

Bengal, T.N. see massive turnout

Record 93% polling as 152 Bengal constituencies vote in first phase

Shiv Sahay Singh
Shrabana Chatterjee
KOLKATA

West Bengal registered a record voter turnout of 92.88% in the first phase of Assembly election on Thursday, amidst isolated incidents of violence. The election, which saw the highest-ever polling in the State, is being held amid a four-month-long special intensive revision (SIR) of electoral rolls that saw a drop in the electorate by about 12%.

Among the districts, Cooch Behar led the State with 96.04% polling, followed by Dakshin Dinajpur at 95.44% and Jalpaiguri at 94.65%. Murshidabad, which recorded the highest number of deletion of electors during the adjudication phase, recorded a voter turnout of 93.61%. According to Chief Electoral Officer Manoj Kumar Agarwal, the polling percentage is expected to rise further when final figures arrive. Before the 2026 election, the highest turnout was recorded in 2011 when 84.33% voters exercised their franchise. The election in 2011 saw the Trinamool Congress defeating the 34-year Left Front government.

The first phase of voting for the 2026 Assembly election was held across 152 Assembly seats and



Mandate on hand: People stand in a queue to cast their vote at Nandigram in West Bengal during the first phase of polls on Thursday. SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

with the polling concluding by 6 p.m., the fate of 1,478 candidates has been sealed in the electronic voting machines (EVMs). West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee said that the people came out in large numbers because this was an election to save their right to vote.

"The people know that if they do not vote for the Trinamool Congress, their right to vote will be taken away. The next step is NRC (National Register of Citizens) and they (the Union government) had already brought the delimitation Bill," Ms. Banerjee said while addressing a gathering in Bowbazar area of Kolkata.

People came out in large numbers to save their right to vote, says Chief Minister Mamata

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who addressed public meetings at three different venues and held a roadshow in the State, congratulated the Election Commission (EC) for holding the polls without much violence. "I congratulate all the voters. Everyone should celebrate the festival of democracy. There has been less violence this time so far. I congratulate the Election Commission," the Prime Minister said, ex-

pressing hope that all records will be broken this time with the enthusiasm shown by the people.

Congress leader and Berhampur candidate Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury also expressed satisfaction over the role of the EC.

The EC has deployed over 2,400 companies of Central forces to ensure free and fair elections. Despite the deployment, stray incidents of unrest and violence were reported across different districts.

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Over 85% polling in Tamil Nadu, highest in its electoral history

Dennis S. Jesudasan
CHENNAI

Tamil Nadu made electoral history on Thursday as it recorded its highest polling percentage in an Assembly election — 85.15%. According to provisional figures, over 4.85 crore people voted from 7 a.m. in all the 234 Assembly constituencies to elect the 17th Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly.

Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar said that it was the highest percentage of polling in the State. "[The] EC salutes each voter," he said.

The data released were "provisional and did not include services voters and postal ballots", a senior official said, meaning that polling figures could still go up.

Tamil Nadu is facing a four-cornered electoral fight involving the ruling DMK-led alliance, the Opposition AIADMK-led alliance, new entrant, actor C. Joseph Vijay-led TVK and the Naam Tamilar Katchi founded by Seeman.

The special intensive revision (SIR) of the electoral rolls in the State was strongly cited by SIR critics as the primary reason for the high polling percentage. The turnout could have been higher if not for



Digital drive: A robot welcomes voters at a polling booth at Nellikuppam in Cuddalore district of Tamil Nadu on Thursday. S.S. KUMAR

the massive traffic snarls of south-bound public and private vehicles from Chennai along the Grand Southern Trunk Road for several hours on Wednesday night.

Poll reflections

Throughout the day, the mood of the electorate was reflected in the shades of the voters' attire, social media posts, and the unsuspecting *kolams*. The choice of the political party and candidate at the ballot was the dominant topic of discussion in almost all public places.

Within two hours of polling since 7 a.m., about 17.69% of the electorate had voted and the per-

Polling peaceful in State barring stray instances of boycott with black flags and scuffles

centage touched 37.56% by 11 a.m. Even in the scorching heat, the pace of polling seemed to have continued between 11 a.m. and 1 p.m. and the percentage was 56.81% by 1 p.m. After lunch time, the pace dipped and by 3 p.m., the polling percentage was 70%. The turnout crossed 80% by 5 p.m. and stood at 82.24% with about an hour of polling left.

Polling was largely peaceful but for incidents,

including in Vengaiyaval where people boycotted the polls with black flags over caste-based atrocities committed against the Scheduled Castes in 2022.

In Chennai, there were scuffles in Harbour, and Thousand Lights constituencies between supporters of the AIADMK and the DMK.

DMK president and incumbent Chief Minister M.K. Stalin, along with his family members, voted in the Mylapore constituency and AIADMK general secretary Edappadi K. Palaniswami voted in the Edappadi constituency. Mr. Vijay and Mr. Seeman voted in Neelankari.

India invites German companies for defence co-development

Saurabh Trivedi

NEW DELHI

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh has invited German defence companies to co-develop and co-produce advanced military technologies with India, highlighting the need for reliable partnerships in an increasingly uncertain global environment.

Addressing Indian and German industry leaders at the Defence Investor Summit in Munich on Thursday, Mr. Singh stressed that shifting geopolitical alignments, supply chain disruptions, and rapid technological changes made trusted collaborations indispensable.

He urged industries to build partnerships based

on shared interests, resilience and mutual trust.

Mr. Singh noted that countries and companies worldwide were reassessing dependencies and diversifying supply chains.

In this context, he positioned India as an attractive partner, citing its expanding market, skilled workforce, stable policy environment, and commit-

ment to the rule of law. These factors, he said, were critical for long-term investments.

Niche areas

Highlighting opportunities under initiatives like *Aatmanirbhar Bharat* and Europe's rearmament push, Mr. Singh said Indian and German firms could collaborate in niche areas such as

advanced radar systems, multi-sensor technologies, AI-enabled unmanned aerial systems, sonobuoys, and underwater transmitters. The Defence Minister underlined India's ambition to become a developed nation by 2047 under the leadership of Narendra Modi, supported by strong economic fundamentals and policy clarity.

He described self-reliance not as isolation, but as a collaborative model where India evolved from a buyer to a co-developer and producer of defence technologies.

Mr. Singh also emphasised the role of the defence sector in driving innovation, economic resilience, and strategic autonomy.

China in mind, India and Japan move to deepen defence ties

Shubhajit Roy

New Delhi, April 23

AS JAPAN relaxed restrictions on its arms exports, India on Thursday welcomed the move and said that both sides have committed to “increase practical cooperation in the interest of their national security”.

This assumes significance at a time when both India and Japan are facing the challenge of a belligerent China in the Indo-Pacific neighbourhood. Both countries cooperate bilaterally and multilaterally at the strategic defence and security landscape, including at the Quad grouping.

Japan relaxed decades-old restrictions on its arms exports, and this is seen as a major departure from the pacifism that has characterised its post-World War II defence policy. Restrictions that limit arms exports to just five categories – rescue, transport, warning, surveillance and minesweeping – will be lifted.

This means Japan can now sell lethal weapons to the 17 countries with which it has defence agreements, including the US and the UK.

“In an increasingly severe security environment, no single country can now protect its own peace and security alone,” Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi wrote on X on Tuesday.

On Thursday, Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said, “India welcomes Japan’s Review of the Three Principles on Transfer of

Both sides have committed to “increase practical cooperation in the interest of their national security”, said India

Defence Equipment and Technology. Defence and Security Cooperation forms an important pillar of the India-Japan Special Strategic and Global Partnership.”

“As part of the Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation between India and Japan, both sides have committed to increase practical cooperation in the interest of their national security and continued economic dynamism. This includes promotion and facilitation of technological and industrial collaboration between the government entities and private sector stakeholders for resilience in sectors critical to national security,” he said.

Japanese PM Takaichi also said there was “absolutely no change in our commitment to upholding the path and fundamental principles we have followed as a peace-loving nation for over 80 years since the war.”

“Under the new system, we will strategically promote equipment transfers while making even more rigorous and cautious judgments on whether transfers are permissible,” she wrote.

Cycle of violence

Manipur sees little respite despite a change of guard under the BJP

Ethnic quagmires are among the most difficult situations for governments to untangle, given the violence and persistence of hostilities – even for those committed to restoring peace. The reason is the intransigent nature of ethnic divides, where hostile elements resist any efforts at normalisation. Any space for empathy is restricted as every incident is ethnicised. The situation is compounded when the government of the day fails to nip the descent into ethnicised hostilities in the bud, making it even more difficult for civil society and subsequent governments to restore peace and normalcy. This is the kind of situation that Manipur finds itself in. Even a relatively moderate Chief Minister such as Yumnam Khemchand Singh, who has sought – at least through nominal gestures – to rise above the ethnic fray, has found the going tough. Violence has flared up again following a bombing attack on April 7 that killed a five-year-old boy and an infant girl in Bishnupur district. Reports of the alleged involvement of a Kuki extremist organisation in bombing attacks – denied by Kuki groups – triggered a series of protests in the valley and renewed violence led to more deaths. With disinformation and rumour-mongering adding fuel to the fire, Manipur has returned to a cycle of violence and hardening stances among groups in its persistent ethnic quagmire.

The Bharatiya Janata Party initially believed that the resignation of former Chief Minister N. Biren Singh, efforts to curb violent ethnic organisations, and the passage of time would help restore normalcy. After a spell of President's Rule, and in an apparent effort to promote a more moderate form of governance before elections are due, the BJP formed a new government under Mr. Khemchand Singh. However, the inadequate involvement of political leaders – including from the Union government – in a genuine peace-building exercise shows that the situation has not improved despite these nominal changes by the BJP. A more thoroughgoing carrot and stick approach, empowering civil society leaders willing to advance peace and punishing those promoting and engaging in violence, would have certainly helped. But political variables focused more on retaining power than achieving peace appear to have kept those seeking to advance hardline views in positions of influence on both sides of the divide. A more pro-active role by the Home Ministry and a genuine effort by the BJP to involve all political actors in easing tensions should help. This should be supplemented by a strategy that empowers security agencies to crack down on hardline elements engaging in wanton violence such as bombings. Short of these measures, Manipur will continue to convulse with recurring incidents of violence, reactions and reprisals.



Troubled waters: A still from a video released by Iran shows the seizure of a container ship in the Strait of Hormuz. REUTERS

Trump orders strike against Iran vessels

Agence France-Presse
Associated Press

TEHRAN/DUBAI

Putting more pressure on a fraying ceasefire in West Asia, U.S. President Donald Trump on Thursday ordered the Navy to destroy any Iranian boat caught laying mines in the Strait of Hormuz, while Tehran said it has banked the first proceeds from the tolls it is exacting on shipping through the strait.

“I have ordered the United States Navy to shoot and kill any boat, small boats though they may be... that is putting mines in the waters of the Strait of Hormuz,” Mr. Trump post-

ed on social media.

The U.S. is under no pressure to end the war with Iran, but “the clock is ticking” for Tehran, the U.S. President said in another post.

Meanwhile, two container ships seized by Iran near the Strait of Hormuz with about 40 crew aboard have been taken toward the port of Bandar Abbas, sources said on Thursday, with Tehran having vowed to retaliate after U.S. forces seized an Iranian vessel three days earlier.

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Trump orders strike against Iran vessels

Iran has vowed it would keep the strait closed to all but a trickle of approved vessels for as long as the U.S. Navy blockades its ports, brushing off demands from Mr. Trump to both reopen Hormuz and surrender its enriched uranium.

“The first revenue received from the Strait of Hormuz tolls was deposited into the Central Bank account,” said deputy Speaker of Iran’s parliament, Hamidreza Hajibabaei, according to Tasnim news agency.

Air defence systems were activated in parts of Tehran on Thursday evening amid reports of hostile aerial activity, Iranian state media said in the first such reports since a ceasefire began. The Mehr news agency reported that the systems were activated in several parts of the capital to counter “hostile targets”, without elaborating further.

Meanwhile, it was still unclear when, or if, the two sides would meet again in the Pakistani capital, Islamabad, where mediators are trying to bring the countries together to reach a diplomatic deal.

How US, Iran can break deadlock, end conflict



SHUBHAJIT ROY

THE US and Iran are in a deadlock over the war in West Asia. But the ceasefire is holding.

These are the two realities as US President Donald Trump faces an Iranian regime that refuses to buckle under pressure.

Pakistan, which has emerged as a useful mediator between the two sides, is reaching out to both for a compromise and a possible deal to end the war.

But ultimately, it is up to the US and Iran to find middle ground, one that allows both sides to project victory to their domestic constituencies. There are key questions on which both must agree, and possible exit strategies within each.

Iran's nuclear programme

The US wants Iran to give up its right to nuclear enrichment. Tehran does not want to relinquish that right, viewing it as central to its sovereignty and national pride.

Washington also wants Tehran to hand over its enriched nuclear material. Iran, however, is unwilling to give up its 60% enriched uranium — estimated at about 440 kg — which can be further enriched to 90%, enough to make 10 nuclear weapons.

The US has proposed that Iran halt enrichment for 20 years, according to media reports, while Tehran has indicated a cap of up to five years. With both sides staking out maximalist positions, a 10-year pause could be a middle ground.

As for the 440 kg of nuclear material, the US President has already offered an opening, saying it lies under rubble — calling it 'nuclear dust'. This could pave the way for a solution where Tehran commits not to move or use the uranium within heavily fortified facilities at Isfahan and Natanz.

Sanctions relief

Iran is seeking relief from sanctions and the release of its frozen assets (estimated at \$100 billion) in the US, Europe and the Gulf, including Qatar. The US, meanwhile, wants proof that Tehran is serious about capping its nuclear programme.



The crushing western sanctions have devastated Iran's economy. One of the primary catalysts behind the country's massive protests in January was the plummeting value of the domestic currency.

While some let up in the sanctions is key for Tehran to revive its economy, Washington is likely to link any easing of sanctions to its behaviour, using it as leverage.

Strait of Hormuz

Iran has found that its most significant lever in the war is the closure of the Strait of Hormuz. Earlier, about 150 vessels passed through the Strait each day; now, that number has dropped to roughly 150 vessels over seven weeks of war. The economic consequences have affected nearly every country in the world.

Reopening the Strait is, therefore, critical. Iran also stands to lose revenue the longer it remains closed. US blockades have aimed to squeeze Iran financially, though Chinese vessels have so far been given a free pass, creating a loophole.

If both sides reach an agreement on the nuclear programme and sanctions relief,

Tankers anchored in the Strait of Hormuz off the coast of Iran's Qeshm Island. AP

Peace dividend

Gulf states have long touted their safety to position themselves as global financial, business and logistics hubs

Any US-Iran deal is therefore crucial for these economies

Iran could reopen the Strait — with the US, China and Gulf states acting as security guarantors — to prevent future disruptions.

A more hardline regime

The Iranian regime has become more hardline following the killing of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, along with key figures such as Ali Shamkhani, Ali Larjani and the senior Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps leadership.

The new Supreme Leader, Mojtaba Khamenei, along with the key national security official Mohammad Bagher Zolghadr, are seen as hardliners. Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf is viewed as a pragmatic manager. Many of them share roots in the Iran-Iraq war.

The remaining moderates include President Masoud Pezeshkian, and former presidents Hassan Rouhani and Mohammad Khatami. Though weakened over the past seven weeks, they remain experienced political operators and potential interlocutors.

The US could open channels of communication with these actors to assess how different factions within Iran respond to

From the nuclear question to the Strait of Hormuz, both sides need to find middle ground on a range of issues as they seek a face-saving exit

the current situation. They may represent the best hope for Iranians seeking greater freedom and a better life.

Many Iranians who have spoken to international media have expressed fears of a more repressive regime once the war ends. If Trump is to claim success in West Asia, he may need to consider how to engage with different actors within Iran to influence the regime's behaviour towards its people — who have suffered both before and during the war.

Regional players

Pakistan has taken centre stage as a mediator between the US and Iran, hosting the US-India-Ghana talks and, thus, creating an opening for direct engagement.

Pakistan's Army Chief, Field Marshal Asim Munir, has engaged with the US President to extend the ceasefire and has travelled to Iran to meet senior leaders. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Deputy Prime Minister Ishaq Dar have also reached out to regional capitals.

What is clear is that Gulf states have a significant stake in maintaining peace and stability. These countries have long touted safety and security to position themselves as global financial, business and logistics hubs. Their petrodollar wealth and energy dominance have enabled economic diversification, modern infrastructure and technological growth, making them attractive centres for sports, entertainment and tourism.

Any US-Iran deal is therefore crucial for these economies, which have a vested interest in regional stability.

India's interests

India, too, has a strong interest in peace in the region. Despite maintaining communication channels with all sides, India was not called upon to play a larger role.

Instead, the US leveraged its renewed engagement with Pakistan, with Field Marshal Munir acting as an effective conduit to Iran. This appears to have caused discomfort in New Delhi.

India has consistently supported efforts towards peace, and should reiterate this position — even if Pakistan receives credit for now. This is in India's interest — 10 million citizens live in the Gulf, 60% of its energy needs are sourced from the region, and there are significant Gulf investments in its economy.

What Pakistan stands to gain from Iran mediation efforts

Yashee

New Delhi, April 23

EVEN AS the Iran-US ceasefire hangs fire, both parties have repeatedly appreciated Pakistan's mediation efforts. While this has raised Pakistan's diplomatic profile, what does the country stand to gain apart from praise? And is it staring at potential pitfalls?

Why is Pakistan working hard to mediate the Iran-US conflict?

For Pakistan, ending the Iran war has deep domestic imperatives. Its economy is heavily dependent on fuel imports from the Strait of Hormuz route. Already, the fuel crisis has forced versions of work-from-home policies in many offices and schools. Millions of Pakistanis work in the Gulf countries and send home remittances.

Also, while rising fuel costs affect economic activities down the chain for every country, Pakistan faces another problem. The nation is currently on an International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan programme, as part of which it needs to maintain foreign currency reserves at a certain level. Spending more on oil drains this reserve.

The research body Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE) said in a recent report, "Rising oil prices increase the import bill, intensify inflationary pressures, and place downward pressure on the exchange rate," thereby slowing economic ac-

tivity. The existing closure of the Strait of Hormuz, if prolonged, can elevate industrial input costs and weaken overall business confidence. Furthermore, higher energy prices may also widen the trade deficit and strain external financing needs."

There are geopolitical concerns too. Even as it basks in praise from US President Donald Trump, Pakistan shares deep ties and a 900-km border with Iran. It is on good terms with the Gulf countries Iran has attacked, especially prime benefactor Saudi Arabia, with whom it also has a defence pact. Its other major benefactor, China, is suffering economically because of the war. Thus, Pakistan would want the war to end before any of its ties are put to a more severe test. Also, neither a defeated or weakened Iran — which would lead to instability on its border — nor a decisively victorious and emboldened one — which would reorder Gulf equations and create problems for Saudi Arabia — is in Pakistan's interests.

As Ali Chishti, a defence and security expert from Pakistan, put it, "Pakistan's concerns had been in two parts: that any Israeli-influenced government in Iran would be devastating for its national security, and that attacks on Gulf states have to stop for Pakistan's security and economic interests. Pakistan also wants Iran to open up economically, for its fuel security. So the negotiation efforts are survival tactics for Pakistan."

High stakes

- Pakistan depends heavily on the Strait of Hormuz route for its fuel needs

- Neither a defeated or weakened Iran — which would lead to instability on its border — nor a decisively victorious and emboldened one — which would reorder Gulf equations and create problems for Saudi Arabia — is in Pakistan's interests

What are the likely gains and dangers?

Less than four years ago, in October 2022, then US President Joe Biden said Pakistan "may be one of the most dangerous" countries in the world. Its image in many quarters was that of a failed economy that supported terrorists. From there to being the main actor in ending a war that threatens the global economy is quite a shift. When the ceasefire was first announced two weeks ago, the European Union and the Gulf Council countries had also appreciated Pakistan's role.

Pakistan can hope that such approval, along with its Board of Peace membership, can get it a seat at global high tables. Also, Pakistan's economy needs loans and foreign investments, and a improved diplomatic image could help with that.

Domestically, it gives the government a win to parade, and further cements the authority of Field Marshal Asim Munir and the military complex.

However, there are notes of caution. Some experts say that with one of the negotiating partners being the unpredictable Trump, the talks could blow up, and Pakistan would end up with some of the blame.

Moonis Ahmar, former head of international relations department at the University of Karachi, said: "Pakistan's diplomatic role to stop the war has been pivotal. Pakistan has been able to make sure that it has regional clout. However, it needs to be care-

ful. If the US again tries to betray Iran, Pakistan's position will be very awkward."

What does all of this mean for India?

In the immediate term, an end to the war is good for India, irrespective of who mediates.

In the long term, there are some concerns. If a diplomatically isolated Pakistan is in India's interests, that situation is changing.

But perhaps more importantly, the negotiations have been seen by some as a triumph of Pakistan's "hybrid regime." While Shehbaz Sharif has been talking to the Gulf and other regional countries, Munir has handled Washington. Munir, in his previous role in the spy agency ISI, had worked with Iran, and impressed Trump with his knowledge of the country.

"The hybrid regime in Islamabad, with Field Marshal Asim Munir and PM Sharif, has cracked the code for Pakistan. Munir, due to his intel jobs, has a strategic mind, reinforced by PM Sharif's great diplomacy. A win-win for Pakistan," said Chishty.

A strengthening of Munir, and thus the military, and the celebration of a "hybrid regime" has consequences not just for Pakistan's democracy, but for India too. Pakistan's peace overtures to India have come when the civilian leadership has been relatively powerful. The military has been hostile to India.

Lebanon, Israel to resume rare direct talks in Washington to extend truce

Lebanon President says contacts are ongoing to extend the 10-day ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah; the objective of future talks is to seek withdrawal of Israeli troops from the country and begin reconstruction process, his office says

Associated Press
BEIRUT

U.S. President Donald Trump will greet Lebanese and Israeli envoys at the White House on Thursday as they meet for a second round of U.S.-facilitated talks, with Beirut seeking to extend a ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah, a day after Israeli strikes killed at least five people including a journalist.

The meeting between Lebanese Ambassador to the U.S. Nada Hamadeh Moawad and her Israeli counterpart Yechiel Leiter is the second between the two diplomats, days after they held the first such di-



Fallen voice: Mourners hold images depicting Lebanese journalist Amal Khalil, who was killed in an Israeli strike. REUTERS

rect talks between the two countries in three decades. Lebanon President Joseph Aoun said on Wednesday that contacts are ongoing to extend the 10-day ceasefire that went into effect on Friday.

Ms. Hamadeh will put forward an extension of the ceasefire during the meeting and ask for an end to ongoing Israeli home demolitions in villages and towns occupied by Israel after the latest war broke

out on March 2, Mr. Aoun said in comments released by his office.

Preparations are ongoing for wider-reaching negotiations.

The aim of the future talks is to “fully” stop Israeli attacks, withdrawal of Israeli troops from Lebanon, release of Lebanese prisoners held in Israel, deployment of Lebanese troops along the border and beginning the reconstruction process, Mr. Aoun said.

Journalist killed

Lebanon's leaders accused Israel on Thursday of committing a war crime, after an airstrike killed a Lebanese journalist in the coun-

try's south, with the Israeli Army saying it was reviewing the incident. Rescuers and the reporter's employer on Wednesday confirmed the death of Amal Khalil, a 42-year-old journalist who worked for the Lebanese daily *Al-Akhbar*.

Prime Minister Nawaf Salam wrote on X that “targeting journalists and obstructing access for rescue teams constitutes a war crime”.

A 10-day ceasefire has been in effect in Lebanon since Friday, pausing the war between Israel and the Iran-backed militant group that has left more than 2,400 dead in Lebanon.

(With inputs from AFP, Reuters)

'In poor taste': Centre hits back at MAGA influencer's comment reposted by Trump

US Embassy tries to control damage, says India is a 'great' country

Shubhajit Roy
New Delhi, April 23

ASUS President Donald Trump reposted a comment by a prominent MAGA influencer and supporter calling India and China "hellhole on the planet", India on Thursday said this was "uninformed", "inappropriate" and "in poor taste."

The US Embassy sought to control the damage by putting out a message that Trump believes India is a "great" country led by a "good friend of mine."

"We have seen the comments, as also the subsequent statement issued by the US Embassy in response," the Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said.

"The remarks are obviously uninformed, inappropriate and in poor taste. They certainly do not reflect the reality of the India-US relationship, which has long been based on mutual respect and shared interests," he said.

Earlier, the spokesperson at the US Embassy had said, "The President has said 'India is a



Trump shared a video of a conservative author who claimed the legal system allows immigrants to exploit American laws by arriving in the "ninth month of their pregnancy"

great country with a very good friend of mine at the top'."

Trump reposted a criticism of birthright citizenship by sharing a video of prominent conservative author and radio host Michael Savage, who claimed the current legal system allows immigrants to exploit American laws by arriving in the "ninth month of their pregnancy."

In the footage, Savage argued that such practices create a loophole where "a baby here becomes an instant citizen, and then they bring the entire family in from China or India or some other hellhole on the planet."

The footage, originally aired on the Newsmax series The Savage Nation, was reposted by Trump, along with the script of the message. In the clip, Savage said, "Today's brief, abbreviated

discussion will be about the arguments that I just listened to before the Supreme Court about birthright citizenship. I was somewhat incensed by listening to the arguments because all I heard was legalese being banded back and forth."

Savage claimed that "English is not spoken here anymore" and alleged a lack of loyalty among modern immigrants.

He also said, "No, they're not like the European Americans of today and their ancestors. The Irish integrated, the Italians integrated, the Polish integrated, the Lithuanians, the Romanians, the Russians. They all integrated and became Americans in the melting pot."

Savage said that the traditional concept of assimilation has failed, noting, "The idea of the melting pot is long over. It is now just a cash in pot. We've gone from the melting pot to the chamber pot."

This is not the first time that immigrants from India have had to face such racist abuse by the MAGA Republican base, a core constituency of President Trump. In December 2024, right-winger Laura Loomer criticised the H1B visa programme for skilled foreign professionals to be "not America First policy" and said the tech executives who have aligned themselves with Trump were doing so to enrich themselves.

Rupee falls 23 paise to cross 94 despite RBI intervention

Central bank action fails to arrest slide as simultaneous rally in crude oil and the U.S. dollar exerts additional downward pressure; stocks fall 1% on profit booking, war-related concerns

Lalatendu Mishra

MUMBAI

Driven by high hedging dollar demand and a broader shift toward safe-haven assets, the Indian rupee on Thursday weakened past the 94 level against the U.S. dollar.

As crude oil prices rose over \$100 a barrel owing to uncertainties around the West Asia conflict, the rupee came under pressure and fell 23 paise to 94.01 against the dollar from its previous close of 93.78 in the spot market as reflected in the Clearing Corporation of India platform.

This is the rupee's fall for the fourth consecutive session, its longest losing streak, analysts said.

Dilip Parmar, Senior Research Analyst, HDFC Securities said, "Central bank interventions failed to arrest the slide as a simulta-



Declining trend: This is the rupee's fall for the fourth consecutive session, its longest losing streak. REUTERS

neous rally in crude oil and the U.S. dollar exerted additional downward pressure."

"With excessive speculation in the currency markets curbed by RBI's actions, rupee is likely to move in tandem with fundamentals. The fundamental factor behind rupee's weakness is the rising current account deficit caused by high crude prices and the sustained FPI outflows

from India," said V.K. Vijayakumar, Chief Investment Strategist, Geojit Investments Ltd.

"So long as these factors remain the same, rupee will remain weak and if crude price rises again due to escalation of the conflict, rupee will depreciate further," he added.

"The low of ₹93.50 to the dollar reached on March 30 is unlikely to be reached in the near-term

since currency speculation is under check. Rupee will move inversely in tune with crude prices. Currently depreciation stands the risk of getting aggravated if FPIs turn big sellers," he further said.

Jateen Trivedi, VP Research Analyst – Commodity and Currency, LKP Securities said, "Uncertainty around U.S.-Iran talks and tensions in the Strait of Hormuz are further supporting crude, adding to inflation concerns and limiting rupee recovery. The dollar remains steady, which is also capping any upside in the rupee."

The equity benchmark indices on Thursday fell about 1% owing to war-related worries.

The BSE Sensex fell 852 points, or 1.09%, to 77,664.

The NSE Nifty-50 index, too, fell 205 points or 0.84% to 24,173 points.

NET FOREIGN DIRECT INVESTMENT INFLOWS IN FEB ROSE TO HIGHEST LEVEL IN ALMOST FOUR YEARS

Net FDI trend reversed pre-war, surged to \$4.6 billion in February

The last time foreign investors had repatriated less than in Feb was in Sept 2020, when it stood at \$817 million

Siddharth Upasani
New Delhi, April 23

INDIA'S CAPITAL flow straits seemingly were set for a reversal of fortunes before the US and Israel attacked Iran, with February not only seeing net foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows return to positive territory after a gap of six months but also surge to the highest level in nearly four years.

According to data released by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on Thursday, India saw net FDI inflows of \$4.62 billion in February — the most since it got \$5.31 billion in May 2022 — as global investor sentiment reversed in the wake of the signing of an interim trade deal between the India and the US early that month, which eliminated the penal 25% tariff and reduced the reciprocal tariff to 18% from 25%.

The sharp pickup in net FDI in February took the total for the first 11 months of FY26 to \$6.27 billion, more than four times higher than the \$1.46 billion recorded in the same period of FY25. In FY25 as a

whole, India saw net FDI inflows of a mere \$959 million. Gross FDI for April 2025-February 2026 stood at \$88.30 billion, up 18% year-on-year.

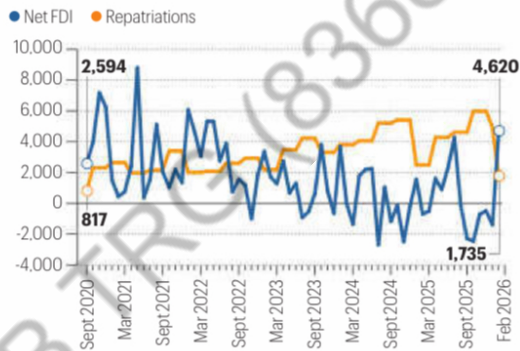
The jump in net FDI in February was on the back of higher gross inflows of \$8.98 billion as well as a sharp decline in repatriations by foreign investors to \$1.74 billion.

The last time foreign investors took back home less money than in February was in September 2020, when they had repatriated \$817 million.

Repatriation of FDI refers to foreign investors taking back money they had previously invested in India. This repatriation can be in the form of profits, dividend, or sale of assets. Net FDI is calculated after adjusting for gross FDI for investments that are repatriated by foreign companies and overseas investments made by Indian firms.

"As India has built up a large stock of FDI over the past several years, foreign firms operating in the country are increasingly repatriating profits and dividends to their parent entities. Healthy profits of multinational subsidi-

• Net FDI jumped to 45-month high in February



NOTE: NET FDI, REPATRIATION FIGURES IN \$ MILLION

SOURCE: RBI

aries in India and easier profit transfer rules have in turn accelerated investment income outflows," Morgan Stanley economists Upasana Chachra and Bani Gambhir said in a note on Wednesday. "The trend in net FDI remains crucial from an external balance sheet perspective, as FDI is typically a more stable source of financing for the current account. A sustained weakening in net flows could increase reliance on more volatile portfolio capital, with potential spillovers to external balance metrics, currency stability and financial markets."

FDI by Indian companies in

February remained robust at \$2.63 billion, with around 75% of the outward FDI going to Singapore, the UAE, and the UK, the RBI said on Thursday in its monthly State of the Economy article.

Weak net FDI numbers have been a concern for policymakers as they have weighed on the rupee's exchange rate. Adding to pressures has been the dumping of Indian stocks and debt by foreign portfolio investors (FPIs), although even that trend reversed sharply in February. After selling \$3.24 billion of Indian financial assets in the first month of 2026, FPIs

bought \$4.17 billion of equity and debt in February, helping the rupee appreciate by 1.1% against the US dollar that month to end at 90.98.

However, the war in West Asia has more than erased those gains, with March seeing FPIs exit Indian financial markets to the tune of \$13.6 billion. Consequently, the rupee dropped past 92-, 93-, 94-, and 95-per-dollar in quick succession last month. Net FPI sales in 2025-26 totalled a record \$16.59 billion.

The RBI will release FDI data for March in the second half of May. So far in April, FPIs have sold India shares and bonds worth \$6.04 billion, with the rupee closing at 94.11 per dollar on Thursday. The Indian rupee is down 4.2% so far in 2026.

The reversal of flows in February also allowed the RBI to add to its kitty of foreign exchange reserves, as it net bought \$7.41 billion of foreign currency, the most in 11 months.

The RBI's holdings of foreign currency are a crucial buffer to protect the rupee's exchange rate from volatility. In April 2025-February 2026, the Indian central bank sold \$166 billion of foreign currency on a gross basis to shore up the rupee. This is sharply lower than the near \$400 billion of sales it had made in all of 2024-25. FULL REPORT ON

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Fuel retailers losing Rs 20 per litre on petrol, Rs 100 on diesel; no plan to hike prices: Govt

Sukalp Sharma

New Delhi, April 23

THERE IS no proposal at present to hike retail prices of petrol and diesel in the country due to the spike in international prices amid the West Asia crisis, the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas (MoPNG) said on Thursday as it dismissed reports of the likelihood of a steep hike in fuel prices after the ongoing assembly elections.

Retail prices of petrol and diesel have not been hiked by public sector oil marketing companies (OMCs) even though they are incurring heavy losses on fuel sales due to the surge in international prices of crude oil and fuels.

According to Petroleum Ministry Joint Secretary Sujata Sharma, the OMCs are currently incurring losses of around Rs 20 per litre on petrol sales and Rs 100 per litre on diesel sales.

"There are some news reports suggesting a price hike of petrol and diesel. It is hereby clarified that there is no such proposal under consideration by the Government. Such news items are designed to create fear and panic amongst the citizens and are mischievous and misleading," the MoPNG said in a post on social media platform X. "In fact, India is the only country where petrol and diesel prices haven't increased in the last four years. Govt of India and Oil PSUs have taken relentless steps in order to insulate the Indian citizens from steep increases in international prices," it added.

While petrol and diesel prices are deregulated, in prac-



India is the only country where petrol, diesel prices haven't increased in the last four years, said the oil ministry. EXPRESS PHOTO

tice, the government-owned OMCs — with 90% market share in fuel retail — have kept prices stable in consultation with the Centre. They incur heavy losses when international oil prices surge, and earn hefty profits when the prices slump. Petrol and diesel prices have been more or less frozen since April 2022.

According to Sharma, oil prices have been extremely volatile since the war began, but the petrol and diesel prices have not been hiked to protect the domestic consumer from this volatility. The Indian crude oil basket, which averaged \$70 per barrel last year, averaged over \$113 this month, she said on Thursday at the inter-ministerial press briefing on the West Asia crisis. "In spite of that, the government has not increased prices and the effort

• OIL SHOCK

THOUGH PETROL and diesel prices are deregulated, in practice, government-owned OMCs — which account for about 90% of fuel retail — have kept prices steady in consultation with the Centre

THE THREE public sector oil marketing companies — Indian Oil, Bharat Petroleum, and Hindustan Petroleum — have been incurring heavy losses

TO PROVIDE some cushion to OMCs, the Centre had slashed excise duty on petrol and diesel by Rs 10/litre. But they continue to suffer by selling fuel at a loss

of the government has been to keep the prices stable," Sharma said, but didn't comment on how long the prices are likely to remain frozen considering there is no end in sight to the Strait of Hormuz crisis.

A few reports, quoting a recent note by brokerage Kotak Institutional Equities, had talked about the potential hike of Rs 25-28 per litre in petrol and diesel prices once the assembly elections conclude.

The final phase of voting is scheduled for April 29.

It reportedly said the case for a petrol and diesel price hike is strong, but the timing is driven by political considerations.

With the West Asia war effectively closing off the Strait of Hormuz, crude oil and fuel prices have surged globally.

A fifth of global oil and liquefied natural gas flows

usually transited the strait.

India depends heavily on oil and gas imports to meet its energy needs, and fuel prices in the country are linked to global oil and fuel price benchmarks. While India has been in a comfortable position with regard to crude oil, petrol, and diesel availability, it still has to bear the brunt of high prices.

Global crude oil benchmark Brent had touched \$119 per barrel in March, up from about \$73 per barrel on February 27, just a day before the US and Israel attacked Iran. While there was some correction in prices, they continue to be significantly higher than the pre-war levels.

The three public sector OMCs — Indian Oil, Bharat Petroleum, and Hindustan Petroleum — have been incurring heavy losses on fuel sales. On April 1, the MoPNG had said they were incurring under-recoveries of over Rs 24 per litre on petrol and almost Rs 105 per litre on diesel.

The under-recovery figures are dynamic and would have changed over the past few days, but continue to remain substantial. The OMCs did hike prices of the premium variants of petrol and diesel, but these variants account for just 2-5% of total petrol and diesel sales in volume terms.

To provide some cushion to the OMCs as they grapple with the financial burden, the government last month slashed excise duty on petrol and diesel by Rs 10 per litre. Nonetheless, the fuel retailers continue to bleed heavily by selling these fuels at a loss.

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