

TRUMP U-TURN: NO HORMUZ TRANSIT FEE, WANT TRADE, INVESTMENT DEALS INSTEAD

Another Indian killed as Iran hits UAE tankers in Hormuz

MEA summons Iran's deputy chief of mission, lodges protest

Shubhajit Roy
New Delhi, July 14

AS THE US and Iran stepped up attacks and battled for control over the Strait of Hormuz, two UAE-flagged oil tankers with Indian seafarers came under fire from Tehran on Tuesday, leaving one dead and 10 injured. The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) summoned the Iranian Deputy Chief of Mission and lodged a strong protest.



A vessel at the Strait of Hormuz, as seen from Oman, Tuesday.

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(Reuters adds: US President Donald Trump stepped back from a proposal to charge a 20% transit fee to guard the strait, saying he would instead seek investment deals with Gulf states. US forces carried

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Dashboard to monitor seafarers, liaison officers for families, says Govt

Vikas Pathak
New Delhi, July 14

WITH ANOTHER Indian seafarer being killed in the US-Iran conflict, the Centre on Tuesday ordered a series of measures, including an operational dashboard to track every Indian on every vessel — regardless of the country it belongs to — and a dedicated liaison officer for every seafarer who is killed or injured, to act as the “single

point of contact” for the affected family.

The decisions were taken at an inter-ministerial meeting chaired by Sarbananda Sonowal, Union Minister of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, soon after the fresh attacks on two oil tankers with Indian crew on Tuesday.

According to sources in the ministry, nine Indian seafarers have died, one is presumed

»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

Another Indian killed

out waves of attacks for the third night in a row after Tehran said it had closed the strait, prompting Trump on Monday to reinstate a blockade of Iranian shipping and propose the fee.

But just a little under five hours before the fee had been due to come into effect, Trump said the strait was open to all shipping traffic except that of Iran. "Based on highly productive conversations with Middle East leadership, I have decided to replace the 20% United States reimbursement fee with trade and investment deals that the various Gulf states will be making into the United States," he said in a post on Truth Social.)

Condemning Tuesday's attacks, India called for an immediate cessation of violence, particularly the targeting of commercial shipping and civilian infrastructure, and restoration of "free and unimpeded navigation and commerce through international waterways in the region".

The incident came days after an Indian seafarer went missing as a Cyprus-flagged ship transiting the Strait of Hormuz was targeted by Iran on Sunday. On

Tuesday, his family in Pune said his death had been confirmed.

"India is deeply concerned by the attacks on two vessels, MT Al Bahiyah and MT Mombasa, during their transit through the Strait of Hormuz today," the MEA said in a statement.

It said of the total 46 crew members on the two vessels, 30 were Indians. "Of the 12 Indian nationals onboard MT Al Bahiyah, one has tragically lost his life and another has been injured," the MEA said. "Of the 18 Indian nationals onboard MT Mombasa, nine have sustained injuries, including two who are reported to be seriously injured," it said.

(Agencies add: The defence ministry of the UAE said on social media that MT Mombasa and MT Al Bahiyah were "targeted by two Iranian cruise missiles while transiting the southern shipping lane of the Strait of Hormuz, within Omani territorial waters". Abu Dhabi National Oil Company's shipping arm ADNOC L&S said the vessels had sustained "significant damage".

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) said that

two "offending" supertankers had been hit and disabled in the Strait of Hormuz after ignoring repeated warnings, turning off navigation systems and attempting to pass through what the Guards described as a mined route. The IRGC's statement did not name the vessels or say whether it was referring to the same tankers cited by the UAE Ministry of Defence.)

In its statement on Tuesday, the MEA said: "The Deputy Chief of Mission of the Embassy of Iran in New Delhi was summoned this morning by the Ministry of External Affairs and a strong protest against these attacks was lodged with him."

"We strongly condemn these attacks and acts of violence targeting seafarers and disrupting free and safe navigation through international waterways like the Strait of Hormuz," it said.

On the situation in the Strait of Hormuz, MEA's official spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said at the weekly briefing on Tuesday: "We are closely following the developments in West Asia. We continue to call for safe and unimpeded navigation and flow of commerce through the Strait of Hormuz. This is key for ensuring energy and economic security of people across the world."

India blames Pakistan for protests in PoK, seeks accountability

The Hindu Bureau

NEW DELHI

Protests continued across multiple districts of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir on Tuesday, a day ahead of the July 15 long march call by the Joint Awami Action Committee (JAAC).

On Monday, eight protests were reportedly held and fresh clashes in Sudhnoti and Mathiyal Mera in PoK resulted in casualties, as per Indian agencies.

Responding to a query at a press briefing on Tuesday, External Affairs Ministry spokesperson Randhir

Jaiswal said: "The ongoing protests are a direct consequence of Pakistan's decades-long systemic exploitation, denial of fundamental rights and administrative oppression in areas under its illegal and forcible occupation."

"Rather than addressing the legitimate grievances

of the local population, the Pakistani state has responded with excessive police brutality, including against helpless women and children, blocking essential supplies, including of food and medicine, enforcing Internet blackouts and deploying lethal force against unarmed civilians that has led to tragic fatalities," he said.

"We expect and hope that the international community will hold Pakistan fully accountable for these egregious abuses and misdeeds," said Mr. Jaiswal.

The JAAC's call for a long march to Muzaffarabad on July 15 follows the expiry of its ultimatum to the Pakistan government over the release of detained leaders and activists, implementation of its 38-point charter of demands, and an end to the ongoing "security crackdown".

'Gold standard' India-U.K. trade deal is coming into effect today

Commerce Secretary describes pact as one of the 'most ambitious and aspirational free trade agreements' signed by the country; he adds that it will benefit farmers, fisherfolk; officials in U.K. welcome deal and highlight its multi-sectoral impact

T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan
NEW DELHI

The India-U.K. Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) and Double Contribution Convention (DCC) that will come into force on Wednesday are a "gold standard" and one of the "most ambitious and aspirational free trade agreements" signed by India, Commerce Secretary Rajesh Agrawal said on Tuesday.

He added that the deals benefit India's farmers, fisherfolk, workers and women entrepreneurs. The India-U.K. CETA and the DCC were signed in July last year.

"This is one of the first free trade agreements (FTAs) of its kind, which establishes a future-oriented economic architecture between two major economies of the world," Mr. Agrawal said at a press briefing. "This is also one of the most ambitious and aspirational FTAs of India, which we are operationalising as till date."

"It is a gold standard and the first of its kind be-

Terms of trade

The India-U.K. Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) and Double Contribution Convention (DCC) are set to come into force on Wednesday

- Under the CETA, the U.K. will immediately eliminate tariffs on **96.8%** of its tariff lines, accounting for **97.7%** of the trade value

- India will immediately eliminate tariffs on **30.3%** of the trade value, with **47%** more seeing tariffs eliminated in a phased manner

- The DCC will exempt Indian workers and their employers from paying social security contributions in the U.K. for **5 years** if contributions are being made in India



- India has protected **sensitive sectors** such as dairy, cereals, pulses, vegetables, gold and jewellery, smartphones, and critical polymers

cause of its wide sectoral coverage and deep reduction in both tariff and non tariff barriers," he added.

Under the deal, the U.K. will immediately eliminate tariffs on 96.8% of its tariff lines, accounting for 97.7% of the trade value. An additional 2% of tariff lines, amounting to 1.8% of trade value, will see reduced tariffs based on quotas. In total, this covers 98.8% of tariff lines and 99.5% of trade value.

India, on the other hand, will immediately eliminate tariffs on 30.3% of the trade value, with 47% more seeing tariffs eliminated in a phased manner. It will also provide reduced quota-based tariffs on 12.1% of the trade value. In total, this would cover 89.5% of tariff lines and 89.4% of trade value.

Officials in the U.K. have also welcomed the deal, highlighting a multi-sectoral impact. "For the City of

London, the agreement provides a strong platform to unlock even greater collaboration in financial and professional services, insurance, fintech, sustainable finance and infrastructure investment," Chris Hayward, Policy Chairman of the City of London Corporation, told *The Hindu*.

"As India continues its remarkable economic growth story, London stands ready to support the mobilisation of global capital and expertise needed to help deliver those goals," he added.

Mr. Agrawal said that the 30 chapters across which negotiations have taken place under this pact extend beyond conventional tariff liberalisation to cover digital trade, government procurement, SMEs, innovation, labour, environment, and gender.

He added that the deal addresses non-tariff barriers as well, so that issues like Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS) and Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) "do not become unjustified trade restrictions for our businesses in the future".

He further explained that the deal protects India's sensitive sectors such as dairy, cereals, pulses, vegetables, gold and jewellery, smartphones, and critical polymers.

'Game changer'

On the DCC, he said that the agreement was a "game changer" for India's services sector and skilled workforce. "Indian employees and their employers contribute around 25% of their salary to the U.K.'s national insurance system," he said. "Their contribution is like a tax of 25% as employees are unable to draw benefits. These are like sunk costs."

He said that the DCC will ensure that workers will not need to pay double contributions towards their social security. That is, if they are paying social security in India, then they will not have to pay it in the U.K. as well for a period of five years.

According to Mr. Agrawal, this will benefit over 75,000 Indian workers and over 900 employers. (With inputs from Sriram Lakshman in London)

India bans import of goods made using forced labour amid pending U.S. probe

T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan
NEW DELHI

The Government of India has issued a notification banning the import of goods manufactured using forced labour, a significant step towards clearing the path towards the signing of an interim trade agreement with the U.S.

The U.S. is currently in the process of releasing its final decision on the tariffs it plans to levy on countries that it says have not done enough to stop the import of goods made using forced labour.

“The import of goods produced or manufactured, wholly or in part, through the use of forced labour is prohibited,” the Ministry of Commerce and Industry said in its notification. It added that the Union government may, from time to time, specify the goods whose import shall be prohibited under this paragraph.

“The procedure for conducting an enquiry by the Director General of Foreign Trade into the use of forced labour in the production of such goods shall be as prescribed in the Handbook of Procedures,

The govt. said it may, from time to time, specify the goods whose import shall be prohibited

2023,” it added. Under its draft proposal following an investigation, the U.S. found that India and 53 other countries “failed to impose and effectively enforce” prohibitions on the import of goods produced using forced labour. As such, it proposed a tariff of 12.5% on imports from these countries.

Commerce Secretary Rajesh Agrawal confirmed on Monday that India had made its submissions to the U.S. on the matter and protested the tariffs.

This pending decision has led to significant uncertainty surrounding the India-U.S. trade deal, with Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal and Mr. Agrawal separately saying India would sign a deal only once it is established that it will receive a comparative advantage over its competitors.

One key factor in establishing this comparative advantage is to see what tariffs the U.S. plans to levy

under its various investigations. The second investigation is into whether the U.S.’s trade partners are using excess capacity to export to the U.S. to the detriment of the American economy.

According to the notification by the Commerce Ministry, “forced labour” means “all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily, as defined under the ILO Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29)”.

According to Manoj Mishra, Partner and Tax Controversy Management Leader, Grant Thornton Bharat, the introduction of a prohibition on imports of goods produced through forced labour marks a significant policy shift in India’s trade framework. “While India has so far relied largely on labour and criminal laws to address forced labour domestically, the Foreign Trade Policy now incorporates a dedicated trade measure aligned with international standards under the ILO Forced Labour Convention,” Mr. Mishra said.

India's imports from China soar to \$80 bn in first half of 2026

Two-way bilateral trade was up to \$91.72 bn after six months, a 23.6% rise from last year, on track to surpass record \$155.62 bn figure from 2025

Ananth Krishnan

India's imports from China rose 21.8% in the first half of 2026 to a record \$79.41 billion, according to data released by China's General Administration of Customs on Tuesday.

Two-way bilateral trade was up to \$91.72 billion after six months, a 23.6% rise from last year, and on track to surpass the record \$155.62 billion trade figure from 2025, when China was again India's biggest trade partner in goods.

While the trade deficit reached \$67.1 billion after the first half of the year – also on track to exceed last year's record \$116.12 billion figure – India's exports to China have also registered strong growth, up by 37.2% to \$12.31 billion.

Trade deficit

India's official data on Monday showed the overall trade deficit in the month of June 2026 rose over fourfold year-on-year to \$15.3 billion in June 2026, on the back of high growth in merchandise imports and a rise in the value of crude oil, electronics and gold imports.

Indian officials are less concerned by the quantum of the trade deficit with China than by the nature of the basket of goods. India imports not only large quantities of finished electronics and other equip-



Chinese checkers: India is less concerned by the quantum of trade deficit with China than by the nature of the basket of goods. REUTERS



Obviously, we would like to be able to export more to China. This is nothing unreasonable about suggesting that

VIKRAM DORAISWAMI,
India's Ambassador to China

ment from China, but also intermediates that are needed for Indian manufacturing and fuel India's own exports. A particular concern is the nature of India's exports to China, which in the past have been dominated by low value-added products such as organic chemicals, ores and seafood.

Earlier this month, India's Ambassador to China Vikram Doraiswami pitched for greater Indian exports to China, especially in areas where India is globally competitive such as pharmaceuticals. "Obviously, we would like to be

able to export more to China. This is nothing unreasonable about suggesting that," he said, speaking at the World Peace Forum, an annual foreign policy forum in Beijing.

"How do we find ways in which India and China can be connected, with a widening basket of goods that both sides can provide each other, but also a sense that reasonable mechanisms to protect consumers can be applied in a way that enables India also to export more of the goods that it can export elsewhere in the world also to China?" he said. "In other words, it would be easier to consider that the trade wouldn't be exactly 50-50 balanced, but one side would have more exports, provided that exports consist of goods that we can also add value. If it is pure consumption goods, that becomes a little harder to sell as a reasonable mechanism for the deficit."

As Wangchuk's condition deteriorates, leaders urge him to end hunger strike

Aroon Deep

NEW DELHI

The 17th day of protests at Jantar Mantar demanding the resignation of Union Education Minister Dharma Pradhan saw larger crowds than Monday, following an increase in the number of voices urging activist Sonam Wangchuk to end his hunger strike.

Mr. Wangchuk has lost 8.5 kg, the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) said on Tuesday.

A growing chorus of Opposition voices urged Mr. Wangchuk, 59, to end his fast. Actors Naseeruddin Shah and Ratna Pathak Shah; economist Jayati Ghosh; writer Arundhati Roy; and multiple Professors from Jawaharlal Nehru University, either sent in a written petition or showed up in person to appeal to Mr. Wangchuk.

In separate posts on social media platform X, Samajwadi Party president Akhilesh Yadav and Trinamool Congress MP Mahua Moitra too appealed to Mr. Wangchuk to end his fast.



Life in peril: Doctors attending to activist Sonam Wangchuk on Tuesday. He has been on an indefinite hunger strike for 17 days. PTI

Former West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee spoke with Mr. Wangchuk over telephone and “urged him to stay strong”, CJP founder Abhijeet Dipke said.

Mr. Dipke said that on Tuesday morning Mr. Wangchuk rebuffed calls to end his fast. “Don’t ask me to end my fast,” he quoted the activist as saying. “Ask the govt. why they won’t even have a dialogue.”

Three student members of the All India Students’ Association (AISA), affiliated to the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation, ended their fast, with one being hospitalised on Monday. Three

other students, however, are still fasting.

Call to political leaders

The CJP invited the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, Rahul Gandhi, to the protest, along with 19 other leaders, including Tamil Nadu Chief Minister C. Joseph Vijay. Most of them have not spoken on the protest.

“We again sincerely appeal to the leaders to keep aside their politics and lend to lend their voice to the voice of the young,” CJP spokesperson Saurav Das said.

The CJP is planning a march to Parliament on July 20.

Over 1,000, mostly bureaucrats, apply for Ram Mandir CEO post

Maulshree Seth
Lucknow, July 14

OVER 1,000 people from across the country have applied for the post of Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Ram Mandir, with retired bureaucrats dominating the list of applicants.

Applications poured into the official email address of the selection committee within 24 hours of the recruitment notification being issued on Monday.

The Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra constituted the three-member committee to identify a new CEO, who will oversee the day-to-day management of the temple trust, amid the ongoing controversy over the alleged theft of donations at the temple.

With July 18 being the deadline for applications, the selection committee has decided to appoint a secretary to help them segregate the applications based on the eligibility

criteria decided by them.

"Within a few hours of issuing the notification, we received around 750 applications on the first day. Given the response in less than 24 hours, we expect the number to run into thousands by the July 18 deadline. We, therefore, need a secretary to compile and scrutinise the applications based on the prescribed criteria," a member of the selection committee told *The Indian Express*.

He added that the committee will meet on July 19 to begin scrutinising the applications and schedule interviews.

Sources said the secretary is likely to be a retired officer.

Among those who have publicly confirmed applying is former IPS officer and social activist Amitabh Thakur (58). "Finding myself suitable under the criteria laid down by the Ram Janmabhoomi Trust for the post of CEO, I have submitted my application," he said.



Given the high response of applications, the selection committee expect the number to run into thousands by July 18 deadline. FILE

Thakur, who has courted controversy in the past, was arrested by the Lucknow Police last year in connection with a case of alleged fraud to secure an industrial plot in Deoria district in 1999.

The committee comprises retired Supreme Court judge Justice Pramod Kohli, retired Lieutenant General Vishnu-

kant Chaturvedi, and retired nuclear scientist and former chairperson of the Shri Saibaba Sansthan Trust in Shirdi Suresh Haware.

On Monday, the committee laid down the eligibility criteria: Applicants must be between 50 and 70 years of age, have at least 20 years of administrative experience, and be willing to

reside in Ayodhya.

In a key eligibility condition, it said the applicant must be a "practising Hindu" with "devotion to Lord Ram" and should be proficient in both Hindi and English.

Sources said the applications include a significant number of retired bureaucrats, some of whom have experience of working in managerial positions in religious places.

After scrutiny, sources said candidates well suited to the role will be called for interviews or discussions. Considering the seniority of the candidates, the panel will be open to online interviews, if required, but a final call will be taken after the July 19 meeting.

The Trust is also scheduled to meet on July 22 by which time the selection committee is expected to present its progress. The next meeting of the selection committee is likely to be in Delhi.

NASA astronaut Anil Menon embarks on 8-month stint to International Space Station

Press Trust of India

WASHINGTON

NASA astronaut Anil Menon and two Russian cosmonauts on Tuesday lifted off onboard a Soyuz MS-29 spacecraft from Kazakhstan on an eight-month mission to the International Space Station.

The Roscosmos spacecraft carrying Mr. Menon and Russian cosmonauts Pyotr Dubrov and Anna Kikina lifted off from the Baikonur cosmodrome.

After a two-orbit, three-hour trip to the station, the spacecraft will automati-



A Soyuz 2.1a booster rocket with the Soyuz MS-29 spacecraft blasts off to the ISS from Baikonur cosmodrome in Kazakhstan. AFP

cally dock to the Prichal module. This marks Mr. Menon's first spaceflight and the second flight for the Russian cosmonauts,

according to NASA.

Once aboard, the trio will join NASA astronauts Jessica Meir, Jack Hathaway, and Chris Williams,

European Space Agency astronaut Sophie Adenot, and Roscosmos cosmonauts Sergey Kud-Sverchikov, Sergei Mikaev, and Andrey Fedyaev.

Mr. Menon, Mr. Dubrov and Ms. Kikina's mission will last about eight months, and they are scheduled to return to Earth in April 2027.

Mr. Menon's father, K.P. Shankaran Menon, hails from Ottapalam in Kerala's Palakkad district.

He is the great-grandson of former Indian National Congress chief Sir C. Shankaran Nair.

U.S. hits Iran and Tehran retaliates across West Asia; 3 tankers struck

The U.S. Central Command says it hit several areas in Iran, targeting 'coastal defence systems, missile and drone sites and maritime capabilities'; Tehran responded with attacks on Bahrain, Jordan and three tankers that travelled through Hormuz

Associated Press

DUBAI

The U.S. launched strikes on Iran early on Tuesday, hours after President Donald Trump vowed to reinstate an American blockade of Iranian ports and charge ships for safe passage through the Strait of Hormuz. Iran responded with attacks on West Asia allies of the U.S.

The focus of the conflict now is the Strait of Hormuz. Iran effectively shut the passage during the war by attacking and threatening ships. It sent the price of oil, fertilizer and other goods soaring at a time when world leaders were



An explosion at Bandar Abbas Naval Base in Iran, as three Corsair unmanned surface vessels fired by the U.S. military, hit the port. AP

already struggling to address rising costs.

An interim deal signed by the U.S. and Iran was supposed to reopen the waterway, but Iran has attacked ships moving

through the strait on a route overseen by the U.S. military. The U.S. has now threatened to reopen the strait by force.

The U.S. military's Central Command said it

struck several areas in Iran, targeting "coastal defence systems, missile and drone sites and maritime capabilities."

Heavy cost

"These strikes will continue imposing a heavy cost on Iranian forces and degrade their ability to attack innocent civilians and commercial shipping in the Strait of Hormuz," the U.S. military said.

Iran responded with attacks targeting Bahrain, Jordan and three tankers that travelled through the strait.

Two of the ships were associated with the UAE and were set ablaze for a time. The Emirati Defence

Ministry said the attack on the tankers *Mombasa* and *Al Bahiyah* killed one mariner and wounded eight others. The Emirates threatened to retaliate.

Dutch shipping firm Stolt Tankers said that one of its ships came under attack. The attack on the Stolt *Magnesium* off Oman sparked a fire in the engine room, but the company said all the mariners were safe.

Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard said the *Mombasa* and *Al Bahiyah* "ignored repeated warnings." Iran has targeted ships that use a route through the strait that passes near Oman outside of its territorial waters.

Trump backs down over 20% levy on Hormuz ships

Agence France-Presse

WASHINGTON

U.S. President Donald Trump said on Tuesday he was scrapping a planned levy on ships transiting the Strait of Hormuz a day after he announced it, and replacing the fee with trade deals with Gulf allies.

Mr. Trump said his sudden decision to withdraw the toll – which he imposed amid fresh clashes with Iran over the vital waterway – was “based on highly productive conversations with Middle East leadership”.

“I have decided to replace the 20% United States Reimbursement Fee with Trade and Investment Deals that the various Gulf States will be making into the United States,” Mr. Trump said on his Truth Social network.



Donald Trump

Mr. Trump did not mention any commitments by Gulf states, saying “Investments will be MASSIVE but, at the same time, extraordinarily good for them, and their future”.

The U.S. leader said he would continue with a “FULL Blockade” on ships coming to and from Iranian ports but only on Ships coming to and from Iranian ports, or carrying anything have to do with Iranian cargo.

Mr. Trump had declared on Monday that Washington was now the “THE GUARDIAN OF THE HORMUZ STRAIT” and would impose hefty fees on shipping to reimburse the United States for protecting the key conduit for oil and gas.

Shortly after Mr. Trump made the 20% fee proposal on Monday, the UN’s shipping agency said it opposed fees on ships passing through maritime waterways but added it would await more details of what Mr. Trump had in mind.

Iran’s military command had insisted it would not allow the United States to “interfere” in the strait, while also warning its Gulf neighbours – who have borne the brunt of its retaliatory attacks – against cooperating with Washington.

Israel's secret bid to turn Ahmadinejad into Iran's next leader

Mark Mazzetti, Julian E Barnes, Farnaz Fassihi & Ronen Bergman

July 14

IN EARLY 2024, the rector of a university in Budapest, Hungary, received a startling request from a senior Hungarian government official.

The official told rector Gergely Deli that Ludovika University of Public Service should hold a climate change conference and invite an unlikely guest: Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the widely reviled former president of Iran.

Even more surprising was the reason. The official said the conference would serve as a front for Ahmadinejad to hold secret discussions in Budapest with Israeli intelligence operatives, despite his long-standing hostility toward Israel.

Deli knew the invitation could tarnish both his reputation and that of the university. But, he said, he believed he might be helping save lives.

"You have two enemies, and if these enemies want to talk with each other, then it's best to do what you can to make them

talk," he said. Ahmadinejad's 2024 visit to the university and another the following year were part of a yearslong Israeli effort to groom him as an intelligence asset who, when the time came, could be installed as Iran's new leader, according to US and Iranian officials familiar with the operation.

Recruiting Ahmadinejad became such a priority that Israel's then-spy chief, David Barnea, travelled to Budapest in 2024 to meet him personally, according to former US officials. Soon after-



Mahmoud Ahmadinejad

ward, they said, Mossad notified the CIA it had established contact with him.

In recent years, according to US officials, Israel secretly paid Ahmadinejad for housing and

travel, while Israeli operatives met him abroad several times, including during his Budapest visits. The effort culminated in late February this year, during the first days of the US-Israeli war on Iran, with an operation to relocate former leader, who had been living under strict surveillance in Tehran. The plan failed.

On February 28, an Israeli airstrike hit Ahmadinejad's compound, targeting his bodyguards' building and armored vehicle. Afterward, according to four senior Iranian officials, a black Peugeot arrived and whisked him away.

US and Iranian officials said Mossad operatives drove Ahmadinejad to a safe house in Iran. But he became disillusioned with the Israeli plan and later left under unclear circumstances.

He reappeared on July 6 at Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's funeral. Four senior Iranian officials said he is now under house arrest by the Revolutionary Guard's intelligence wing.

Israeli officials have not commented publicly about the plan to install Ahmadinejad as Iran's leader, which was part of a broader attempt to topple the government in Tehran. **NYT**