

PM reaches out to students; Sonam Wangchuk ends fast

Activist ends his hunger strike in the presence of two Ministers; Modi, in a late-night social media post, says Cabinet will discuss paper leak issue today; Centre transfers Higher Education Secretary

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Activist Sonam Wangchuk, who was on a hunger strike demanding the resignation of Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan over the NEET irregularities, ended his fast late on Thursday night.

The move came even as Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in a late-night video message posted on his X and Instagram accounts, promised that the government would discuss NEET paper leaks in Friday's Cabinet meeting and will bring a Bill in Parliament next week. "More strict actions against paper leaks to come in tomorrow's Cabinet [meeting]," Mr. Modi said in his post.

Mr. Wangchuk broke his



First sip: Sonam Wangchuk breaks his fast in the presence of Union Ministers J.P. Nadda and Jitendra Singh. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

fast in the presence of two Union Ministers, said Cherring Dorjay Lakruk, co-convenor, Leh Apex Body.

He broke the fast on certain conditions with the government giving written assurance that cases against students will be taken back, if they are not violent, said Mr. Dorjay.

The government also said that it would consider compensation for families of suicide victims, he said.

The developments came shortly after the Centre shifted Higher Education Secretary Vineet Joshi to the Ministry of Panchayati Raj. Meanwhile, government sources told *The*

No debate while Pradhan stays in office: Opposition

NEW DELHI

The Opposition on Thursday refused the government's offer of a debate in Parliament on the NEET paper leaks and other irregularities, saying that any discussion must be preceded by the resignation of Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan. » **PAGE 13**

Hindu that CJP leaders may meet Union Ministers J.P. Nadda and Jitendra Singh on Friday. A response from the CJP on the meeting was awaited.

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Delhi Police, Centre silent on use of force on protesters

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Three days since videos of police personnel allegedly using disproportionate force against unarmed men and women during the July 20 march to Parliament emerged on social media, Delhi Police and the Ministry of Home Affairs are yet to clarify their position.

Though Prime Minister Narendra Modi said on Thursday that "a series of steps for safeguarding the interests of students" are being taken, there was no assurance from the Centre on probing the "police excesses". The Delhi High Court has sought responses from the Centre and Delhi Police on PIL pleas alleging excessive use of force.

The court also instructed authorities to preserve all material connected to the police action, including CCTV footage and video recordings. Over 100 police and Rapid Action Force (RAF) personnel also sus-

There has been no assurance from the Union government so far on probing the 'police excesses' against protesters

tained injuries on July 20.

The Hindu had reported about two persons, who were hit by pellets allegedly fired by RAF personnel, being operated upon at government hospitals.

One of them, Sahil Lochab, 19, risks losing vision in the right eye due to a pellet piercing his pupil, according to his family.

Additional Deputy Commissioner of Police Sandeep Lamba, who was seen in a video allegedly slapping a woman on July 20, was removed from protest-related duties around Jantar Mantar on Wednesday and sent to north-east Delhi, his original place of posting.

Another video showed a police officer allegedly

molesting a woman with a wooden stick.

Eenesh, a 26-year-old resident of Chhattisgarh who was among the first protesters to be injured in police action near Jantar Mantar during the march,

said, "None of the protesters attacked the police. There were thousands of people in that small protest area that was blocked with high barricades. I was in front when a huge push came from behind. Several people fell to the ground, toppling the barricades. That is when the police started hitting us with batons. I saw 200 people being injured with lathis."

Mr. Eenesh continues to stay at the protest site with bandages on his wrist and knee. He refuted the police claim that protesters threw bricks at them. "You look around Jantar Mantar, there are no places where people can find loose rocks to throw at the police. There was no space even to move," he told *The Hindu*.

'NOTHING MORE IMPORTANT THAN WELFARE AND FUTURE OF OUR YOUTH'

PM steps in: Fast-track courts to punish exam leak guilty, tough new law on way

Draft Bill ready, will take it to Cabinet today... paper leaks have caused immense distress to students, their parents: Modi

Harikishan Sharma,
Jatin Anand & Damini Nath
New Delhi, July 23

HOURS AFTER he announced fast-track courts to punish those behind exam paper leaks, Prime Minister Narendra Modi posted a video on social media Thursday night, saying a tough new law was on its way. He said he had received its draft and it would be discussed at a meeting of the Cabinet Friday.

In the video, Modi said, "Friends, I am well aware that the issue of paper leaks is not a small matter. It causes immense distress to lakhs of students and their parents. Consequently, numerous measures have been taken over the past two-and-a-half months following these incidents, and the culprits have been apprehended and are currently in jail."

"Our primary responsibility was to ensure that the students did not lose an academic year; conducting the examinations promptly was crucial. The government mobilised all its resources to arrange for the exams of 22 lakh students to be held in the shortest possible

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EXPRESS
interview



'PM's decision shows Govt very sensitive to issues of the youth'

ARJUN RAM MEGHWAL
LAW & JUSTICE MINISTER
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Business as Usual
By EP UNNY



Activist Sonam Wangchuk with Union Ministers JP Nadda and Jitendra Singh at Medanta Hospital in Gurgaon, Thursday, as he ended his hunger strike after 26 days. @WANGCHUK66/X

Wangchuk ends 26-day fast, cites 'long negotiation, possible violence'

Jatin Anand
New Delhi, July 23

ACTIVIST SONAM Wangchuk, whose indefinite hunger strike in support of the Cockroach Janta Party demands had strengthened the student protest at Jantar Mantar, ended his fast late Thursday night at the Medanta Hospital in Gurgaon.

Wangchuk, in a post on X, said, "Just now in the presence of Union Ministers JP Nadda & Dr. Jitendra Singh and the senior

leaders of Apex Body of Leh Ladakh, I finally broke my fast after 26 days. Earlier, 65 Members of Parliament from different political parties had visited or signed letters urging me to break the fast. This was done after a long negotiation on various conditions and in view of possible violence in the country. I will explain the conditions in detail in a separate video very soon. Meanwhile, urge you all to stay very vigilant about not allowing violence of

any kind anywhere."

Earlier in the day, in another post, he urged protesters to remain peaceful, saying he was pained by reports that "anti-social elements" were trying to provoke violence.

"Peace and only peace is my way. While at Jantar Mantar the protests remain peaceful, I'm pained to learn that elsewhere some antisocial elements are taking advantage of the peaceful protests to provoke violence," he said.

What this move will address: Endless trials of leak cases, gaps in law

Express News Service
New Delhi, July 23

THE FAST-track courts, announced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi Thursday, to address the issue of exam paper leaks, have their task cut out. In a system where accountability for exam leaks has been dismal with most cases stuck in legal quicksand.

An investigation by *The Indian Express*, published on

June 5, found that of 45 major exam leaks between 2002 and 2025, each involving at least one lakh candidates or applicants, only two led to convictions. The biggest challenge, this newspaper found, is poor quality of investigation and the relatively lenient treatment of paper leaks as ordinary offences with no stringent bail conditions.

On multiple occasions, the courts rejected "closure reports" filed by probe agencies mainly citing lack of evidence,

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What this move will address: Endless trials of leak cases, gaps in law

or reprimanded them for lapses in investigation.

In the 2016 Karnataka PUC Chemistry paper leak, for example, the Bengaluru Sessions Court acquitted 19 accused, including senior officials and the alleged kingpin booked under the stringent Karnataka Control of Organised Crime Act (KCOCA), in May 2024, citing serious investigative shortcomings.

In another case from that year — the UP Public Service Commission examination for the posts of Review Officer and Assistant Review Officer — a Special Judicial Magistrate rejected the closure report filed by the UP Police's CB-CID in 2018 and ordered a reinvestigation in 2020.

There have been instances where cases were closed in haste, too.

In the UGC NET case of 2024, for example, a Delhi court in May 2026 criticised the CBI for filing a closure report despite possessing, in the court's assessment, evidence of a leak.

According to investigators and officials, paper leaks are often treated under the law as ordinary offences. "Most cases were registered under IPC Sections such as 420 (cheating), 467 and 468 (forgery), and 120-B (criminal conspiracy) -- all ordinary offences that carry no stringent bail conditions. Some states have brought in the Enforcement Directorate to invoke the money laundering law... UP has, on occasion, applied the Gangsters Act to attach properties and extend custody," a senior official associated with a Central inves-

tigation told this newspaper.

One area where fast-track courts can potentially make a difference is in accelerating the process. For, as *The Indian Express* investigation found, in several cases, trials proceeded slowly when charges are framed. An illustrative example is the 2006 Railway Group-D case, which has seen 142 hearings between 2012 and 2026 and is still at the "witness stage".

Outside the court, too, there are three key gaps that need to be plugged.

● **Rot within:** The institutions meant to prevent leaks were sometimes enabling them. For instance, the Rajasthan High Court found that Rajasthan Public Service Commission members themselves were complicit in the 2021 Sub-Inspector exam leak.

● **Evolving rackets:** Leak rackets have transformed rapidly, leaving the investigative and legal apparatus several steps behind. Criminal networks have moved from fax transmissions to Bluetooth devices, remote-access software and compromised printing and logistics firms.

● **Weak links in chain:** Poor security at the printing and transport stage of exam papers are hard to trace and prosecute. Two examples: The 2023 Bihar Police Constable leak, where a printing firm diverted papers to an unauthorised private warehouse; the 2024 UP Police Constable leak, where the sealed trunks containing exam papers were tampered with while keeping the official seals intact.

Over two decades on, two CBI cases in 2003 CAT leak still pending in courts

Devesh K. Pandey

NEW DELHI

More than two decades after the 2003 Common Admission Test (CAT) paper leak, two Central Bureau of

Investigation (CBI) cases against Ranjit Singh, alias Ranjit "Don" – described as an "education mafia" figure in some media reports – remain pending before courts in Delhi and Patna. The Patna case is at the trial stage, while the proceedings in the other case are yet to reach that point.

It was on November 22, 2003, that the Delhi Police Crime Branch received a tip-off about the CAT paper leak and its sale, a day ahead of the examination. A police officer contacted one intermediary, who agreed to sell the paper.

Further investigation led them to an examina-

The Patna case is at the trial stage, while proceedings in the Delhi case are yet to reach that point

tion candidate and they found that those willing to buy the solved question paper were being taken to a Mahipalpur hotel in South-West Delhi. The police were pursuing various leads when they discovered that the CBI had raided the place.

Based on its findings, the police arrested several accused persons. They alleged that Kumar Suman Singh alias Ranjit, already arrested by the CBI, was the mastermind behind the leak.

The 2003 CAT paper leak led to the cancellation of the examination. This was the case which brought Ranjit, who be-

longs to Bihar's Nalanda district, into national focus. As alleged by the probe agency, he had brought his associates to Delhi for arranging candidates.

In the Delhi case, the CBI submitted its chargesheet in early 2004. The agency stated that it initially received information about the suspected roles of Ranjit and his aides in pilfering the paper and delivering it at the Mahipalpur hotel to the candidates.

During a surprise check at the hotel, the CBI allegedly found Arun Kumar Sinha, Ranjit and his other aides in two rooms. Different sections of the question paper were seized allegedly from Ranjit's possession. The agency also recorded statements of candidates, alleging that ₹2 lakh to ₹4 lakh were de-

manded from them.

The CAT 2003 paper had been printed at the IBPS press in Mumbai. The CBI alleged that Arun and Hari Shankar had visited Mumbai on October 27, 2003, and met accused Sanjeev Kumar, then a daily-wage worker at the press, who handed over the question paper to Arun. A sum of ₹18 lakh was allegedly paid to Sanjeev's father Yogendra Prasad and ₹3.25 lakh to him in Mumbai.

Arun then took the help of Mohammed Shahin for solving the question paper, as per the CBI, which chargesheeted Ranjit and several others. In this case, "argument on charge" started in July 2019 before a Delhi court and the further necessary proceedings are under way.

The next date of hearing is on July 28.

Centre shifts higher education secy, education ministry gets 2 new secys

Harikishan Sharma

New Delhi, July 23

IN A major bureaucratic reshuffle, the Centre on Thursday shifted Higher Education Secretary Vineet Joshi to the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, and appointed two new Secretaries in the Ministry of Education.

The Ministry of Education has been at the centre of a controversy due to the NEET-UG

question paper leak and irregularities in the CBSE's evaluation of board exams.

While Naresh Pal Gangwar has been appointed as the Higher Education Secretary, T K Anil Kumar has been brought in as Secretary, Department of School Education and Literacy. Gangwar, a 1994-batch Rajasthan-cadre IAS officer, is currently the Animal Husbandry Secretary. Anil Kumar, a 1995-

batch Karnataka-cadre IAS officer, is posted as Additional Secretary in the Ministry of Rural Development.

Joshi was also holding the charge of School Education Secretary, and was the acting chairperson of the University Grants Commission (UGC) too.

He has also served as the Director General of the National Testing Agency (NTA) and

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Higher education secy shifted, education ministry gets 2 secys

chairman of the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE).

According to the order issued by the Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT), Joshi will succeed current Panchayati Raj Secretary Vivek Bhardwaj, who is superannuating at the end of the month.

In other changes, the Appointments Committee of the Cabinet, which is headed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and has Home Minister Amit Shah as the other member, has appointed D Thara, a 1995-batch Gujarat-cadre IAS officer, as the Secretary of the newly created Department of Capital Development in the Ministry of Housing & Urban Affairs.

Satyendra Singh, a 1995-batch IAS officer of Jharkhand cadre, has been appointed as Secretary, Department of Urban Development. He is currently posted as the Additional

Secretary, Cabinet Secretariat.

Urban Development Secretary Katikithala Srinivas, a 1989-batch IAS officer of Gujarat cadre, has been shifted as Secretary, Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region.

Chandra Bhushan Kumar, a 1995-batch IAS officer of AGMUT cadre, has been appointed as the new Labour Secretary, succeeding Vandana Gurnani, who is superannuating on July 31.

Mines Secretary Piyush Goyal has been given new charge as the Secretary, National Human Rights Commission. Keshav Chandra, a 1995-batch IAS officer of AGMUT cadre, has been appointed as the new Mines Secretary.

Sushil Kumar Lohani, a 1995-batch IAS officer of Odisha cadre, has been appointed as the new Secretary, Department of Animal Husbandry and Dairying.

Protests over paper leak intensify in States

Student outfits, civil society groups, and political parties hit the streets demanding resignation of Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan; protest marches turn confrontational in several districts of Kerala; police stop protesters in A.P.; security personnel resort to baton-charge in Bihar

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

What began as a protest at Jantar Mantar against the paper leak in the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) over a month ago snowballed into a nationwide agitation on Thursday, with student outfits, civil society groups and political parties hitting the streets and demanding the resignation of Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan, while criticising the police crackdown on protesters in Delhi.

In Chennai, the protests sought the scrapping of NEET. Amid the ongoing agitation by the Cockroach Janta Party-Tamil Nadu and the All India Student Federation (AISF) at the Communist Party of India office, a demonstration was also organised by the Neelam Student Movement. The Democratic Youth Federation of India, the Student Federation of India (SFI), and over 500 students of New College at Royapettah in the heart of the city joined the cause.

Across Kerala, the SFI took out protest marches that turned confrontational in several districts as police used water cannon and tear gas to disperse the crowds. Marches were



Students staging a protest in Bhopal on Thursday demanding the resignation of Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan and, right, police use water cannons to disperse activists of Students Federation of India protesting in Thiruvananthapuram. A.M. FARUQI; NIRMAL HARINDRAN



held in Kochi, Pathanamthitta, Alappuzha, Thrissur, Palakkad and Kannur, while protesters clashed with police in Kasaragod and faced water cannon in Palakkad and Kannur.

'Chalo Lok Bhavan'

The "Chalo Lok Bhavan" protest organised by student and youth organisations in Andhra Pradesh turned tense after the police stopped them midway. They said Friday's proposed educational institutions' bandh would be intensified and the agitation would continue in phases until the Education Minister resigned.

In Uttar Pradesh's Lucknow, Bhim Army activists tried to march towards the Governor's residence,

clashed with the police when stopped, and were detained. The Sanyukt Chhatra Manch organised a march in Prayagraj, leading to a brief face-off with the police. Protests were also held in Ghazipur, Varanasi, Ballia, and Azamgarh.

The Aam Aadmi Party's Chandigarh unit extended support to activist Sonam Wangchuk and demanded Mr. Pradhan's resignation. Party workers and social activists in Mandi, Himachal Pradesh, criticised the police action in Delhi.

Besides, the student agitation in Madhya Pradesh's Indore gathered momentum as more students, teachers and parents joined in solidarity with the Delhi protests, leading

to a heavy police deployment. Student groups expressed their grievances in Bhopal. Hundreds of working professionals, organisations such as the Dalit Sangharsha Samithi and the All India Students' Association (AISA), gathered in Karnataka's Bengaluru to voice their anguish.

The Delhi protests also resonated in the northeastern States. In Assam, students' organisations, including the All Assam Students' Union, the All Assam Minority Students' Union, and the All Assam Tribal Students' Union came together.

Students, activists, and political leaders sought education reforms in Guwahati, where the protest was organised under the

CJP. Rallies were taken out in Arunachal Pradesh's Itanagar, Shillong in Meghalaya, and Mizoram's Aizawl. Meanwhile, the BJP Assam unit organised a counter-protest in Guwahati against the Congress's sit-in outside the Prime Minister's residence in Delhi.

Several cases

In Bihar, the police lodged several cases against over 600 unidentified protesters for vandalising public property and Wednesday's protest march in which several police personnel were injured. Over 40 students were detained in Patna.

Security personnel resorted to baton charge against stone-pelters in Katihar and Begusarai. Prot-

ests were also organised in Bhalgalpur and Darbhanga districts, and marches taken out in Patna, Munger, Sheikhpura and Vaishali. In Patna, members of AISA and the All India Progressive Women's Association (AIPWA) extended support to those gathered at Jantar Mantar.

The Jan Sangharsha Manch Haryana and the Students' Organisation for Socialist Democracy activists took to the streets in Haryana's Kurukshetra. Leaders of all major Khap Panchayats in the district came together and in Jind, the district bar association suspended work for a day in support.

Chhattisgarh's capital Raipur saw the police booking nearly a dozen Congress workers under non-bailable provisions.

The Biju Janata Dal's (BJD) youth wing staged a demonstration in Odisha, where all the Opposition parties have intensified their agitation along with students' outfits. In Maharashtra, the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) saw chaotic scenes with Opposition parties demanding a discussion on the police action against agitators in Delhi.

Various students' wings, such as AISA and SFI, organised rallies in several localities of Kolkata.

Mobile Internet shut around Jantar Mantar

Express News Service
New Delhi, July 23

THE GOVERNMENT ordered telecom companies to shut down Internet services in parts of central Delhi on Thursday, particularly in areas around Jantar Mantar, the site of the students' protests.

According to two orders issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs, mobile Internet across all technologies was suspended in a 1.5-km radius of Jantar Mantar from 8 am to midnight on Thursday. The initial order was for suspension of services until 4 pm, which was then extended to midnight.

The orders said the suspension was necessary "in the interest of public safety and averting public emergency" and for maintaining public order and "preventing incitement to the commission of any offence".

The directions were issued under Section 20(2)(b) of The Telecommunications Act, 2023, and The Telecommuni-

cations (Temporary Suspension of Services) Rules, 2024.

Mobile data services in places as far as Mandi House metro station almost two kilometres away from Jantar Mantar were reported to have been impacted on Thursday. Both the protesters as well as people in workplaces in the city's central business district were impacted.

A message received by an Airtel user in the Mandi House area read: "Dear customer, as per Government directive, Internet services have been temporarily stopped in your area. Inconvenience caused is regretted. Team Airtel."

Hotels in the area that charge a fee to park vehicles told people that they would only accept cash. Several shopkeepers complained that they were unable to accept payments through UPI. Users said they could not make or receive WhatsApp calls, and normal calls were proving inconsistent due to network congestion.

Ghost town by dusk: CP falls silent as shutters come down

Mishal Mussaddique
New Delhi, July 23

CONNAUGHT PLACE — usually packed with office-goers, shoppers and diners — had fallen eerily silent by Thursday evening.

Around 7 pm, shutters rolled down across much of the market, restaurants emptied out and only a handful of CJP protesters and Rapid Action Force (RAF) personnel occupied the streets.

Earlier in the afternoon, the New Delhi Traders Association (NDTA) had issued an "advisory circular", asking all shops and establishments, including offices and restaurants, in Connaught Place to close for the day by 6.30 pm on the advice of the NDMC chairman and vice chairman. The owners were requested to cooperate and ensure "strict compliance" with the directions to avoid any unpleasant situation and save

themselves from "loss of property" and "injury".

Most businesses complied. Popular eateries such as Embassy Restaurant, Immigrant Cafe, Haldiram's and KFC shut well before sunset. Retail outlets, including Fabindia, Raymond and Nike also pulled down their shutters by 6.30 pm.

But not all did. Mayank Sharma, who has run a mobile accessories shop at Regal Building on Sansad Marg for 25 years, chose to keep his store open.

"My shop closes at 10 pm every day. I saw the NDTA notice, but it only advises us to shut by 6.30 pm," he said, pointing to the word "advise" on the circular displayed on his phone. "I will stick to my usual timings."

Saravana Bhavan, a popular South Indian restaurant, too, continued serving customers. "We have been told to stay open unless there is any problem. There hasn't been one so far, so

we will continue," its manager said.

Crocs' store in B Block, Inner Circle, was one of the flagship stores that remained open even after 6.30 pm. The manager said the company's headquarters had not issued any closure instructions.

Restaurants that remained open said business had suffered over the last few days.

Barbeque Nation, which earlier received around 300-350 customers daily, now sees barely 50, its management said.

Sandos reported a similar decline. "Since the road closure after the violence on Monday, and the increase in the number of barricades, there has been a drastic decrease in footfall," said the manager of Sandos.

By 8.15 pm, the well-lit Connaught Place had given way to darkness. The only movement came from buses carrying RAF personnel, their headlights briefly lighting up the streets.



UNIVERSITY WARNS OF CONSEQUENCES

Students should not become political tool by joining 'cockroach' protest: DU official

Vidheesha Kuntamalla

New Delhi, July 23

STUDENTS should not become a "political tool" by participating in the ongoing CJP-led protests, Rajni Abbi, Director, Delhi University South Campus, told *The Indian Express*, saying it is advised that students stay away from the agitation as it has, in its view, "turned into a political exercise."

Meanwhile, on Thursday, DU issued an advisory on X, urging students and faculty to stay away from Jantar Mantar, where the protests are being held. "Dear students and faculty, your safety matters to us," the post said, warning that "any unlawful assemblies or demonstrations at Jantar Mantar, New Delhi, which are strictly regulated as per the directives of the Hon'ble Supreme Court of India, may invite legal action."

It said participation in such activities could "pose serious risks to students' personal safety and significantly impact their academic progress and professional opportunities," and urged students to prioritise their safety and comply with the law. The university also cautioned that "a significant amount of fake and misleading content is being created and circulated to fuel the situation."

On the participation of DU students in CJP protests, Abbi said, "We do not want our stu-

dents to become a 'political tool'. Our students have nothing to do with the ongoing agitation. Even if they wish to express solidarity, we want them to understand that participating in such protests can have consequences. FIRs and other legal proceedings are serious matters, and students are young and often do not fully appreciate their implications. It might lead to difficulties in getting opportunities in the future," Abbi said.

"They should carefully assess the nature and trajectory of any agitation before deciding to participate. What may have begun as a movement for reforms has now, in our view, turned into a political exercise and even a spectacle. There should certainly be reforms wherever they are needed, but the agitation has now become political," Abbi added.

She added that DU routinely counsels students to prioritise their education. "During the orientation programme, we generally communicate the importance of nationalism, discipline and responsible citizenship to our students...." Abbi said.

The remarks came a day after DU, in a post on X, said: "We see the pain and anxiety of our students. It is unfortunate that vested interests are exploiting their fears instead of easing them. The need of the hour is to calm the situation.."

DRDO flight test of 'Kusha' takes off

Rajnath hails test, says it will eliminate import dependency for such SAM systems

Amrita Nayak Dutta
New Delhi, July 23

IN A MAJOR step towards the development of indigenous long-range air defence capabilities, the Defence Research & Development Organisation (DRDO) Thursday successfully conducted the first flight test of the 'Kusha' Long-Range Surface-to-Air Missile (SAM), at the APJ Abdul Kalam Island off the coast of Odisha.

A long-range SAM typically has a range of over 200 km. India operates Russian S-400 Triumph, which is understood to

be capable of hitting targets up to 400 km away.

In a statement, the Ministry of Defence said that this maiden test was conducted against an electronic target simulating a high-speed, high-altitude aerial threat, which the missile system successfully intercepted.

The DRDO has been developing Project Kusha — an indigenous long-range SAM system — to protect strategic military and civilian assets and infrastructure from a range of aerial threats, including fighter jets, missiles, unmanned aerial vehicles and large enemy aircraft within a wide range and altitude envelope.

All weapon system elements, including the missiles, radars, command and control centre, have been developed by various DRDO laboratories and industry partners.

Calling the test's success an important milestone in Indian defence R&D, Defence Minister



DRDO conducted the maiden flight test of Long-Range SAM 'Kusha' from the APJ Abdul Kalam Island off the coast of Odisha. PTI

Rajnath Singh said that it will also eliminate India's import

dependency for such systems.

Last year, the DRDO suc-

cessfully conducted maiden flight tests of the Integrated Air Defence Weapon System (IADWS) — a multi-layered air defence system comprising all indigenous Quick Reaction Surface to Air Missiles (QRSAM), Advanced Very Short Range Air Defence System (VSHORADS) missiles, and a high-power laser-based Directed Energy Weapon (DEW).

Together, Kusha and the IADWS are understood to be major steps towards bringing India closer towards developing a home-grown nationwide security shield from multi-domain enemy attacks under Mission Sudarshan Chakra in the next 10 years.

Defence Secretary and Secretary, Department of Defence R&D, and Chairman, DRDO, Rajesh Kumar Singh, monitored the launch and congratulated the team members, the statement noted.

Sikkim tunnel accident: bodies of all 25 workers recovered

The Hindu Bureau

GUWAHATI

Multiple agencies concluded their search and rescue operation after the bodies of all 25 workers trapped inside an under-construction tunnel of the 500 MW Teesta Stage-VI Hydropower Project in Sikkim's Namchi district were recovered by Thursday evening.

"The bodies of all 25 missing people were recovered. The search and rescue operation was subsequently concluded," District Magistrate Anupa Tamling told *The Hindu*.

Sudden explosion

According to the National Hydroelectric Power Corporation (NHPC), the workers were about 1.5 km in-



Police and rescue workers at the under-construction tunnel that was damaged in a blast in Sikkim's Namchi district on July 20. PTI

side the tunnel when "sudden explosive release of suspected methane gas" caused an explosion at 1.04 p.m. on July 20. However, the NHPC and the State government announced separate investigations into the cause of the accident.

Officials said the work-

ers could have struck methane-embedded rocks and the sparks from the drilling inside could have caused the explosion, which partially damaged the tunnel. Earlier, the NHPC announced ex gratia of ₹5 lakh each to the kin of the deceased.

Global waterways should be safe, unimpeded: Jaishankar

Attacks on seafarers, civilian shipping or infrastructure cannot be countenanced, says External Affairs Minister at East Asia Summit; Ministry hits back at Pakistan Deputy PM's comments

Kallol Bhattacharjee
NEW DELHI

Participating in the 21st East Asia Summit (EAS) in Manila, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar said on Thursday that the global maritime channels “must remain safe and unimpeded”.

At the meeting, Mr. Jaishankar also called for dialogue and diplomacy in dealing with the crisis in the Persian Gulf region and a “political solution” to the civil conflict in Myanmar, where Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs) have been challenging the authority of the military junta that took power in February 2021.

“Calling for dialogue and diplomacy to end the West Asia/Gulf conflict, India stresses that international waterways must remain safe and unimpeded, fully in consonance with international law. Under no circumstances can attacks on seafarers, civilian shipping or infrastructure be countenanced,” said Mr. Jaishankar. He described the evolving condition of the global order as “uncertain and volatile”.

He said India will be



External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar addresses the 21st East Asia Summit in Manila on Thursday. ANI

hosting two specific EAS activities in the current year – the seventh EAS conference on maritime security cooperation in Kochi and an EAS Maritime Heritage Festival in the ancient port city of Lothal.

South China Sea

He informed the EAS of the Indian position on South China Sea and said that India supports the “conclusion of a substantive, effective and legally binding Code of Conduct (CoC), fully compliant with UNCLOS 1982 that does not prejudice the legitimate rights of all users”. Continuing with the theme, he

called for “ASEAN centrality, regional stability, and the realisation of a free, open and prosperous Indo-Pacific”.

Regarding the ongoing civil conflict in Myanmar, he expressed India’s support for ASEAN efforts to resolving the situation. “India stands for finding a political solution to the Myanmar issue,” said Mr. Jaishankar, who also spoke at the 33rd ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF).

He reiterated India’s policy on “zero tolerance for terrorism”, and said there should not “be any doubt that acts of terrorism will have consequenc-

es”. He said that “collective action against cyberscam centres” should be prioritised. On the Israel-Palestine crisis, he reiterated India’s position, and said “a two-state solution can lead to a lasting and durable peace”.

Indus Waters Treaty

The External Affairs Ministry separately responded to Pakistan Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar’s remarks on Kashmir and the Indus Waters Treaty at the ARF.

“It is no surprise that a multilateral forum has once again been cynically exploited by Pakistan to amplify falsehoods, peddle state-sponsored disinformation, and divert attention from its own well-documented record of sponsoring cross-border terrorism,” said the Ministry’s official spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal.

Mr. Dar, in his remarks, had said, “... lasting peace in South Asia lies in the just resolution of the Jammu and Kashmir dispute in accordance with UN Security Council”.

He further said that upholding the treaty is a “cornerstone of regional peace and stability”.

Warning signals for India from NATO's Ankara summit

The heads of state or government of the 32 countries that are politico-military allies under the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) met in Ankara, Turkey, on July 28, 2026 for what is called the Ankara Summit. Their stated objective was to review progress made since the 2025 Summit in The Hague and to set out a roadmap for continuing delivery on NATO's key objectives.

The gathering in Ankara is being regarded as one of NATO's more successful summits, despite the abrasive presence of United States President Donald Trump, who devoted most of his speaking time to extolling the putative success of U.S. strategy and talking up the superiority of American weapons systems.

A strategic road map

Four substantive commitments came out of Ankara. First, the 32 NATO allies – too often divided by divergent objectives and capacities – agreed on their “ironclad commitment to (their) collective defence under Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, and to the transatlantic bond”; second, the unanimous endorsement of “The Hague defence commitment”, in which all NATO members undertook last year to allocate at least five per cent of their respective Gross Domestic Products (GDPs) on defence by 2035 – an unprecedented hike over the two per cent spending pledge that existed earlier. Third, NATO declared its “unwavering support for Ukraine in defending its freedom, sovereignty and territorial integrity”, and fourth, the alliance partners vowed to build a high technology, high capacity, European defence industrial base (DIB) – the term for the network of firms, factories, laboratories and skilled workers needed to build and sustain a country's military power.

The focus in Ankara was overwhelmingly on implementation – turning political commitments into military capability through investment, industrial capacity and innovation.



Ajai Shukla

Former Indian Army officer (colonel), who now analyses issues and events relating to defence

Europe's defence revival and commitments may create new challenges for India's defence needs

Russia accuses the U.S. and European democracies of unbridled expansionism, through NATO's progressive incorporation of East and Central European countries. These include Poland, Romania, the Baltic states, and former Soviet republics that Moscow has historically regarded as lying within its sphere of influence. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was driven in part by the fear that Kyiv was inching towards joining the Atlantic alliance, a step that would have increased NATO's numbers from just 12 countries at its founding in 1949 to 31 now. The Russian invasion effectively blocked Ukraine, but spooked historically neutral Finland and Sweden into abandoning nonalignment and becoming NATO's 31st and 32nd members.

NATO's transformations

NATO, however, sees itself not as expansionist, but as merely adapting to Europe's changing strategic landscape. In 1990-91, with the relatively peaceful ending of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, NATO shifted its focus to out of area operations in theatres such as the Balkans. After the 9/11 strikes in 2001 on the World Trade Center towers, NATO made another strategic shift, joining the Global War on Terror. Now, with Russia and China joining hands in a new era of superpower confrontation, NATO is adapting once again.

It was evident from the discussions at the Ankara Summit that Europe has prioritised the revitalisation of its DIB. The European defence industry was struggling to scale up production even before the five per cent defence spending pledge at The Hague. European defence industry giants, MBDA and Rheinmetall, have warned of shortages in ammunition production.

Operation Epic Fury, the U.S.-Israel bombing campaign against Iran, illustrates the inevitability of weapons and ammunition shortages when Asian allies' demands for U.S. weaponry compete with ongoing European needs. The U.S. has fired

more than 850 Tomahawk cruise missiles at Iran during this campaign. At the current production rate of 85 per year, replacing these would take a decade.

Many NATO members have capable defence industrial bases, but there is little coordination of alliance-wide priorities. The resulting strategic mismatch has been found during the Ukraine war to cluster in the critical categories of air defence missiles and interceptors, precision guided munitions, and artillery rockets. While the U.S. decision to allow Ukraine to produce Patriot air defence systems under licence is a strong signal of support to Ukraine, more needs to be done.

Without a major revitalisation of Europe's defence industry, NATO's five per cent pledge will only deepen its dependency on the U.S. Half of Europe's defence spending between 2022-2024, came from the U.S., up from 28% in 2019-2021. Foreign Military Sales notifications to the U.S. Congress for European customers have quadrupled since 2008 to \$76 billion in 2024.

Need for self-reliance

For the world's big arms buyers and especially for India, this spike in European demand is bad news. As NATO spends more, the international arms bazaar is shifting inexorably from a buyers' market to a sellers' market. The first sign of this was the delay by U.S. firm General Electric Aerospace in supplying India with F-404 fighter jet engines, which are critically needed for the Indian Air Force's Tejas light combat aircraft programme.

Looking ahead, as India's defence increasingly relies on new-age defence technologies and weaponry such as drones, artificial intelligence, cyber and electronic warfare and resilient networks, it will become critical for its defence industry to achieve self-reliance in these technology realms, rather than relying on overstretched suppliers who have their own battles to fight.

Houthi attacks on 2 Saudi Arabia-flagged tankers drive Brent crude price past \$100

M. Kalyanaraman

CHENNAI

In an escalation of the conflict in West Asia, the Houthis, Iran's allies in Yemen, said they attacked two Saudi Arabia-flagged tankers in the Red Sea on Thursday, as part of a blockade on Saudi shipping.

According to Al Masirah, the Houthis' official television channel, the attacks on the *Encelia* and the *Layla* took place early on July 23. Saudi Arabia's official *Saudi Press Agency* has confirmed the projectile attack on the *Encelia*, adding that the crew is safe and the vessel secured.

The attack on the *Layla*, a three lakh-tonne Saudi-



The Bab el-Mandeb escalation has added to the crisis at the Strait of Hormuz. FILE PHOTO

flagged Very Large Crude Carrier, remains unconfirmed.

Soon after the attacks were reported, Brent crude rates surged past \$100 a barrel, a 7% jump over the previous day's close of around \$94.

The escalation off the

to be shipped out through Yanbu – port city on the Red Sea coast – largely to Asian markets, including India.

Thursday's attacks comes close on the heels of Ukraine targeting Russian merchant ships, including oil tankers, off the port of Novorossiysk, a Russian city on the Black Sea coast. Ukraine has claimed more than 180 hits on Russian ships in the Black Sea in July.

On July 17 and 19, Russia attacked two ships off Odesa, a Ukrainian port on the Black Sea, killing four Indian seafarers.

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Bab el-Mandeb Strait – the Red Sea's exit to the Arabian Sea – comes with attacks erupting in regions crucial to India's oil imports. After constraints on the Strait of Hormuz, Saudi Arabia had been piping some 4 million barrels of crude across the country

Houthi attacks drive Brent price past \$100

India's crude oil imports are a little less than 5 mbpd.

"A disruption may mean cargoes may need to be rerouted via the Suez Canal, into the Mediterranean and around Africa, but that will take much longer and come with higher freight costs," says Pankaj Srivastava, a senior vice president at Rystad Energy.

Mr. Srivastava says India imported 2.25 mbpd of Russian crude in June, with nearly 0.7 mbpd originating from Novorossiysk. "If the disruption persists or infrastructure damage is more extensive, India could face additional pressure in securing replacement crude volumes," he says, adding that the immediate impact is likely to remain manageable.

'Iran inspiring Houthi blockade'

Since the Houthi hijacking of the car carrier *Galaxy Leader* in November 2023, ship traffic across the Suez Canal had plummeted. It picked up in January this year, however, and surged in March, as Yanbu became an alternative to the Strait of Hormuz. The Houthis have cited Saudi Arabia's "blockade of supplies" and the attack on Sanaa international airport in Yemen on July 13 as reasons for their blockade. Reuters has, however, reported that Iran is inspiring the Houthi blockade of Saudi oil-carrying ships.

Shipping industry sources say insurance rates climbed 10 to 15 times as soon as the Houthis announced their blockade on July 20, nearly matching rates for the Strait of Hormuz. Meanwhile, the U.S.-based think tank, Institute for the Study of War, said that at least seven vessels have already diverted their routes to avoid the Bab al-Mandab Strait as a consequence of the tanker attacks.

Erik Grundt, Rystad Energy's senior market analyst, says: "In sailing-time terms, the detour through the Suez Canal and around Africa stretches the Yanbu-to-India (west coast) voyage from about eight days to nearly 39 days."

Compounding this, VLCCs are too large to transit the Suez Canal fully loaded, so they must partially offload at Ain Sukhna and reload at Sidi Kerir on the Mediterranean side, adding time and complexity.

Mr. Srivastava says India, is now more resilient, having diversified its crude sources, which now include African nations, Brazil, Guyana, and the U.S. Indian refineries are capable of handling a wide range of crude oils, allowing them to quickly take crude from other sources.

Iran vows 'eye for an eye' as U.S. bombing continues

Agence France-Presse

TEHRAN, WASHINGTON

Iran vowed on Thursday to keep striking the region so long as it remains under attack, as the war spread to new fronts with Tehran's Houthi allies attacking Saudi shipping in the Red Sea.

The Houthis of Yemen this week joined the conflict, claiming to have struck two Saudi oil tankers after declaring a blockade of Saudi ports. Reacting, U.S. President Donald Trump threatened Iran and the Houthis with "major military punishment".

Meanwhile, Jordan and Kuwait both reported intercepting strikes as Iran's military and Revolutionary Guards claimed to be targeting U.S. assets in both countries. "The armed

forces' retaliatory attacks will continue as long as the U.S. attacks on the country's infrastructure and coastal areas continue," Iran's army spokesperson Mohammad Akraminia said, according to state TV.

The developments followed new U.S. strikes on Iranian military targets, with U.S. Central Command reporting its 12th consecutive night of strikes, saying it aimed to "further degrade Iran's



A screengrab from a video released by the U.S. Central Command shows debris and smoke from strikes at a location in Iran. REUTERS

ability to threaten civilian mariners and commercial vessels transiting regional waters".

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi said Tehran would respond in kind to any attack on its infrastructure, writing: "Our defence doctrine is clear: eye for an eye."

Iranian state media said on Thursday that a U.S. attack killed two people at Shalamcheh on the Islamic Republic's border with Iraq. It also reported two U.S. missiles hit Bushehr, home to the country's only civilian nuclear plant.

The Houthis said they had carried out missile and drone strikes on two Saudi tankers in the Red Sea, the *Encelia* and the *Layla*, after declaring a blockade of Saudi ports.

Saudi Arabia confirmed the *Encelia* had been struck, without commenting on the other tanker.

In Hormuz, the Revolutionary Guards said they stopped three oil tankers from transiting, as the U.S. and Iran vie for control over the route.

"The Strait of Hormuz is under our control... and any ship that is deceived by the U.S. and intends to pass without coordination with the Islamic Republic of Iran will suffer the same fate," the Revolutionary Guards said.

In recent weeks, Iran has hit tankers using a route hugging the Omani coast to traverse the strait, in a bid to strong-arm vessels into using its own waters along its coast and pay for safe passage.

U.S. House approves \$95-bn budget, most of it for Iran war

Agence France-Presse
WASHINGTON

The U.S. House of Representatives approved a \$95 billion budget framework on Wednesday, with most of the funding earmarked for the Pentagon to fund the war against Iran.

The measure was narrowly approved in a 216-214 vote and now heads to the Senate, where its fate is uncertain.

The plan provides \$73 billion for the armed forces and intelligence agencies, notably to fund operations linked to the war against Iran, as well as \$12 billion in aid for farmers affected



The U.S. Capitol in Washington.

by President Donald Trump's trade war.

An additional \$10 billion would go towards election-related programmes as part of Mr. Trump's push to enact new nationwide

voting restrictions while his broader "SAVE America Act" lacks enough support to proceed.

The budget package represents the Republican party's last major legislative push before November's midterm elections, the outcome of which will determine whether the party retains its majority in Congress and thus continues to shape the remainder of Mr. Trump's second term.

Democratic Representative Rosa DeLauro denounced a measure that would allow Mr. Trump to finance the continuation of his war against Iran.

Russia warns the U.S. against 'unacceptable' arms sales to Ukraine

Agence France-Presse
MANILA

Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov warned Washington against making "unacceptable" arms deliveries to Ukraine in a Thursday meeting with U.S. counterpart Marco Rubio in Manila in Philippines, Moscow said.

Mr. Lavrov told the U.S. secretary of State "it was unacceptable to continue supplying weapons to the Kyiv regime", the Russian Foreign Ministry said in a statement. In their meeting held on the sidelines of a

summit of Foreign Ministers of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Mr. Lavrov condemned "a destabilising policy by European countries, which are still seeking to inflict a 'strategic defeat' on Russia".

He reiterated that the Russian side was ready for a "political-diplomatic resolution to the conflict".

On Thursday, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said spoke with U.S. envoys Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner in a bid to revive stalled talks aimed at ending the war.



Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov (*right*) with US Secretary of State Marco Rubio on the sidelines of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Pasay, Metro Manila, on Thursday. REUTERS

Rubio meets Lavrov in Manila, says US to help end Ukraine war

Reuters

Manila, July 23

US SECRETARY of State Marco Rubio said on Thursday that the United States remains prepared to play a “constructive role” in helping bring an end to the war in Ukraine, following talks with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on the sidelines of an ASEAN gathering in Manila.

Speaking after the meeting, Rubio said President Donald Trump had made clear that the United States was prepared to help facilitate an end to a “senseless war” if the opportunity arose. He said Washington had conveyed that message to Moscow while declining to characterize Russia’s position.

“We had a good conversation, a frank conversation,” Rubio said of his meeting with his Russian counterpart. He said he would not go into specifics about what was discussed.

“The United States, the president’s been clear that ... we are prepared to play a constructive role in bringing about an end to a senseless war, and we’re ready to do that,” Rubio said.

Lavrov, for his part, “reaffirmed Russia’s readiness for a

“The US, the president’s been clear that ... we are prepared to play a constructive role in bringing about end to war, and we’re ready to do that”

MARCO RUBIO,
U.S. SECRETARY OF STATE

political and diplomatic settlement of the conflict,” Russian ministry’s statement said, and told Rubio Moscow remained committed to proposals put forward by Presidents Trump and Vladimir Putin at their August 2025 meeting in Alaska.

Rubio said the conflict had exacted a heavy toll, pointing to civilian deaths and Russian strikes on Kyiv. Both Russia and Ukraine had an incentive to bring the war to an end, but the central challenge remained finding a settlement “that both sides can accept,” he added.

“I think it is a very bloody war,” Rubio said. “I think both sides should have an incentive to bring it to an end...”

BRUSSELS

EU locks in oil price cap in new Russia sanctions over Ukraine war



REUTERS

EU countries on Thursday agreed a new watered-down round of sanctions on Russia over the Ukraine war. Envoys from member states had been racing to seal an agreement to lock in a price cap on Russian global crude exports at \$44 before a deadline that could have seen it leap up. The cap is frozen for the next 12 months. AFP

U.S. announces civilian nuclear agreement with Saudi Arabia

Trump says the deal is contingent on Riyadh normalising relations with Israel; critics warn it could set off an arms race in the Gulf; while reports suggest U.S. companies could build a uranium enrichment facility in the kingdom, Trump says 'no'

Agence France-Presse

RIYADH

The United States and Saudi Arabia on Wednesday announced a landmark deal that would establish a civilian nuclear programme in the kingdom, which U.S. President Donald Trump said was contingent on Riyadh normalising relations with Israel.

The move comes as the U.S. fights a war with Iran that began in large part over concerns about Tehran's nuclear programme – still a key point of contention in now-stalled peace talks.

The deal is set to generate billions of dollars for American companies and is seen as a major win for Iran's long-time regional rival, but critics fear it also carries risks.

Washington has sought in recent years to tie any nuclear agreement and defence pact to Saudi normalisation with Israel, and just hours after the deal was announced, Mr. Trump took to social media to say Riyadh must first meet that condition.



Close allies: A file photo of President Donald Trump with Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman from his visit to Washington in November last year. REUTERS

The nuclear deal "will be approved, but is totally subject to Saudi Arabia joining the very respected and successful Abraham Accords", he wrote.

Concern of enrichment

Critics have insisted the deal – the text of which was not immediately made public – could precipitate a nuclear race in a region already battered by war.

One provision would

potentially see U.S. companies build a uranium enrichment facility in Saudi Arabia, the Wall Street Journal reported.

The U.S. Energy Department made no mention of such a provision and did not offer comment when asked about it by AFP, while Mr. Trump added in his Truth Social post that: "There will be no enrichment of material!"

The deal will be submit-

ted to Congress for review, but the Republican-controlled legislature is unlikely to block its implementation.

U.S. lawmakers from both parties and Israeli officials have previously voiced opposition to such a project over fears Saudi Arabia could eventually convert it to develop nuclear weapons.

"Trump claims his war on Iran is about stopping

an authoritarian country from enriching nuclear fuel," left-wing U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders wrote on X.

"Now he's letting his best friends in Saudi Arabia – one of the most brutal dictatorships in the world – do exactly that. This is absurd."

'Pact with safeguards'

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio said that "any agreement that we're going to make with any country in the world on civil nuclear energy is going to be one that will have safeguards in place to ensure that it can't be turned into a weapons programme".

Riyadh, like Tehran, has long been adamant about its right to pursue a civilian nuclear programme. Last year it signed a mutual defence pact with nuclear-armed Pakistan.

Policymakers have long feared that if Iran produced a nuclear weapon, the move would set off an arms race across the Gulf.

The United States has agreements governing nuclear cooperation with more than 50 countries.

Trump: N-deal only if Saudi normalises ties with Israel via Abraham Accords

Kingdom is yet to respond; deal has to pass US Congress

Reuters
July 23

PRESIDENT DONALD Trump said on Thursday a civil nuclear deal between the US and Saudi Arabia is conditional on Riyadh joining the Abraham Accords to normalize relations with Israel, an action the kingdom has so far refused to take.

The US and Saudi Arabia announced an agreement on Wednesday on civil nuclear power, letting Riyadh enrich uranium and build nuclear reactors using American technology, without requiring snap UN inspections that Washington has demanded from Iran. The deal has to pass US Congress to go into force.

"The Civil Nuclear Deal (There will be no enrichment of material!)... pertains only to non-military use such as the ones that Iran and UAE (and others) already have, will be approved, but is totally subject to Saudi Arabia joining the very respected and successful Abraham Accords," Trump said in a post on Truth Social.

"The United States is not opposed to Civil (Non-Enriched) Nuclear Facilities," Trump said.

The Saudi Embassy in Washington did not immedi-

ately respond to a request for comment on Trump's post.

Saudi Arabia's longstanding position has been that it would not sign the Abraham Accords unless there was an agreement on a roadmap to Palestinian statehood.

The United Arab Emirates and Bahrain signed the Abraham Accords during Trump's first term in 2020, breaking a longstanding taboo to become the first Arab states to recognize Israel in a quarter century. Morocco and Sudan followed suit.

Israel, which feared the Saudi deal could ignite a West Asia arms race, welcomed the condition on Thursday. "Saudi Arabia's joining of the Abraham Accords would be an historic leap forward for peace in the Middle East," Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office said in a statement.

The Trump administration on Wednesday said the civil nuclear deal abides by nonproliferation agreements in the US Atomic Energy Act, which are among the world's strongest.

The deal would let Saudi Arabia enrich uranium and reprocess nuclear waste, both of which are potential pathways to a nuclear weapon.

The UAE agreed to forgo both when it signed a similar deal with US in 2009. It was not clear what Trump meant in his social media post when he said there would be no nuclear enrichment under the agreement.

EU imposes \$1 bn fine on Google over antitrust breaches

Associated Press

Brussels, July 23

THE EUROPEAN Union on Thursday hit Google with a fine of USD 1 billion after it said the technology behemoth broke digital antitrust regulations by setting up Google Play and its ubiquitous search engine to corral consumers towards its own services and apps to the detriment of competitors.

It was the latest major crack-down on Big Tech by Brussels, which has led the world in rein-

ing in some of the world's largest companies from Silicon Valley to Beijing.

It has done so despite the risk of incurring the wrath of President Donald Trump, who has lashed out at the 27-nation bloc's digital regulations amid a broader campaign against Europe: imposing high tariffs, making threats to seize Greenland from Denmark by force, and rattling trust within the NATO military alliance.

In the past, Trump has threatened retaliation if Ameri-



Google's Bay View Campus in Mountain View, California. FILE

can tech companies are penalised. Google had recently lost its appeal of a \$4.5 billion antitrust

fine imposed by the EU for throttling competition and reducing consumer choice through dominance of its mobile Android operating system.

The European Commission, the bloc's executive branch and highest antitrust enforcer, said it was acting in the interest of consumers after an investigation of Google.

"The best products should succeed because they're better, not because they're owned by the company running the search engine. And European

consumers have a right to be told by app developers where to sign up to the best offers, even when the app store owner does not get a cut," said Teresa Ribera, the commission's Executive Vice President for Clean, Just and Competitive Transition.

Google's President of Global Affairs Kent Walker blasted the fine as "product degradation driven by a small group of self-serving complainants" that will have a negative impact on European businesses and consumers.

China says it drove away two more Philippine vessels

Reuters

BEIJING

China said on Thursday it tracked and drove away two Philippine vessels it accused of having “intruded into” waters near the disputed Scarborough Shoal despite warnings, the week’s second incident in the South China Sea to involve both nations.

A flashpoint that is one of Asia’s most contested maritime sites, Scarborough Shoal is claimed by both the Philippines and

China, which calls it “Huangyan Dao”.

“We urge the Philippines to immediately cease its infringing and provocative actions,” China’s Coast Guard said in a statement, while reaffirming sovereignty over the disputed shoal.

The Coast Guard took necessary measures, such as tracking, monitoring, and interception to drive away the Philippine vessels, it added.

The Philippine Coast Guard and the Philippine



A screenshot from a handout video shows a Chinese coast guard ship firing a water cannon at a Philippine vessel. REUTERS

embassy in Beijing did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

The remarks came after protests by both sides this week following a clash bet-

ween Beijing and Manila in the Second Thomas Shoal in the busy waterway of South China Sea.

On the sidelines of a meeting of regional grouping ASEAN on Wednesday, the Foreign Ministers of both nations exchanged protests over the prior South China Sea encounter.

China’s Wang Yi warned Manila of “bitter consequences of its own making” if it sought to provoke Beijing with the support of outside powers.