnessed in Hubli, Karnataka. By winning this match, the Jammu and Kashmir cricket team secured for themselves the Ranji Trophy," he said. He remarked that this success for Jammu and Kashmir will encourage many young people to take up sports, adding that the people of J&K have a "tremendous passion" for sports. "I am glad that it is now becoming a hub for major sporting events," Mr. Modi said. "I hope this winning streak of J&K sports persons continues in the future."

# 7 foreigners held: Court agrees with NIA, says need to probe drone objective, rebel link

Nirbhay Thakur

New Delhi, March 29

WHY DID they come to India? What was the objective behind using drones? Was any rebel ethnic group linked to them?

A special court in Delhi has said that these are the key questions that the NIA needs to investigate as it proceeds against seven foreign nationals — six Ukrainians and an American — arrested on March 13 and booked in an alleged terror conspiracy case.

In an order extending the custody of the accused by 10 days after hearing arguments last Friday at the NIA headquarters, Additional Sessions Judge Prashant Sharma said, "...facts of this case, have to be appreciated, in totality. Why accused persons had come to India? Why they travelled to



Six Ukrainians and an American were held on March 13 and booked in an alleged terror conspiracy case. FILE

Myanmar? What was their objective, in using drones? Did accused persons use drones for imparting training to any person? Whether any Indian or any member of rebel ethnic group in India, is linked with accused persons, directly or indirectly?"

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# Foreigners

“What all infrastructure was used by accused persons while visiting India and beyond? Such questions, and questions of like nature, need investigation. I am in agreement with NIA,” he said.

The NIA told the court the possibility of the accused being linked to ethnic rebel groups in India “could not be ruled out”. The judge said, “There are aspects which NIA has apprised this court through case diaries, which are sensitive information... Said information justifies filing of present application.”

Matthew Aaron Van Dyke of the US and Hurba Petro, Slyviak Taras, Ivan Sukmanovskyi, Ste-fankiv Marian, Honcharuk Mak-sim and Kaminskyi Viktor of Ukraine were arrested on March 13. While the US national was de-tained by the Bureau of Immi-gration at Kolkata airport, three Ukrainians were detained at Lucknow airport and another three at Delhi airport.

The NIA registered an FIR the same day under Section 18 (punishment for being part of a terrorist conspiracy) of the UAPA, among others.

According to the FIR, the ac-cused had entered India on tour-ist visas on separate dates and had flown to Guwahati, from where they had allegedly travelled to Mizoram without the requisite documents. They had then allegedly crossed the border illegally into Myanmar with the intention of carrying out a “pre-scheduled training for Myanmar-based Ethnic Armed Groups”, according to the NIA. Consignments of drones from Europe were delivered by the ac-cused to individuals and groups in Mizoram, the NIA said.

# On a wing

## Subsidies will not create demand for air travel to small towns

In a bid to revive the regional aviation sector, the Union Cabinet has signed off on a 'Modified UDAN' scheme with a sixfold higher outlay. The scheme had first been launched to expand aviation to interior areas, using scheduled commuter airlines. Even then, industry analysts and experts had complained that UDAN did not make a viable business case for small regional airlines due to a lack of supporting infrastructure, low or unpredictable passenger demand, insufficient coverage of operating costs, and lack of awareness. In Modified UDAN, the subsidy period for tier-II and tier-III routes has been increased from three years to five years, an extension at least one of the small carriers had sought under UDAN before the COVID-19 pandemic hit. The exchequer will also fund the subsidies directly rather than having airlines levy an additional charge from passengers, with the government setting aside ₹10,043 crore over the next decade to this end. The government will also spend ₹12,159 crore to redevelop a hundred unused airstrips, ₹3,661 crore to build 200 helipads in remote areas, and purchase aircraft and helicopters for state carriers to boost last-mile connectivity to better match the mode of transport to actual demand and geography. The scheme will also pay for ongoing costs such as staffing and maintenance of low-traffic airports.

Regional aviation in India is structurally fragile and unlikely to become widely self-sustaining due to the unyieldingly high cost per passenger, price sensitivity, competition from rail and road transport, and operational inefficiencies. UDAN did not address them adequately and, sadly, Modified UDAN carries that failing over. The foremost one is weak underlying demand, with UDAN often picking routes with insufficient economic activity even as leisure and occasional travel could not sustain regular flights. Extending the subsidies, even if they are eased from the third year onwards, could keep routes alive for longer but will not of itself create demand. In this sense, the government's reluctance to revisit how it identifies and nurtures routes, and how different transport modes might substitute for air travel in low-density regions, seems inexplicable. The emphasis on last-mile connectivity and better planning also appears only partially incorporated as the details the Civil Aviation Ministry shared did not mention ground transport links or integrated scheduling, among others. Whether the decision to sustain connectivity using sustained government support, rather than cultivate a market that can stand on its own, will lead to lasting changes depends on whether route selection and integration with broader transport and economic networks improve in practice.

# Despite assurance from Centre, MGNREGS workers denied work

From Bihar to Rajasthan, thousands of rural workers say work has been halted; as the Centre continues talks with the States on the VB-G RAM G Act, some district officials say they have been directed not to start new work under the old scheme

**Sobhana K. Nair**  
NEW DELHI

For the past 87 days, MGNREGS workers have been protesting at the Muzaffarpur district headquarters in Bihar.

The Union government had assured them that until the Viksit Bharat-Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) (VB-G RAM G) Act, 2025, passed by Parliament in December, is rolled out, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) will continue unchanged. But on the ground, workers say the story is very different.

The protest in Muzaffarpur began on January 2. Nearly 12,000 workers in the district have not received work for the past three or four months – even before the new rural employment law was introduced.

## Uncertainty continues

There is no clarity on when the new scheme under the VB-G RAM G Act will be implemented on the ground, as the Centre is still hold-



**Hold on:** The scheme under the VB-G RAM G Act, 2025 is yet to be rolled out. MOORTHY G.

ing talks with the States to establish the necessary framework.

“Usually, no work is given during the rain. We waited for the monsoon to end, then for the waterlogged areas to drain. By December, the MGNREGA season normally begins. But despite repeated demand, no work has been provided. This is a blatant violation of the law,” said Sanjay Sahni of MGNREGA Watch-Bihar, an organisation working with rural

workers. Facing repeated rejections, around 16,000 workers – most of them women – gathered at the district headquarters to demand work. A delegation also travelled to Delhi on March 25 to meet senior officials in the Rural Development Ministry.

“The district officials claim they have instructions not to start any new work. But the Ministry officials insist that no such order exists,” Mr. Sahni said. He wonders whether it is

lack of information or whether there is an informal signal from the Centre to stop all work under the MGNREGS.

## Ground reality

In Dungarpur district of Rajasthan, similar complaints have emerged. At Balwarha panchayat, around 40 women workers arrived on March 23 to complete paperwork for April’s work cycle. Panchayat officials asked them to return later, citing a lack

of clarity. On Saturday, they were told that the MGNREGS had been discontinued and no further work would be available under the scheme.

At Padarmarhi Mewarha panchayat, nearly 30 women workers sat for four hours last Friday, demanding work for the first week of April. Local officials initially claimed that directions had been issued not to start new MGNREGS works. After the women refused to leave, their applications were eventually accepted, but uncertainty continues whether any work will actually be assigned.

“For each household, MGNREGA work brings in about ₹25,000 to ₹28,000 annually. In some women-led households, MGNREGA and government pensions are the only sources of income,” said Madhulika of the Rajasthan Asangathit Mazdoor Union.

“There are no formal orders. The VB-G RAM G Act clearly states that until it is implemented, MGNREGA will continue. But on the ground, we are being told otherwise,” she said.

# Iran warns against ground invasion amid talks in Pak.

'Waiting for troops to set them on fire', says Iran Speaker; Pak. says it will soon host U.S.-Iran talks after regional Ministers meet in Islamabad; meet a cover for U.S. to deploy more troops, says Iran

**Associated Press**

ISLAMABAD

Iranian forces were "waiting for the arrival of American troops on the ground to set them on fire and punish their regional partners forever", Iran's state media reported Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf as saying on Sunday while warning the U.S. against a ground invasion. The remarks came as Pakistan announced on Sunday that it will soon host talks between the U.S. and Iran.

"Pakistan is very happy that both Iran and the U.S. have expressed their confidence in Pakistan's facilitation" of the talks, which will happen in the "coming days," Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar said in a televised speech after top diplomats



Foreign Ministers of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Turkiye meet in Islamabad on Sunday to discuss the West Asia situation. REUTERS

from regional countries met in Islamabad.

There was no immediate word from the U.S. or Iran.

Foreign Ministers of Saudi Arabia, Turkiye, and Egypt were in Islamabad on Sunday for talks without U.S. or Israeli participation in a push to broker an end to the month-long war.

The Iranian Speaker dismissed Sunday's talks as a cover while the U.S. dispatches additional troops to West Asia.

The visiting Ministers have endorsed Pakistan's peace efforts, Mr. Dhar said without specifying whether the proposed talks would be direct or indirect. The Ministers are

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**NEW DELHI**

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expected to meet again on Monday. Israel and the U.S., however, kept up strikes on Iran on Sunday and Tehran responded by firing missiles and drones across West Asia.

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# Iran warns against ground invasion

Egypt's Badr Abdelatty, who was part of the talks with Turkiye's Hakan Fidan, Saudi Arabia's Prince Faisal Bin Farhan, and Pakistan's Ishaq Dar, said the meetings were aimed at opening a "direct dialogue" between the U.S. and Iran.

Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps warned in a statement that it would consider Israeli universities and branches of U.S. universities in the region "legitimate targets" unless offered safety assurances for Iranian universities, state media reported after Israeli strikes hit several universities, including ones claimed to have been used by the Islamic Republic for nuclear research and development.

Israel announced waves of incoming strikes from Iran on Sunday and explosions could be heard throughout Tehran.

Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif earlier said he and Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian had held "extensive discussions" on the regional hostilities. Officials said 20 more Pakistani-flagged ships were allowed to transit the Strait of Hormuz late on Saturday as Iran eased restrictions over the critical waterway.

IRGC also said that they launched strikes on aluminium plants in Bahrain and the UAE over the weekend, targeting what they described as industries linked to the U.S. military. It added that the strikes were retaliation for a U.S.-Israeli attack on Iranian industrial infrastructure launched from bases in Gulf states. Aluminium Bahrain, one of the world's largest aluminium producers, said two employees were wounded in the strike.

*(With AFP inputs)*

# 'Global acceptance of Pakistan a failure of Indian foreign policy'

**The Hindu Bureau**

NEW DELHI

In the context of Pakistan mediating between the United States and Iran to resolve the ongoing conflict in West Asia, Jairam Ramesh, general secretary (communications) of the Congress, on Sunday criticised the Bharatiya Janata Party-led government's foreign policy, alleging that Pakistan's renewed global acceptance reflected failures in India's diplomatic engagement and narrative management.

In a post on X, Mr. Ramesh described Pakistan as a country where "democracy is a farce," its economy "a basket case dependent on the IMF, China, and Saudi Arabia," and one regarded as "a haven for terrorists" whose activities have targeted countries across the world.

Mr. Ramesh argued that despite Pakistan's isolation after the 2008 Mumbai attacks, it had recently regained international acceptance. Citing External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar's description of Pakistan as a "dalal", he said this shift underscored what he termed the "colossal failure" of the Modi government's foreign policy.

He added that U.S. President Donald Trump, whom Prime Minister Na-



Jairam Ramesh

arendra Modi has publicly called a "good friend", had also contributed to Pakistan's current standing. Mr. Ramesh questioned why the Prime Minister, despite showcasing close ties with Washington at events such as the *Howdy Modi* rally in Houston in 2019 and the *Namaste Trump* event in Ahmedabad in 2020, had "allowed this to happen".

Mr. Ramesh alleged that the government's attempts to curry favour with the U.S., including what he called a "betrayal of India's farmers" through a trade deal granting American agricultural interests unprecedented market access, had yielded no diplomatic leverage.

Mr. Ramesh said the "unravelling" of what he described as a "heavily personality driven foreign policy" had exposed the "*Vishwaguru*" persona as a "*Vishwaphoney*".

# Pak. as U.S. mediator with Iran recalls Nixon's China outreach

Washington's decision is shaped by Pakistan's proximity, its ties with Tehran, and its lack of ties with Israel

## WORLD INSIGHT

Suhasini Haidar

Pakistan's emergence as Washington's choice as a mediator in talks with Iran can be explained in a number of ways. Since Operation Sindoor in May 2025, U.S. President Donald Trump has been flattered by Pakistan's description of him as a "peacemaker", and he has reportedly built a personal rapport with Pakistan's Field Marshal General Asim Munir and Pakistani PM Shehbaz Sharif, meeting them several times.

In particular, Mr. Trump hosted General Munir to lunch at the White House in June last year, amidst the last U.S.-Israeli strikes, in an effort reportedly to ensure that Pakistan would not support Iran militarily.

Pakistan's offer of a critical minerals deal to the U.S. and decision to join the Gaza Board of Peace (BoP) have also helped forge the relationship.

For Iran, Pakistan's advantage over many other possible mediators is not only its proximity but also the fact that it does not recognise Israel, and thus is not

amenable to concerns or inputs from the Benjamin Netanyahu government. This may suit Mr. Trump as well, who has reportedly conveyed a 15-point proposal to the government in Tehran, which it hopes will lead to a ceasefire.

### Cold War precedent

However, Washington's decision to engage Pakistan as a facilitator for talks may also be rooted in history, given Islamabad and a different General's role in facilitating U.S. talks with China 55 years ago, at the height of the Cold War.

At that time, U.S. President Richard Nixon had begun to work on his plan to open up relations with Beijing (the U.S. still formally recognised Taiwan as the Republic of China), but direct Sino-U.S. Ambassadorial talks had floundered. Pakistan was not the first option, as he and his National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, considered others.

Mao Zedong, Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party and leader of the People's Republic of China (PRC), turned down the idea of France as he wanted a "non-Western" channel. The Warsaw track fell apart after two rounds of talks between U.S. and Chinese officials, as Mr. Mao protested U.S. attacks on Cambodia,

which were part of a U.S. Army effort to cut off supplies to Vietnamese troops.

While Mr. Nixon's need for partners in Asia, as the Vietnam War drained the U.S., drove him to seek China, Sino-Soviet tensions gave Mr. Mao a reason to engage with Washington.

The U.S. tried Romania, working through President Nicolae Ceausescu to reach out to the Chinese government, but hit an unexpected block. "We went to the Romanians, thinking they were most independent of the East Europeans and they were communists and therefore the Chinese would like that. Turns out the one group the Chinese didn't trust were Communists," Mr. Kissinger told journalist Tom Brokaw decades later, explaining that Beijing feared Romanian officials would divulge details to the Kremlin, which would attempt to sabotage the process.

By then, Mr. Nixon had also established a secret channel to the PRC's leadership through Pakistani President General Agha Mohammad Yahya Khan. "In Nixon's view, Khan was an attractive intermediary since he had good relations with the leaders of the U.S. and the PRC, and he provided a means to circumvent the U.S. Department of State, which Nixon feared

# Israel will expand its security strip in south Lebanon, says Netanyahu

Israeli pesticide plant struck by Iranian missile, fire breaks out

Reuters  
Jerusalem, Islamabad,  
March 29

ISRAELI PRIME Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on Sunday he had instructed the military to further expand the existing security buffer zone in southern Lebanon, vowing to fundamentally change the security situation there.

"I have just instructed to further expand the existing security buffer zone. We are determined to fundamentally change the situation in the north," Netanyahu said in a video statement from the Northern Command.

He said the decision aimed to strengthen Israel's security posture along the northern frontier.

Israeli pesticides maker ADAMA said its Makhteshim plant in southern Israel had been hit either by an Iranian missile or debris from an intercepted missile on Sunday, but no injuries were reported. ADAMA, part of Chinese-owned Syngenta Group, said the extent of any damage to the plant was not immediately known.

Israel's fire and rescue service said a fire broke out in an industrial area in southern Israel that houses several chemical



(From L-R) Egyptian Foreign Minister Badr Abdelattar, Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al-Saud, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar and Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan walk down to their meeting venue in Islamabad on Sunday. AP

manufacturing and industrial plants following an Iranian missile attack, likely debris from a missile that was intercepted.

Meanwhile, Pakistan hosted talks with Turkey, Egypt and Saudi Arabia on Sunday as part of its efforts to broker an end to the Iran war, with initial discussions focused on proposals to reopen the Strait of Hormuz to shipping, sources said.

Foreign ministers from the three regional powers landed in Islamabad for the talks as Iran warned the US against launching a ground attack and global oil prices surged amid continued fighting between Iran, the US and Israel.

The countries meeting in Pakistan have floated proposals to Washington tied to maritime

traffic and reopening the Strait of Hormuz, sources told Reuters, as part of wider efforts to stabilise shipping.

Pakistan, which like Turkey borders Iran, has leveraged its close ties to both Tehran and Washington to emerge as a key diplomatic channel in the conflict, while Ankara and Cairo have also played a role.

A source from Pakistan said proposals, including from Egypt, had been forwarded to the White House by the countries before Sunday's meeting and that they included Suez Canal-style fee structures.

Two other Pakistani sources said Turkey, Egypt and Saudi Arabia could form a consortium to manage oil flows through the waterway.

Israel bars Latin Patriarch from entering Church of the Holy Sepulchre

World leaders condemn move

Reuters  
Tel Aviv, March 29

ISRAELI POLICE prevented the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem from marking Palm Sunday at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre "for the first time in centuries," the Patriarchate said, with police citing security concerns linked to the Iran war.

Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa and Friar Francesco Ielpo were stopped by police while walking to the church, built on the site where Christians believe Jesus was crucified and rose from the dead, the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem said.

"As a result, and for the first time in centuries, the Heads of the Church were prevented from celebrating the Palm Sunday Mass at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre," it said in a statement.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said in a statement: "There was no malicious intent whatsoever, only concern for his (Pizzaballa's) safety and that of his party."

He said preparations were in place to allow church leaders to worship at the church in the coming days.

Israeli police said all holy sites in Jerusalem's Old City – including those sacred to Christians, Muslims and Jews – had been closed to worshippers since the start of the U.S.-Israeli war on Iran, particularly locations without bomb shelters.

Palm Sunday marks the beginning of Holy Week, the most important week in the Christian calendar, leading to Easter. The Old City would typically be busy, with Roman Catholics passing through the massive wooden doors of the Holy Sepulchre.

Italy's Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni criticised the police action and Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani said on social media that he would summon Israel's ambassador over the incident.

France's President Emmanuel Macron condemned the Israeli police's decision, which he said "adds to the worrying increase in violations of the status of the Holy Places in Jerusalem."

US Ambassador to Israel Mike Huckabee said denying the Patriarch's entry to the church on Palm Sunday was "difficult to understand or justify."

The Vatican did not respond to a request for comment. On Sunday, Pope Leo said that God rejects the prayers of leaders who start wars and have "hands full of blood", in unusually forceful remarks as the Iran war entered its second month.

## 10 Kuwaiti troops injured in Iranian missile attack

**Kuwait:** Ten Kuwaiti military personnel were injured in an Iranian missile attack on a military camp in the Gulf country, the Kuwaiti army said on Sunday, without giving a location.

During a media briefing, the Ministry's Spokesman Colonel Saud Al-Atwan said that some of these missiles and drones targeted a Kuwaiti armed forces base, leaving 10 personnel injured and causing material damage to the site.

REUTERS

# Oli remanded in custody for 5 days as protests continue across Nepal

Oli attends remand proceedings virtually due to deteriorating health, while Lekhak was physically produced in court; supporters of Communist Party of Nepal (UML) stage protests; ex-Energy Minister arrested in a money laundering case

**Press Trust of India**  
KATHMANDU

Nepal's former Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli was remanded in judicial custody for five days by the Kathmandu District Court on Sunday, even as protests continue to erupt in various parts of the country over the arrests.

Mr. Oli and former Home Minister Ramesh Lekhak were arrested on Saturday for their alleged involvement in suppressing the Gen Z movement of September 8 and 9 last year, in which 76 people, including around two dozen youth, were killed. The arrests came a day after the



**Hue and cry:** Supporters of K.P. Sharma Oli march escorted by police during a protest, in Kathmandu, Nepal, on Sunday. REUTERS

newly formed Balendra Shah government decided to implement the report of the probe commission into the Gen Z protests in its first Cabinet meeting.

Mr. Lekhak was present

before the district court seeking remand for ten days to carry out further investigation into their alleged involvement in the incidents of killings. He was also remanded in cus-

tody for five days. However, ex-PM Oli virtually attended the district court session due to his deteriorating health conditions, according to Deepak Kumar Shrestha, information officer at the district court.

Mr. Oli is currently undergoing medical treatment at Tribhuvan University Teaching Hospital in Maharajgunj, Kathmandu, as his health conditions deteriorated when he was taken to the hospital on Saturday following the arrest.

Workers of the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) held a protest in Maitighar against the arrest of the party chair, Mr. Oli.

Meanwhile, Nepal pol-

ice on Sunday arrested former Energy Minister and Nepali Congress leader Deepak Khadka in connection with a money laundering case, local media reported.

During the Gen Z protest last year, images and videos had surfaced showing burnt fragments of banknotes at the residences of Mr. Khadka and former Prime Ministers Sher Bahadur Deuba and Pushpa Kamal Dahal.

Mr. Khadka was accused of receiving financial benefits in exchange for facilitating licences and contracts for projects while serving as the Minister for Energy, Water Resources and Irrigation.

# Neighbours first

## India must invite Nepal's new Prime Minister, Balen Shah, to revive ties

In an exchange of early messages, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Nepal's newly-sworn-in Prime Minister Balendra "Balen" Shah said they look forward to "working closely" to take forward bilateral ties. Delhi and Kathmandu are prepared to begin a new chapter in relations, united by familial bonds, a shared culture, open borders, and intertwined politics. Landlocked Nepal has depended on trade and transit through India, with India's plans for an energy grid in the region an important channel for Nepal's hydropower exports and revenues. Like many former leaders of Nepal, Mr. Shah studied in India. Familiarity aside, it would be a mistake to assume that his ascension will chart a well-worn and predictable course between the two countries. At 35, he is Nepal's first Madhesi leader, and upturns the old dominance of the Brahmin-Chhetri Pahadi elite. New Delhi must have a greater understanding of the priorities of this new Gen-Z movement that brought down the K.P. Sharma Oli government in 2025. This is a new leadership that has not inherited the old foreign policy understandings of the past generations of leaders that came through the panchayati movement, Congress and Communist parties, or the Maoist movement that overthrew the monarchy. In that sense, the Shah government's foreign policy, including its ties with China and the U.S., as well as the overarching relationship with India, is yet to be formalised. In the past decade, India has increased its development assistance to Nepal, but it also strained its ties over the constitution, the long blockade on border trade, and territorial issues. As Mayor of Kathmandu, Mr. Shah was known for his overt nationalism, and rejection of the "hegemony" of India and other powers, while his use of a map of "Greater Nepal" had been read with some concern in New Delhi.

The Modi government should tread lightly, and positively, as the Shah government finds its feet, but offer India's full support in dealing with Nepal's immediate challenges. Among those are the impacts of the war in West Asia where Nepal will need help with fuel and fertilizer imports. Approximately 14% of Nepal's population (about 3.5 million) work abroad, and the country is dependent on remittances and tourism revenues. New Delhi could also reconsider requests from previous Nepali governments to allow overflight for new Nepali airports, reduce restrictions on purchasing Nepali power produced with third-country assistance and to update the bilateral friendship treaty. Differences delayed New Delhi's invitation in 2024 to Mr. Oli, upon his election – he eventually visited Beijing first. It is time to quickly invite Mr. Shah to visit Delhi at the earliest, and for Delhi and Kathmandu to move forward, putting "Neighbours first" in South Asia.

# N. Korea tests missile engine capable of reaching the U.S.

**Associated Press**

SEOUL

North Korean leader Kim Jong-un observed a test of an upgraded solid-fuel engine for weapons capable of reaching the U.S. mainland, and called it a significant development boosting his country's strategic military arsenal, state media reported on Sunday.

While the test was in line with Mr. Kim's stated goal of acquiring more agile, hard-to-detect missiles targeting the U.S. and its allies, some experts speculate North Korea's claim may be an exaggeration. Missiles with built-in solid propellants are easier to move and conceal their launches than liquid-fuel weapons, which in general must be fuelled before liftoffs and cannot last long.

The official *Korean Cen-*



Kim Jong-un inspecting a combustion test of a solid-fuel rocket engine at an undisclosed location in North Korea. AFP

*tral News Agency* reported Mr. Kim watched the ground jet test of the engine using a composite carbon fibre material. It said the engine's maximum thrust is 2,500 kilonewtons, up from about 1,970 kilonewtons reported in a similar solid-fuel engine test in September.

KCNA reported the test was conducted as part of

the country's five-year arms build-up meant to upgrade "strategic strike means," a term referring to nuclear-capable ballistic missiles and other weapons.

Mr. Kim said the latest engine test had "great significance in putting the country's strategic military muscle on the highest level," according to KCNA.

# What Iran's drone blitz means for the future of warfare

Abhinav Chakraborty  
New Delhi, March 29

OVER THE years, Gulf Arab countries procured top-of-the-line US-made fighter jets and air defence systems to counter external security threats. But these lavishly assembled systems have run into a formidable opponent built at a fraction of their cost — Iran's Shahed drone, which it has used to devastating effect in the war in West Asia.

The use of drones, not just in the Gulf, but also the Russia-Ukraine war and the India-Pakistan conflict last year, demonstrates how modern war is being shaped by low-cost technology that is easy to obtain and difficult to defeat.

## Up in the air

Besides missile systems, Gulf countries have deployed advanced fighters such as the F-16 to tackle the swarms of Shahed drones. These fourth-generation jets cost at least \$70 million for newer variants (older ones are less than half the cost), besides additional costs for special packages. They are armed with air-to-air missiles such as the AIM-9X Sidewinder (about \$485,000 each) and the AIM-120 AMRAAM (over \$1 million each). These jets can use their cheaper cannon rounds. But that would require them to attack drones at close quarters and low altitudes, endangering civilians.

Since the war began on February 28, these Gulf fighters have managed to intercept most of the 3,000-plus drones Iran has fired across the region. But their effectiveness has come at a high cost, not just financially but also in the form of overstretched

pilots and planes on guard round the clock.

Analysts say this is not sustainable in the long term. While a Shahed drone costs anywhere between \$20,000 and \$50,000 apiece to manufacture, just keeping an F-16 in the air costs over \$25,000 per hour.

If one of these jets were shot down, both the plane and the skilled pilot would be lost.

But if the drone is shot down, the replacement cost is only in monetary terms.

On what Iran's use of drones says about its military objectives both in economic and strategic terms, drone systems expert Group Captain Rajiv Kumar Narang (retired) told *The Indian Express* that putting the economic imperative first and foremost would be wrong. "From Iran's point of view, it's the indigenous innovation that has made it low cost — not that they went for low cost (in the first place)," he said.

Narang, a senior fellow at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, said: "The Iranian military realised they will not get everything... So they kept innovating for a long time and they kept innovating all the critical components in Iran, which made it possible to develop a large number of drones."

## Shooting from the ground

Then there is the question of the ground-based interceptors, such as the Patriot and the THAAD. Barring Oman, all five Gulf countries — Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, and Kuwait — rely immensely on these US-made interceptor missile systems. A full battery system of either can easily cost over a billion dollars. A single Patriot missile costs close to \$4 mil-

## Iran's Shahed-136 'kamikaze' drone

### ONE-WAY DRONE

#### COST

\$20,000-30,000 per unit

#### WINGSPAN

2.5m

#### RANGE

3000 km

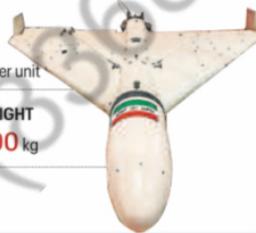
#### WEIGHT

200 kg

#### ALTITUDE: From 20-30 metres

(below the radar) to up to 5.2 km

- Push-propeller engine
- Often deployed in swarms
- Explosives in their nose
- They dive towards their target, detonate on impact



## Laser weapons

● Laser weapons are a cost-effective option to target drones

● HELIOS Laser, deployed on the US destroyer USS *Preble*, was reportedly used to hit Iranian drones

● They work by shooting beams that destroy targets with heat. But their performance can be affected by the weather

lion. A THAAD interceptor missile costs \$13-15.5 million.

The US and its allies fired over 800 of these interceptors in the first few days of the war. According to military data trackers, only 620 of the most advanced Patriot missiles were produced and delivered in 2025, while the annual tally for THAAD was 96. Replenishing stocks will take years.

## Cost-effective solutions

Ukraine earlier used Patriot interceptors (which it received as part of US military aid) to combat Russia's Geran drones — Moscow's version of the Shahed.

It has since adopted low-cost solutions — such as a counter-drone technology that can recognise the Geran's lawnmower-like

sound, an interceptor drone called Sting, worth \$2,000-4,000 per unit, and an American-made anti-drone system called Merops.

*The New York Times* reported that these small Merops interceptors have proven so effective that the US was racing to deliver thousands of them to West Asia.

The US said in March that it deployed its own one-way attack drone in Iran. The LUCAS (Low-cost Uncrewed Combat Attack System) costs about \$35,000 apiece.

Closer to home, the India-Pakistan conflict in May last year also saw significant use of drones. To combat Pakistan's employment of drones en masse, Narang said India used its indigenous air defence systems like the Akashteer and the Integrated Air Command and Control System, besides air defence guns such as Bofors L-70, ZU-23, and Shilka. But he felt that India needs to do more in terms of integrating drone and counter-drone systems with air defence networks.

## The road ahead

For now, Gulf countries will need to think about their reliance on costly US defence systems. Anan Tello pointed out in an analysis for *Arab News*: "For Gulf states, the lesson is clear: even with advanced defences, the economics of modern warfare are shifting, and the cost of protection may prove as decisive as firepower itself."

But while drones may play a key role in the future of war, Narang said they have not replaced aircraft: "All major attacks are done by manned aircraft. Even today, wherever heavy payloads have to be dropped, it was (them). But in terms of the ability to strike soft targets, drones have done well."

# 'New normal (in India-Canada ties) does not erase what has happened'

Divya A

New Delhi, March 29

EXPRESS  
interview

HIS BELONGINGS packed in cartons at his Delhi residence, ready to be shipped to his hometown Patna, former Indian High Commissioner to Canada Sanjay Verma recalls another shift that took place in the twilight of his 37 years in foreign service — one that was abrupt and “tense”.

That was in October 2024, when Verma was declared persona non grata, along with five other Indian officials, by the Justin Trudeau government in Canada over the Hardeep Singh Nijjar assassination case — India had denied any involvement in the killing. Today, Verma says he is happy that ties have mended between the two countries, and a “new normal” is being worked out. Edited excerpts from an exclusive interview:

**Canada’s Prime Minister Mark Carney visited India this month. There has been a turnaround in India-Canada ties. You were in Ottawa when ties were frozen, what do you think necessitated this (turnaround)?**

Whatever was happening in Canada when I was there was politically motivated. And the political motivation could linger long, or could be cut



**SANJAY VERMA**

FORMER INDIAN HIGH COMMISSIONER TO CANADA

short depending on the person in the chair. So, that is what has happened (with PM Mark Carney coming in). Whenever there is a change, there is a window of opportunity. And that window was quickly claimed through the visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Canada. PM Carney is more of a global citizen, having served as governor of the British central bank. He has seen the world from a very different lens, which has a bit of geopolitics, but a lot of pragmatism.

Earlier, everything was being put in one basket, which was highly coloured by the views expressed by Khalistani extremists and terrorists there. Now, there are two containers. In one container, those areas

»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

# India-Canada ties

where we have convergence, which is a very large container; those areas where we have not so much of convergence, which is a very small container. That will continue to be discussed.

I don't use the word reset, but now it is being re-normalised. Both the countries are trying to establish a new normal.

**Were there external factors also nudging both countries to come together, especially with US President Donald Trump coming in and the subsequent tariff wars?**

Ecosystem has certainly changed. If you look at Canada's over-dependence on the US, in economic terms it was huge. In people-to-people it was very big. They were more or less one culture despite different ideologies. And later on, the strains became obvious due to change of ecosystem in Washington.

So, again, their philosophy of reducing over-dependence on the US started. So, when they started looking at where to diversify, they would look for the highest leverage. That, for them, was India and China, both for different reasons.

**Recently, the chief of Royal Canadian Mounted Police (conducting Nijjar probe) has said there is no evidence linking India to the case. What is your view of where it started, where it is now, what has to be done?**

Everything started with (the bombing on Air India flight) Kanishka. All the evidence pointed towards the Khalistani terrorists and extremists having planted the bomb. That was the beginning of the tear. That tear moved ahead because there was no closure. My own assessment is that some of the digital evidence was deleted, physical evidence was destroyed. So, therefore, in the court of law where you need to prove it, the prosecutors could not prove it. That episode gave rise to further radicalisation in Canada.

**Because there was no accountability?**

Because they saw they could get away with it. And therefore,

dian politics, into Canadian agencies which are responsible for immigration, border control, customs and policing.

And that really made them much stronger and allowed them to punch above their weight. And some other organisations which are anti-India also joined because the purpose converged.

What I had seen in Canada was that they also got involved in human trafficking, drug manufacturing, fentanyl in particular, and pushing it across the borders to the US and in Canada. I have also seen them using the trucking business for different purposes and getting into extortion rackets.

They would go and intimidate other individuals from their own community. Out of 8 lakh Sikhs who are there in Canada — both Indian nationals and those of Indian origin -- about 5,000 are hardliners, Khalistani extremists. Rest are common citizens, wanting to live their normal lives. But what to do if they are intimidated? So, they don't voice, but they show their presence in such protests. PM Carney is aware of this and he will try to create more orderliness for a safer Canada.

**I want to take you back to the days when the Nijjar case flared up, you were named and you had to return to India.**

The situation was tense after Prime Minister Trudeau had given the statement, I believe he should not have given, in the Parliament. There was no evidence. That was September 2023. Till today, no evidence has been presented, which means it was premature. If there was a lead, probably the investigative agency should have been allowed to proceed first.

The RCMP commissioner still says there is no evidence of external linkages to transnational repression and transnational crimes in Canada. External linkages include India.

So, therefore, it is very clear. If he cannot see evidence now, what was the evidence there that he (PM Trudeau) had to come out. And in one of his statements he had said that. I said so to put

**while the Nijjar case was on, in the US, there was this Gurpatwant Singh Pannun assassination plot case, and there was an effort by the US Department of Justice to link the two... How did you view that?**

Law does not listen to emotions or intelligence. I have not seen any evidence so far where they are connected. The link has been talked about, but no evidence has come forward. I would maintain that they remain disconnected till the time evidence can be there.

**One Indian citizen in the US (Nikhil Gupta) has already pleaded guilty. Will that give any credence to the theories?**

I will not be able to comment much about the US case. But as far as Canada is concerned, there was a crime committed. And we always maintain that since the crime has been committed in Canada, that of a murder of their citizen, you should take corrective action. But before reaching the finality, do not start blaming.

Four Indian nationals have been arrested and the case is in pre-trial stage. So, till the time the case is not decided, we really do not know. But don't equate Indian nationals with Indian government. Evidence for that linkage has never been presented.

**Do you think that (Nijjar) episode is behind us?**

The new normal does not erase what has happened earlier. My colleagues, our families, had to undergo such emotional trauma. Some of their spouses had to leave jobs, children had to leave university to come back with their parents. The human side of it is huge.

If I have a family member in Canada today, I still can't go and visit. Of course, I am not challenging the prerogative of the host government. I was treated as a criminal, as if I am a murderer who is moving around on the streets of Canada. Till today, which is about 18 months later, they have not been able to prove anything against me. I'm still having that stigma — in the otherwise very successful, 37 years of public service — of being called a criminal.

I am the first-ever serving Indian ambassador to be declared persona non grata. No other In-

PAKISTAN HOSTS TALKS WITH TURKEY, EGYPT AND SAUDI ARABIA TO BROKER END TO WEST ASIA WAR

# Israel will expand its security strip in south Lebanon, says Netanyahu

## Israeli pesticide plant struck by Iranian missile, fire breaks out

Reuters  
Jerusalem, Islamabad,  
March 29

ISRAELI PRIME Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on Sunday he had instructed the military to further expand the existing security buffer zone in southern Lebanon, vowing to fundamentally change the security situation there.

"I have just instructed to further expand the existing security buffer zone. We are determined to fundamentally change the situation in the north," Netanyahu said in a video statement from the Northern Command.

He said the decision aimed to strengthen Israel's security posture along the northern frontier.

Israeli pesticides maker ADAMA said its Makhteshim plant in southern Israel had been hit either by an Iranian missile or debris from an intercepted missile on Sunday, but no injuries were reported. ADAMA, part of Chinese-owned Syngenta Group, said the extent of any damage to the plant was not immediately known.

Israel's fire and rescue service said a fire broke out in an industrial area in southern Israel that houses several chemical



(From L-R) Egyptian Foreign Minister Badr Abdelattly, Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al-Saud, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Dar and Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan walk down to their meeting venue in Islamabad on Sunday.

manufacturing and industrial plants following an Iranian missile attack, likely debris from a missile that was intercepted.

Meanwhile, Pakistan hosted talks with Turkey, Egypt and Saudi Arabia on Sunday as part of its efforts to broker an end to the Iran war, with initial discussions focused on proposals to reopen the Strait of Hormuz to shipping, sources said.

Foreign ministers from the three regional powers landed in Islamabad for the talks as Iran warned the US against launching a ground attack and global oil prices surged amid continued fighting between Iran, the US and Israel.

The countries meeting in Pakistan have floated proposals to Washington tied to maritime

trafficking and reopening the Strait of Hormuz, sources told Reuters, as part of wider efforts to stabilise shipping.

Pakistan, which like Turkey borders Iran, has leveraged its close ties to both Tehran and Washington to emerge as a key diplomatic channel in the conflict, while Ankara and Cairo have also played a role.

A source from Pakistan said proposals, including from Egypt, were being forwarded to the White House by the countries before Sunday's meeting and that they included Suez Canal-style fee structures.

Two other Pakistani sources said Turkey, Egypt and Saudi Arabia could form a consortium to manage oil flows through the waterway.

## Israel bars Latin Patriarch from entering Church of the Holy Sepulchre

### World leaders condemn move

Reuters  
Tel Aviv, March 29

ISRAELI POLICE prevented the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem from marking Palm Sunday at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre "for the first time in centuries," the Patriarchate said, with police citing security concerns linked to the Iran war.

Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa and Friar Francesco Ielpo were stopped by police while walking to the church, built on the site where Christians believe Jesus was crucified and rose from the dead, the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem said.

"As a result, and for the first time in centuries, the Heads of the Church were prevented from celebrating the Palm Sunday Mass at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre," it said in a statement.

Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said in a statement: "There was no malicious intent whatsoever, only concern for his (Pizzaballa's) safety and that of his party."

He said preparations were in place to allow church leaders to worship at the church in the coming days.

Israeli police said all holy sites in Jerusalem's Old City – including those sacred to Christians, Muslims and Jews – had been closed to worshippers since the start of the U.S.-Israeli war on Iran, particularly locations without bomb shelters.

Palm Sunday marks the beginning of Holy Week, the most important week in the Christian calendar, leading to Easter. The Old City would typically be busy, with Roman Catholics passing through the massive wooden doors of the Holy Sepulchre.

Italy's Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni criticised the police action and Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani said on social media that he would summon Israel's ambassador over the incident.

France's President Emmanuel Macron condemned the Israeli police's decision, which he said "adds to the worrying increase in violations of the status of the Holy Places in Jerusalem."

US Ambassador to Israel Mike Huckabee said denying the Patriarch's entry to the church on Palm Sunday was "difficult to understand or justify."

The Vatican did not respond to a request for comment. On Sunday, Pope Leo said that God rejects the prayers of leaders who start wars and have "hands full of blood", in unusually forceful remarks as the Iran war entered its second month.

## 10 Kuwaiti troops injured in Iranian missile attack

**Kuwait:** Ten Kuwaiti military personnel were injured in an Iranian missile attack on a military camp in the Gulf country, the Kuwaiti army said on Sunday, without giving a location.

During a media briefing, the Ministry's Spokesman Colonel Saud Al-Atwan said that some of these missiles and drones targeted a Kuwaiti armed forces base, leaving 10 personnel injured and causing material damage to the site.

REUTERS

# USAGE TO IMPACT: HOW LPG DIFFERS FROM LNG

The Strait of Hormuz closure has hit a large chunk of India's energy supply — crude oil, and, to greater degrees, LPG and LNG. Here's what they are used for and how they differ.

## MEANING

### LNG, OR LIQUEFIED NATURAL GAS,

is primarily a natural gas — mainly methane. It is cooled to below -160 degrees Celsius and cryogenically turned into a liquid for storage or ease of transportation



LNG is regasified into natural gas and is called:

- PNG, or piped natural gas, when supplied to households
- CNG, or compressed natural gas, when used to power vehicles

## USE

**LPG:** Cooking, heating and limited industrial applications

**LNG:** Regasified into natural gas, it is used in transportation, industrial applications such as power generation and machinery operations, cooking

### LPG, OR LIQUEFIED PETROLEUM GAS,

primarily comprises propane and butane. LPG is a byproduct of the crude oil refining process. Under relatively low temperatures or moderate pressure, LPG becomes a liquid, allowing it to be bottled in cylinders.

## The dependency is greater for LPG...

- **33 million** tonnes India's annual consumption
- **13 million** tonnes is the share of domestic production in annual consumption
- **60%** India's import dependency
- **90%** of these imports came via the now-closed Strait of Hormuz
- **54%** the effective hit to total supplies

## ...than for LNG

- **71 billion** cubic metres India's annual consumption
- **35.6 billion** cubic metres is the share of domestic production in annual consumption
- **50%** India's import dependency
- **60%** of these imports came via the now-closed Strait of Hormuz, mainly from Qatar and the UAE
- **30%** the effective hit to total supplies

India is the world's 6th biggest LPG producer and the 3rd biggest LPG consumer

## TOP LPG PRODUCERS (IN THOUSAND TONNES)

COUNTRY	2023
1. US	104,732
2. China	51,658
3. Saudi Arabia	25,538
4. Russia	17,344
5. Canada	16,556
6. India	12,777

## TOP LPG CONSUMERS (IN THOUSAND TONNES)

COUNTRY	2023
1. China	81,647
2. US	47,993
3. India	31,317
4. Saudi Arabia	17,560
5. Russia	13,627

SOURCE: STATISTICAL REVIEW OF GLOBAL LPG