

Vijay sworn in as CM, promises transparent, clean governance

Emotional supporters cheer actor-turned-politician; he vows to bring out a White Paper on State's finances, grants 200 units of free power, and sets up police units to curb drug offences and crimes against women; nine Cabinet members sworn in

The Hindu Bureau

CHENNAI

ushering in a change in Tamil Nadu's bipolar Dravidian political landscape that has been in existence since 1967, Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam president and actor C. Joseph Vijay, 52, was sworn in as Chief Minister at the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium in Chennai on Sunday morning.

Nine Cabinet members were sworn in along with him, with eight of them, including a woman, being first-time Ministers.

The Ministry is expected to be expanded after the floor test slated on or before May 13, when it is likely to evolve into the State's first coalition government.

Mr. Vijay, a Christian by faith, is the first member of a minority religious denomination to occupy the top constitutional post, previously held by 13 others since Independence.

As Governor Rajendra Vishwanath Arlekar administered the oath of office and secrecy to Mr. Vijay,



New beginnings: Tamil Nadu Governor Rajendra Vishwanath Arlekar greeting Chief Minister and TVK chief C. Joseph Vijay during the swearing-in, in Chennai on Sunday. B. JOTHI RAMALINGAM

emotionally charged supporters cheered their *Thalapathy* (commander), with some shedding tears of joy. The Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, Rahul Gandhi, was seated next to Mr. Vijay on the dais.

Dressed in a black blazer, white shirt, and black trousers, Mr. Vijay took the oath of office from memory in a punchy style, while reading out only the oath of secrecy.

The Chief Minister signed three files on stage, delivering on some of his promises. He ordered the provision of 200 units of free electricity to domestic consumers whose bi-monthly consumption does not exceed 500 units. The move is expected to cost the exchequer ₹1,730 crore annually.

The existing scheme of 100 units of free electricity would continue for domestic consumers whose bi-

monthly consumption exceeds 500 units.

With women's safety and the circulation of drugs being major election campaign issues, Mr. Vijay ordered the setting up of an elite "Singa Penn [Lioness] Special Force" for women's safety and an Anti-Narcotic Task Force to crack down on offences involving illegal drugs.

The special force would have 65 police stations in 37 districts and nine cities.

Mr. Vijay, thereafter, used the stage to launch a political attack on the previous DMK government, accusing it of leaving behind a ₹10-lakh-crore debt.

'Treasury emptied'

"The Treasury has been completely emptied and scraped clean. They have placed a burden that cannot even be lifted. It is in such a condition that we have taken up this responsibility. Only when you go inside and see will you understand the real condition of things – what exists, what doesn't, and the state everything is in. After examining all that, I want to release a White Paper," he declared.

"I want to take it forward from there." Assuring transparency in governance, Mr. Vijay declared there would be no separate power centres, but only one centre under his leadership.

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EDITORIAL

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'Identical words, common signatures': Gram Sabha resolutions questioned

Nikhil Ghanekar
New Delhi, May 10

THREE GRAM Sabha resolutions cited by the Andaman and Nicobar islands administration as proof of tribal consent to divert 166.10 sq km of forests for Great Nicobar project had consent of settlers rather than Nicobarese and Shompen tribes, and signatures of at least 60 persons were found on at least two of the three resolutions.

These submissions were made before the Calcutta High Court's Port Blair bench by the petitioner, former union government secretary Meena Gupta, who has filed a PIL alleging illegalities in the islands administration's order claiming compliance of Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006 for the mega project.

In an order that was made public on Friday, the Calcutta High Court division bench headed by Chief Justice Sujoy Paul overruled the Centre's objections on the maintainability of this and two other petitions, and agreed to hear them.

In her counter-affidavit rebutting the Andaman and Nicobar administration's supplementary affidavit, the petitioner has called into question the entire process followed to convene these Gram Sabhas as well as the constitution of the sub-divisional level committee (SDLC) which examines resolutions passed by Gram Sabhas.

It also underscored that committees required under FRA were constituted only two

E. EXPLAINED

The Great Nicobar development project

AS PART of the Rs 81,000-crore project, the Union government wants to build an integrated township, a transshipment container port, solar and gas-based power plant and a greenfield military and civilian use airport.

were held, and 14 years after the FRA came into force.

The islands' administration had submitted in an April 9 affidavit that it had followed due procedure under the Forest Rights Act and obtained tribal consent. It submitted the minutes of three Gram Sabha resolutions held at Campbell Bay, Govind Nagar and Laxmi Nagar on the same day, August 12, 2022.

However, the petitioner has pointed out that the participants of these Gram Sabha meetings were settlers who had no rights or role under the Forest Rights Act. Settlers refer to citizens from the mainland, predominantly servicemen and ex-servicemen, who have lived on the islands.

The former union secretary provided a table in the counter-affidavit, based upon the administration's own submissions, which revealed that at least 60 names and signatures appeared in two or more of the three gram sabha proceedings. Three

the same resolution. These proceedings were held at different venues at 10.30 am (Campbell Bay), 11 am (Govind Nagar), and 11.30 am (Laxmi Nagar) on the same date, August 12, 2022.

The language of these resolutions also read identical with a unanimous decision to divert 166.10 sq kms of forests for the "holistic development" of Great Nicobar Island.

"The respondent has also failed to disclose that the same persons have signed the three resolutions. At least 60 names are repeated. It is submitted that the respondent's attempt to justify these illegal, irrelevant gram sabha resolutions ought to be deprecated. It does not behave a statutory authority to support a blatant violation of the law," the affidavit said.

The petitioner has also called the composition of SDLC illegal, as it did not include two members from the ST community as mandated under FRA, 2006. "It is reiterated that the settlers have no role/rights under the FRA...the composition of the SDLC is statutorily mandated and the respondent cannot choose to change it as they deem fit," the counter-affidavit stated.

The petitioner also sought to rebut the claim by the administration that the Andaman Adim Janjati Vikas Samiti represented the interest of Shompen tribes in key meetings, calling it factually incorrect. It was pointed out that no person or organisation could claim to represent an indigenous tribe let alone consent on be-

Release high-powered panel report on project: Ramesh to minister

Express News Service
New Delhi, May 10

RAJYA SABHA MP Jairam Ramesh wrote to Union Minister for Environment, Forest and Climate Change Bhupender Yadav on Sunday demanded

that the report of the NGT-mandated High-Powered Committee (HPC), which was tasked with revisiting the Great Nicobar Project's environmental clearances, be made public.

Ramesh alleged that the Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) conducted for the project fell short of legal requirements.

The former environment minister's letter comes on the back of a detailed statement issued by the Union government last week, in which it claimed that the ecological impacts of the project had been "comprehensively identified, assessed" and were being managed through a detailed environmental management plan.

Ramesh said, "These reports are an insult to science and make a mockery of the EIA process. All my efforts to locate the 'comprehensive studies, detailed assessments and robust EIA and EMP' relied on in the FAQs (issued by government) have failed."

The Congress leader under-



Jairam Ramesh

in March 2022 was based on a single winter season study spanning December 2020 to February 2021. He noted that the quick primary survey of ecology and biodiversity was conducted in just nine days, and the primary survey of leatherback turtles was conducted in just seven days.

The Congress leader reiterated his earlier demand that the HPC report, which revisited the project's statutory environmental clearances, be made public. The Centre had repeatedly submitted to the NGT that the HPC report was confidential.

Ramesh asked Yadav that when the environmental clearance appraisal process and EIA reports, of the proposed airport in Nicobar were public, what was the basis to contend that the HPC report was confidential. He urged the minister to "pause, reflect, and revisit the project in

AFTER IRAN, UKRAINE CONFLICTS

Govt targets homegrown AI systems for defence sector

Defence ministry in talks with SarvamAI, BharatGen, say officials: 'Idea is to have Indian version of Palantir soon'

**Soumyendra Barik
& Anil Sasi**

New Delhi, May 10

AS THE Indian defence establishment evaluates the ongoing conflict in West Asia, a compelling need is being felt for the military to have access to domestically-made artificial intelligence (AI) systems, amid a concerted push to decouple from foreign-made technology

in strategic sectors, *The Indian Express* has learnt.

The defence ministry is currently in conversations with Indian companies like SarvamAI and BharatGen — that have built domestic AI models — on how the technology can be integrated with India's existing defence capabilities, three senior government officials said.

"The idea is to have an Indian version of Palantir as soon

as possible," an official said. To invest in a foundational model of our own has a growing strategic imperative, even if we're behind the curve, another official involved in the broader deliberations said.

The conflicts in Iran and Ukraine, where the defence forces are said to have used AI effectively to take operational decisions, have shown New

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Homegrown AI system

Delhi that the technology can be a game changer, not just as a defensive resource, but as an offensive option as well. In the US, systems developed by the likes of Palantir were used in strikes carried out on Iran. The technology has also been used to carry out cyber attacks on digital infrastructure.

China, for instance, is rapidly integrating artificial intelligence into military operations as part of the push by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) towards what's being described as "intellectualised warfare". Chinese military planners are using AI for battlefield decision-making, autonomous drone swarms, surveillance, target recognition and command systems that can process combat data in seconds. Recent studies of PLA procurement documents show strong focus on AI-enabled command-and-control and reconnaissance systems, aimed at speeding up operations and countering US military advantages. China has also showcased AI-powered robotic "wolf pack" combat systems and autonomous drone platforms.

The key question though is whether India should rely on existing AI solutions for warfare, with the government and the country's military establishment believing that domestic options might be the better alternative for strategic sectors such as defence.

"Using American AI models to build products as wrappers on top of them might work in other business fields, but when it comes to strategic sectors, it is clearly being felt that there is a need to have our own technology, at least invest in them and build them, so that we are not reliant on something that we

source from outside," a second official said.

Even if extensively large models like those built in the US may not have been created in India so far, the military sees merit in deploying domestically-made small models for use on the ground. "Such AI can still help guide our autonomous systems for surveillance, reconnaissance and target mapping, and aid in intelligence fusion," a senior government official said.

Intelligence fusion in the military refers to the process of aggregating, analysing and integrating data from multiple sources — such as signals, imagery and human intelligence — to create a unified, actionable and real-time picture of threats. This concept is evolving into Intelligence Fusion Systems, which utilise AI and machine learning to rapidly process data, reducing the time from data collection to decision-making.

"From our conversations with local players, what we have understood so far is that the difference in models that have been built domestically by companies like Sarvam and BharatGen is not that much when compared with Deepseek, or at least the gap can be bridged, even though there might be a lag. But we need our own model, no question about that," another official said.

One of the reasons behind that is also the money involved in building AI models. General purpose large language models such as those built by companies like OpenAI and Anthropic take substantial investments, with computing alone costing close to \$200 million, and data training and annotation costs can take that figure up to \$500 million-\$600 million.

smaller models which are tailored for specific purposes may be cheaper to build comparatively. Indian firms may also struggle in matching compute access that some of their Western counterparts have, although the government has tried to address that handicap by providing them GPUs at discounted usage rates under the India AI Mission.

Queries sent to the defence ministry and Sarvam AI did not elicit a response until publication.

What has also irked New Delhi are comments made by senior US administration officials earlier this year, where they insisted that the US expects that its allies, including India, should build their AI solutions on top of the so-called America AI stack.

To be sure, the Indian armed forces did use AI cloud-based integrated air command and control systems to detect and position any hostile objects in the sky during Operation Sindoor last year, as reported by The Indian Express. Also, during the India AI Impact Summit earlier this year, Lt General Dinesh Singh Rana, chief of the Strategic Forces Command, revealed that the Army had deployed AI predictive tools to anticipate and repulse a Chinese attempt along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Yangtse, Arunachal Pradesh.

There is, however, a refrain around India's hardware capabilities in these discussions, officials said. "Even if our start-ups are able to build AI-led systems for military use cases, the underlying hardware that is powering those, including the graphics processing units crucial for computing power, are currently all made by foreign companies. We don't have that level of technology at our disposal yet, but it is something that has to be ensured in the coming years," a senior government official said.

Manipur Naga bodies urge PM to rein in Kuki groups

Civil society groups say recent attacks on Kuki villages amounted to cross-border military invasion and not an ethnic clash as drones, rocket launchers and other military-grade weapons were used

The Hindu Bureau

GUWAHATI

Three Naga civil society organisations in Manipur have petitioned Prime Minister Narendra Modi, seeking his “personal and urgent intervention” to check a “sustained campaign of violence and territorial aggression” by Kuki groups against Naga villages in the hill districts of the north-eastern State.

Urging the Centre to rein in the Kuki armed groups operating under the Suspension of Operations (SoO) arrangement, the organisations sought the Prime Minister’s help to expedite an inclusive and honourable settlement of the Indo-Naga peace process based on the Framework Agreement. The Centre signed this agreement with the National Socialist Council of Nagalim, also called the NSCN (Isak-Muivah).

The memorandum, copies of which were released to the media on Saturday evening, was signed by Ng Lorho, president of the United Naga Council; Ch Priscilla Thumai, president of the Naga Women’s Union; and Th Angheshang Maring, president of



Manipur Home Minister Govindas Konthoujam and others inspect the violence-affected area at Z. Choro village on Sunday. ANI

the All Naga Students’ Association, Manipur.

The signatories alleged that Myanmar-based extremists of the Kuki National Army-Burma (KNA-B), aided by the SoO groups, have launched repeated attacks on Naga villages in Ukhrul, Kamjong, and other hill districts of Manipur.

May 7 attacks

They claimed that the May 7 attacks on Z. Choro, Namlee-Wanglee, and Kaka villages, in which many houses were burnt and residents displaced, amounted to a cross-border military invasion rather than an ordinary ethnic clash.

The three organisations said that the use of drones, rocket launchers, and other military-grade weapons, along with reports that scores of armed cadres crossed the India-Myanmar border, pointed to a well-coordinated foreign-backed assault.

The memorandum accused the government of failing to uphold the spirit of the 2015 Framework Agreement, which recognises the political rights of the Naga people. It argued that the continued accommodation of Kuki extremist groups, despite alleged attacks on Naga settlements, undermines the credibility of the peace process and

the Centre’s constitutional responsibility under Article 355 to protect the States against external aggression.

The organisations called on the Centre to immediately launch operations to evict members of the KNA-B, People’s Democratic Force (anti-junta Myanmar group), and SoO cadres from Naga areas; guarantee that no administrative arrangement would affect the Naga ancestral territories; restore free movement along Manipur’s highways; and institute a time-bound judicial inquiry into the recent attacks and alleged security lapses.

Asserting that the Centre’s “continued appeasement of Kuki armed groups” constitutes a “proxy war against the very people with whom it signed the historic Framework Agreement”, the organisations requested Mr. Modi to help take the peace process with Nagas to its “logical and acceptable” conclusion.

“The Naga people have chosen the path of peace,” they said, adding that a just political settlement was essential for securing both the eastern frontier and India’s national security.

Cut fuel use, avoid foreign travel, urges PM amid global uncertainties

P. Laxma Reddy
HYDERABAD

Amid elevated global crude oil prices and an energy crisis triggered by the U.S.-Iran war, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday called for collective participation to help

the country withstand global economic uncertainties, supply chain disruptions, and inflationary pressures.

He urged citizens to make “nationally responsible” lifestyle choices and promote the use of local products, asking “how can

the nation progress if we depend on imports for everything”. Mr. Modi appealed to people to avoid non-essential purchase of gold for one year to reduce pressure on foreign exchange outflows, and advised against going on foreign tours. He said

conserving foreign exchange reserves was an act of patriotism, and urged people to avoid overseas vacations and destination weddings abroad. He pitched for domestic tourism and celebrations within the country.

He suggested reviving

some of the practices adopted during the COVID-19, including work-from-home arrangements, online conferences and virtual meetings. In a 30-minute address here, he spoke about strengthening India’s economic resilience and promoting responsible

living. He made a call to reduce petrol and diesel consumption, promote use of Metro Rail and public transport, car-pooling, and railways for freight movement, besides wider adoption of electric vehicles.

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PM urges people to cut fuel, avoid foreign travel

Mr. Modi said patriotism was not limited to sacrificing one's life for the country but also meant discharging responsibilities towards the nation during difficult times. Stressing that safeguarding national interests was not the responsibility of any one government or party, he said every citizen, party and organisation should work together to help the country overcome global challenges. He sought the support of the media in this regard.

Referring to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine war on the global economy, the Prime Minister said supply chains had been severely disrupted, and prices of food, fuel and fertilizers had risen internationally. Despite these pressures, he said, the Centre was shielding farmers from the burden of rising fertilizer prices through subsidies. He said that fertilizer bags costing nearly ₹3,000 in the international market were being supplied to farmers for less than ₹300.

Calling for a stronger implementation of the 'Vocal for Local' campaign, the Prime Minister appealed to the people to prioritise locally manufactured (Swadeshi) products, including daily-use items such as shoes, bags and accessories. He asked families to cut down consumption of edible oil, stating that it would benefit both the country's economy and public health.

Expressing concern over excessive use of chemical fertilizers, the Prime Minister said the practice was damaging soil health and increasing import dependence. He urged farmers to reduce chemical fertilizer usage by up to 50% and gradually shift towards natural farming practices.

He encouraged the use of solar-powered irrigation pumps instead of diesel-run sets for agriculture.

"There is a situation where we are even forced to import cooking oil. We must achieve self-sufficiency in edible oils," Mr. Modi said.

'Maritime security is of primordial importance to Indian Ocean Region'

Any disruption in the Indian Ocean will have a deep impact on the economy across the region, says Sanjiv Ranjan, Secretary-General of the Indian Ocean Rim Association; India chairs the 23-nation grouping; a summit marking its 30th anniversary is expected to be held next year, he adds

Suhasini Haidar
NEW DELHI

Navigating maritime security in the wake of the war in West Asia will be at the top of the agenda as India chairs the 23-nation Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), with a leaders' summit expected next year, says the organisation's Secretary-General Sanjiv Ranjan.

In addition to raising the profile of the IORA, the government is expected to focus on the specific challenges arising from the war in West Asia, including the violence in the region and the Hormuz Strait blockades by Iran and the U.S.

Last week, Mr. Ranjan had co-hosted the Indian Ocean Dialogue in Delhi, which was attended by Ministers from India, Mauritius and Yemen, besides representatives from both Iran and the United Arab Emirates.

Speaking to *The Hindu*, he said while bilateral differences are not discussed at the grouping, the Gulf war has raised issues of "primordial importance" for the IOR countries.

"The increasing realisa-

tion from the contemporary situation is that maritime safety and security is of primordial importance for our energy security, our food security, [and] many livelihoods, which are involved as a result of the developments in Indian Ocean littoral areas," he said, referring to all countries with coastlines on the Indian Ocean.

Two-day dialogue

Delivering a keynote address to the two-day dialogue, Mauritius Foreign Minister Dhananjay Ramful said that the "ideal of the Indian Ocean as a zone of peace" has been negated and "war has come" to the ocean. Mr. Ramful called the U.S.'s sinking of the Iranian naval ship *IRIS Dena*, in which 100 sailors were killed in March, as "outrageous" and also expressed concern over retaliatory Iranian attacks using Intermediate Range Ballistic Missiles (IRBMs) on the U.S.'s Diego Garcia base on Mauritius's Chagos Islands.

"They might not have reached their target, but they have nonetheless breached our comfortable



IORA Secretary-General Sanjiv Ranjan says member countries have seen fuel prices rise considerably due to war. SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

status quo. They have introduced in our region of the Indian Ocean an intent of aggression hitherto unknown," Mr. Ramful added.

According to the IORA charter, "bilateral and other issues likely to generate controversy and be an impediment to regional co-operation efforts will be excluded from deliberations". However, they will discuss the "socio-economic" impact of the conflict in talks on eight priority areas: maritime safety and security, trade and investment, fisheries management, disaster risk management, tourism, cul-

tural exchanges, blue economy and women's economic empowerment, Mr. Ranjan said.

"Without a doubt, any disruption in the Indian Ocean will have a deep impact on the economy across the region. The tourism sector is affected badly especially due to airline disruptions. Fuel prices in many of our member countries have increased considerably, some have had to shut down offices and schools. In the long term, inflation, agricultural output and productivity – impacted due to fertilizer shortages – will all hurt the region. A big worry is that

[due to the war] situations where fisherman are unable to go out to the sea for fishing will affect livelihoods," Mr. Ranjan told *The Hindu*.

The IORA Summit in 2027 will mark the organisation's 30th anniversary, said Mr. Ranjan, adding that the last time such a summit had been held was in 2017, when Indonesia marked the IORA's 20th anniversary in Jakarta. In the run-up to that, India will host the Senior Officials Meeting, in June this year, while the IORA Council of Ministers would meet towards the end of 2026.

Series of meetings

The Indian Ocean dialogue, which was a "track 1.5" conference for officials, academics and experts, co-hosted by the IORA and the Ministry of External Affairs and organised by the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA), will kick off a series of meetings expected over the coming year, as India seeks to recharge the IORA.

The grouping was formed in 1997 with former South African leader

Nelson Mandela amongst those leading it. However, the IORA has not received the relevance that other regional groupings have, such as the now-defunct SAARC, BIMSTEC, SCO or Quad, over three decades.

In addition to its salience in India's MAHASAGAR maritime policy and Indo-Pacific strategy, the IORA is less contentious for India as Pakistan has never been admitted to its ranks. Pakistan had requested membership in the early 2000s, but the fact that it refused to grant India "MFN status" for trade violated the IORA charter that calls for "sovereign equality" or equal treatment of all states, according to officials.

The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) currently comprises 23 member states, including Australia, Bangladesh, Comoros, France, India, Indonesia, Iran, Kenya, Madagascar, Malaysia, Maldives, Mauritius, Mozambique, Oman, Seychelles, Singapore, Somalia, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Thailand, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.

Iran responds to U.S. proposal as drones target Gulf nations

Tehran seeks to end the war on all fronts, including in Lebanon, state TV says; the UAE and Kuwait report drones in their airspace while one hit a ship off Qatar; Supreme Leader issues new directive

Associated Press

DUBAI

Iran has sent its response to the latest U.S. ceasefire proposal via Pakistani mediators and wants negotiations to focus on permanently ending the war, Iran's state-run media said on Sunday. Pakistan confirmed receiving it.

Iran seeks to end the war on all fronts, including in Lebanon, where Israel fights the Iranian-backed Hezbollah militant group, and to ensure the security of shipping, its state TV said. Washington's latest proposal addressed a deal to end the war, reopen the Strait of Hormuz and roll back Iran's nuclear program, an issue that Tehran would rather discuss later.

Trump's latest threat

U.S. President Donald Trump on Sunday accused Iran of "playing games" and laughing at America, but said it soon would be made to stop – without commenting directly on Iran's reply.

"Iran has been playing



Water wars: The American military says it has turned back over 60 commercial vessels since it began the blockade of Iranian ports. AFP

games with the U.S., and the rest of the World, for 47 years," Mr. Trump said on his Truth Social platform. He also accused Tehran of "laughing at our now GREAT AGAIN Country" but added: "They will be laughing no longer!"

Iran's new Supreme Leader, Mojtaba Khamenei, "issued new directives for the continuation of operations and the powerful confrontation with the enemies" while meeting with the head of the joint military command, the state broadcaster reported.

Meanwhile, the fragile ceasefire was tested when

a drone ignited a small fire on a ship off Qatar and the UAE and Kuwait reported drones entering their airspace. The UAE blamed Iran. No casualties were reported, and no one claimed responsibility.

Mr. Trump has reiterated threats to resume full-scale bombing if Iran does not accept an agreement to reopen the strait. Iran has largely blocked the strategic waterway that's key to the global flow of oil, natural gas and fertilizer since the war began, rattling world markets.

The U.S. in turn has blockaded Iranian ports

and on Friday struck two Iranian oil tankers it said were trying to breach the blockade. The American military said on Sunday that it has turned back 61 commercial vessels and disabled four since the blockade began on April 13.

Nuclear issue

Another sticking point in negotiations is Iran's highly enriched uranium.

An Iranian military spokesperson said its forces were on "full readiness" to protect nuclear sites where uranium is stored, state media reported. "We considered it possible that they might intend to steal it through infiltration operations," Brig. Gen. Akrami Nia told the IRNA news agency.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on Sunday that the war isn't over because the enriched uranium needs to be taken out of Iran. "Mr. Trump has said to me, 'I want to go in there,' and I think it can be done physically," he said.

(With inputs from AFP)

14 police personnel killed in Pakistan suicide attack

Associated Press

PESHAWAR

The death toll from a suicide attack on a security post in northwest Pakistan rose to 14 police officers, authorities said on Sunday. A self-proclaimed breakaway group of the Pakistan Taliban has claimed the attack.

A suicide bomber and several gunmen detonated an explosives-laden vehicle near the post in Bannu, a district in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province bordering Afghanistan, late on Saturday, said senior police official Sajjad Khan.

The attack triggered an intense shootout, and some officers were killed in the exchange, while others died later after the building collapsed.

Rescuers conducted an hours-long search operation using heavy machinery to retrieve bodies from under the rubble, Mr. Khan said, adding that three police officers were wounded in the attack.

Meanwhile, hundreds gathered on Sunday at the police headquarters in Bannu to attend the funerals of the slain officers. Uniformed colleagues stood in silence as coffins draped



Solemn respects: Funeral prayers for the police officers killed in a car bombing and shootout in Bannu, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. AP

in the national flag were carried past grieving families. Some relatives broke down upon seeing the coffins, as a Muslim cleric led funeral prayers under tight security.

President Asif Ali Zardari condemned the attack and offered condolences to the victims' families. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif also condemned the attack.

President levels charge
Mr. Zardari said, "Terrorists operating from sanctuaries in Afghanistan under the Taliban administration and supported externally are targeting civilians and law enforcement personnel in Pakistan." He also vowed to target "their facilitators and sponsors."

Security forces have launched an operation to

track down the perpetrators.

A newly formed militant group, Ittehad-ul-Mujahideen Pakistan, claimed responsibility for the attack in a statement. While the group claims it was formed by splinter factions of the Pakistani Taliban, known as Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), authorities have accused it of being a front for the TTP.

Pakistan has witnessed a surge in militant violence in recent years, much of it blamed on the TTP, a separate group but an ally of the Afghan Taliban, who returned to power in Afghanistan in 2021.

Islamabad often accuses Afghanistan's Taliban government of providing sanctuary to the TTP, a claim that Kabul denies.

Putin suggests Ukraine war is coming to an end

Reuters
MOSCOW

A U.S.-mediated ceasefire between Russia and Ukraine appeared under serious strain on Sunday, with both sides trading blame for weekend attacks.

Russian officials had on Saturday sent mixed signals with Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov saying peace in Ukraine was a “very long way” away but President Vladimir Putin suggesting the war was “coming to an end”.

Mr. Putin said that he

Russian leader proposes former German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder as mediator

thought the Ukraine war was coming to an end, remarks that came just hours after he had vowed victory in Ukraine at Moscow’s most scaled-back Victory Day parade in years.

“I think that the matter is coming to an end,” Mr. Putin said. He also said he would be willing to negotiate new security arrange-

ments for Europe, and that his preferred negotiating partner would be Germany’s former Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder.

Meanwhile, the three-day pause announced on Friday by President Donald Trump, as part of a broader U.S.-led push for peace that has so far failed to end the more than four-year-old war, seems to have had little effect, with attacks being reported from both sides.

Three killed

Three people were killed in Russian drone strikes on

areas near the front line, and more than 200 battlefield clashes had taken place since Saturday, Ukrainian officials said. They accused Russia of violating the U.S.-brokered deal, which also included a swap of 1,000 prisoners of war from each side.

Russia’s Defence Ministry also accused Ukraine of flouting the ceasefire, saying it had downed 57 Ukrainian drones over the past day and “responded in kind” on the battlefield.

Earlier this week, Russia and Ukraine had each announced separate cease-

fires, starting on Friday and Wednesday respectively, but quickly accused one another of breaking them.

According to the Interfax news agency, Kremlin adviser Yuri Ushakov announced that U.S. envoy Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner will visit Moscow “soon enough” to continue diplomatic discussions.

Separately, Germany on Sunday dismissed a suggestion by Mr. Putin that Mr. Schroeder could coordinate talks with the European Union to secure a peace deal in Ukraine.

War could make Trump's trip to China a bit chillier than his first-term visit

Associated Press

Washington, May 10

WEEKS BEFORE his trip to China, President Donald Trump was already predicting on social media that his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping, would "give me a big, fat hug when I get there."

But Beijing's deep economic ties to Iran, as well as trade tensions over tariff threats stretching back to Trump's first term, could crimp the good feelings when Trump flies to Beijing this week — even though the Republican president has for years effusively praised Xi, making it clear he sees China's leader as a competitor strong enough to warrant his respect and admiration.

Trump isn't fond of long plane rides or extended stretches away from the White House or his properties in Florida and New Jersey. He is expected to spend parts of three days on the ground in China.

There will be plenty of pomp, but the grandeur is not expected to rival Trump's first visit to China in 2017, which Beijing dubbed a "state visit-plus."

"Even before this whole conflagration with Iran, they weren't going to go state visit-plus like last time, just because things are tense," said Jonathan Czin, a former director for China at the National Security Council dur-

● THE VISIT

- Trump arrives in Beijing on Wednesday evening, says White House.
- Thursday morning opening ceremony, state banquet in the evening.
- Trump, Xi to discuss China's support for Iran and Russia, Beijing's nuclear programme.
- US and China will work on joint board of trade and investment.
- US plans to host Xi Jinping for reciprocal visit later in 2026.

ing the Biden administration.

Trump could meet with China's leader four times in eight months. After his visit to Beijing, Trump plans to host Xi at the White House. Trump might also attend the November Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation meeting in Shenzhen, China. And Xi could come to the Group of 20 summit the following month at Trump's resort in Doral, Florida.

Czin noted that Xi also is not very fond of travel, meaning not all of the planned encounters may happen. He said China's leader also does not "do personal connections" like the kind Trump relishes, noting Xi led a Chinese military purge in January that included replacing officials with long-standing personal ties to his family.

Evacuation of hantavirus-hit vessel begins in Canary Islands

Agence France-Presse

GRANADILLA DE ABONA

Occupants of a cruise ship struck by a deadly hantavirus outbreak that has sparked international alarm began flying home from Spain's Canary Islands on Sunday in a complex repatriation operation.

Three passengers from the *MV Hondius* have died, while others have fallen sick with the rare disease, which usually spreads among rodents.

No vaccines or specific treatments exist for hanta-

virus, which is endemic in Argentina, where the ship departed in April. But health officials have stressed that the risk for global public health is low and played down comparisons to a repeat of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The final flight to evacuate most of the ship's nearly 150 passengers and crew will leave on Monday, Spanish Health Minister Monica Garcia said.

Passengers wearing blue medical suits began disembarking the Dutch-flagged vessel onto smaller boats to reach the port of

Granadilla on Tenerife. The evacuees then boarded a Spanish Army bus and travelled to Tenerife South airport in a convoy with Civil Guard vehicles.

The evacuees changed into new protective equipment before boarding their repatriation flight.

"The operation is going very well," World Health Organization chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said.

All passengers are asymptomatic and underwent a final medical assessment before their disembarkation, Ms. Garcia said.