

Dharmendra Pradhan quits; CJP calls off stir

We have done it, says Abhijeet Dipke; President appoints Pralhad Joshi as Education Minister

This is a signal to farmers, labourers, poor people to stand up to the oppressive govt., says Rahul Gandhi

Kharge seeks stringent action against those who 'unleashed lathis and pellet guns' on students

Sandeep Phukan
Nistula Hebbar
NEW DELHI

As the student protests over paper leaks spread across different States and snowballed into a major political crisis for the Narendra Modi government, Dharmendra Pradhan resigned as the Education Minister on Saturday, prompting the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) to call off the protests at Jantar Mantar, which had become the epicentre of the agitation for the past 36 days.

President Droupadi Murmu accepted Mr. Pradhan's resignation and appointed Pralhad Joshi as the Education Minister. In his resignation letter, addressed to Prime Minister, Mr. Pradhan said he was stepping down on his own account, so that "anti-national" elements do not exploit the situation created by the protests.

Protesters celebrate

As soon as the news of the resignation broke in the afternoon, protesters at Jantar Mantar erupted in joy. "We have done it," CJP founder Abhijeet Dipke told the jubilant crowd.

Activist Sonam Wangchuk, whose hunger strike gave momentum to the protests, termed it a victory.



One voice: CJP supporters celebrate at Jantar Mantar after Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan's resignation. SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

ry of democracy, peace, patience, and perseverance. "Congratulations CJP. Gen Z of the nation, and thank you all citizens for shedding fear and the fear of fear, and rising up from every corner of the nation," he posted on X.

The resignation came moments before Union Ministers J.P. Nadda and Jitendra Singh met CJP spokespersons Ashutosh Ranka and Saurav Das for talks to end the protests.

At a joint press conference with the Ministers, the CJP spokespersons said

they are calling the protest off in "good faith" as the government had agreed to their two demands: ₹1 crore to the families of all students who died by suicide after the NEET cancellation and no action against any of the student protesters.

Mr. Nadda said the government will give "honourable compensation" within rules to the families of the students who died by suicide and ensure withdrawal of all FIRs registered against the protesters. "As far as their [CJP]

charter for broader education reforms is concerned, we will deliberate upon and engage with them," he said.

'PM should apologise'

Congratulating the students on their victory, Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi said exit of Mr. Pradhan is a "symbolic" but huge step in rebuilding the education system.

He, however, said there are still two more demands: anyone who beat up the students should be

held accountable and that the Prime Minister should apologise to the students.

"It is also a signal to other parts of society, farmers, labourers, poor people, anybody whom this regime is attacking and oppressing, there is wisdom and courage in standing up. *Daro mat* (do not fear). Let us get rid of this regime," Mr. Gandhi said.

In a post on X, Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge said: "The Prime Minister should apologise to youth. There should be strict action against those

Centre to table Bill to strengthen anti-cheating law

NEW DELHI

Union Minister Dr. Jitendra Singh is set to introduce the Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Amendment Bill, 2026, which seeks to strengthen the anti-cheating law, in the Lok Sabha on Monday. The proposed legislation, a copy of which was circulated among MPs on Saturday, significantly toughens the penalties established under the 2024 Act, introduces mandatory two-month investigation deadlines, and imposes penalties reaching up to ₹10 crore for organised crime networks. » PAGE 9

Three protesters injured as police open fire in Bihar

PATNA

At least three protesters sustained bullet wounds and several police officers reported injuries from stone-pelting in Siwan district of Bihar on Saturday as a State-wide bandh called by the All India Students' Association over the NEET issue turned violent. While police fired 10 rounds in Siwan, incidents of stone-pelting were reported in several districts, including capital Patna. Though a heavy deployment of the police force was made in the State capital, the large number of students managed to lodge their protest. » PAGE 10

who unleashed lathis and pellet guns."

With the first week of the Monsoon Session of Parliament washed out over the Opposition's insistence on Mr. Pradhan's resignation, the government is now expecting both Houses to function.

Amid the jubilation at Jantar Mantar, there were also tense moments, as three senior police officials were injured in stone-throwing near the protest site. Police personnel quickly restored order by using tear gas and resort-

ing to a mild lathi-charge.

Sources said the government had come around to the view on Friday evening that it would be necessary for Mr. Pradhan to resign in order to end the spiralling protests, which appeared to be spreading across the country. With Delhi University set to reopen soon and protests spreading to tier-II cities, discretion was considered the better part of valour, the sources added.

DETAILED COVERAGE
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Union govt. circulates Bill to strengthen anti-cheating law

Centre to introduce the Bill in Parliament on Monday; it proposes to introduce mandatory two-month investigation deadlines, designated Special Fast Track Courts, steep financial penalties

Maitri Porecha

NEW DELHI

In a move to strengthen the anti-cheating law, the Union government has proposed the Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Amendment Bill, 2026, a copy of which was circulated among members of Parliament on Saturday.

Union Minister Dr. Jitendra Singh will introduce the Bill in the Lok Sabha on Monday.

The proposed legislation significantly toughens the penalties established under the 2024 Act, introduces mandatory two-month investigation deadlines, along with designated Special Fast Track Courts, and steep financial penalties reaching up to ₹10 crore for organised crime networks.

Maximum imprisonment sentences for individual and institutional offenders have been increased, alongside a steep hike in financial penalties, according to the proposed Bill.

Specialised Enforcement Units enable the Un-

Tougher rules, bigger fines

The Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Amendment Bill, 2026 significantly escalates the cost of committing or facilitating exam malpractices

■ **Under Section 10(1)**
(General offences): **Jail:** 5-10 years (from 3-5 years); **Fine:** up to ₹50 lakh (from ₹10 lakh)

■ **Under Section 10(2)**
(Service provider fines): **Fine:** up to ₹5 crore (from ₹1 crore)

■ **Under Section 10(2)**
(Service provider directors/management): **Jail:** 3-10 years;

Fine: ₹5 crore (from ₹1 crore)

■ **Under Section 10(3)**
(In-charge personnel): **Jail:** 5-10 years (from 3-10 years); **Fine:** ₹5 crore (from ₹1 crore)

■ **Under Section 11(1)**
(Organised crime): **Minimum jail:** 7 years (from 5 years); **Fine:** up to ₹10 crore (from ₹1 crore)



ion government to constitute dedicated Special Task Forces (STF) to take exclusive charge of investigation efforts.

All investigations – whether conducted by local police, Central Investigating Agencies, or an STF – must be concluded within 60 days.

State governments and Union Territory administrations will designate Sessions Courts to conduct trials on a continuous, day-to-day basis. Trials must wrap up within three months of the chargesheet being filed. High Court appeals will be heard by a Di-

vision Bench (two judges) and must also be resolved within a three-month period.

To address prolonged legal delays, the Bill introduces Sections 12A and 12B, establishing an uninterrupted procedural pipeline.

Courts cannot grant adjournments beyond the following day without writing explicit, exceptional reasons.

Transfer of cases

All ongoing cases under the 2024 Act will immediately transfer to the newly designated Special Fast

Track Courts and must be completed within three months of transfer.

States and Union Territories are mandated to appoint Special Public Prosecutors under the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS), 2023 to handle these trials exclusively.

Appeals against bail orders, judgments, or sentences must be filed within 30 days (with a strict absolute ceiling of 90 days for special delays) and will be adjudicated by a two-judge High Court Bench.

Recent incidents of paper leaks and malpractices have necessitated urgent structural overhauls to safeguard transparent and merit-based selections.

“The objective of the Act is to bring greater transparency, fairness, and credibility, and to inspire confidence in the public examination system, Dr. Jitendra Singh noted.

“The amendments ensure time-bound investigations, speedy trials, and enhanced deterrence against organised crime groups and institutions,” he said.

What changed in 48 hours? Concerns over Parliament washout, larger stir

Sentiment on Pradhan was not turning positive even after announcements of fast-track courts, harsh Bill to punish culprits

Jatin Anand, Shubhangi Khapre & Ritika Chopra
New Delhi, Mumbai, July 25

JUST 48 hours before Dharmaendra Pradhan quit, his resignation was not in the government's mind, top BJP and government sources said.

But the assessment on three specific aspects seem to have prompted the action. One, the protests gained further momentum in Delhi despite police action, and spread across many cities. Two, concerns that a prolonged confrontation could wash out the entire Monsoon Session of Parliament, jeopardising the political capital spent on building support for the contentious de-limitation and the women's reservation bills. Three, the

government's actions — fast track courts, shifting of higher education secretary, a Bill with harsh measures to prevent paper leaks, and sacking of 47 NTA officials — did not cut ice with protesters.

At the beginning of the week on Monday, a day after activist Sonam Wangchuk was removed from Jantar Mantar and admitted to a hospital, the assessment within the government was that protests would eventually lose steam. NEET as well as other major entrance examinations were after all over, and the academic calendar was largely on track.

While the government closely monitored the agitation, there was little indication

»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2



Pradhan's resignation was under consideration. Senior Education Ministry officials met the Prime Minister's Office and the Ministry of Home Affairs on July 22-23 to assess the situation, sources said. Pradhan continued with his official engagements, chairing meetings with states on school education on both days.

By Thursday evening, however, the government's calculations had begun to shift. The Prime Minister has been in direct control, signalling his intent to address every concern of the youth, and his personal appeals were continuously gauged to see if they resonated among students, a BJP MP said.

During this period too, not only did the crowds at Jantar Mantar continue to swell, smaller protests broke out across many state capitals and other big cities. In Mumbai, for instance, despite prohibitory orders and FIRs naming nearly 300 protesters, the turnout at each successive demonstration grew larger.

All measures to contain the fallout including the harsh Bill cleared by Cabinet on Friday to punish those indulging in paper leaks, did not seem to ease the protests, sources in the government said. The government first offered a discussion in Parliament, then transferred Higher Education Secretary Vineet Joshi, and later announced the removal of five NTA officials while promising a wider overhaul of the examination body.

None of these steps eased the protests, and the government concluded that a bigger political signal was needed. "It seemed the sentiment with regard to the Education Minister was not turning positive even after the draft of the new proposed law was cleared by the Cabinet. There were not many choices," a senior BJP source said.

Adding to the concerns was Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's sit-in just outside the Prime Minister's residence, which, sources said, reinforced the perception within the ruling leadership it was losing control of the political narrative. This heightened fears the Monsoon Session could be washed out, an outcome the government was keen to avoid given the Bills lined up for passage, particularly on delimitation and

women's reservation, for which it had worked hard for months.

The speed with which the decision was taken, sources said, was reflected in Pradhan's own schedule. As late as Friday evening, he attended a briefing to prepare for Parliament questions relating to his ministry. "If he knew he was no longer going to be the minister, would he have sat through a detailed briefing on answering questions?" said a source familiar with the meeting. There was "absolutely no indication" at the time that a resignation was imminent, the source said.

In public, the party and the government argued throughout that the demand for Pradhan's resignation was political. Party leaders were apprehensive it would come across as a moral victory for the Opposition, especially Rahul Gandhi.

But the mood within the party was shifting. At least two Cabinet ministers *The Indian Express* spoke with said Pradhan may have to forego the education portfolio. Some state leaders called his continuation "untenable". "Both the government and the BJP could not afford to antagonise the youth and women," a senior party leader said.

With the Cockroach Janta Party threatening a larger national protest if its demands were not met, there were concerns things could go out of hand. “Many opposition parties, especially the Congress, the Aam Aadmi Party and the Samajwadi Party, had sent their members to the protest on one pretext or another. Had protests continued, it had the potential of becoming larger and more complex with the aid of experienced political hands. That has been snipped now,” another senior BJP source said.

Highly placed BJP sources said the decision to seek Pradhan's resignation would help shift the focus back to Parliament from Monday. “The central leadership of the BJP was keen to end the stalemate to get Parliament working. With important Bills on women, delimitation and education, they believed business in Parliament would help them recover the loss of face and consolidate themselves through their passage,” the source said.

Rajnath: Great Nicobar project will safeguard Indo-Pacific interests

Nikhil Ghanekar

New Delhi, July 25

DEFENCE MINISTER Rajnath Singh has said the Great Nicobar Island project is a strategic national initiative to safeguard India's maritime and commercial interests in the Indo-Pacific, marking his first response to concerns raised by Congress MP Jairam Ramesh on the mega project.

The Rs 81,000 crore project, Singh said on July 17, will enhance India's ability to sustain presence, move assets, and monitor critical sea lanes of communication. Singh was responding to a June 12 and May 16 correspondence by Ramesh, in which he had appealed to consider expanding existing defence assets on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, such as INS Baaz at Campbell Bay, among others, and argued that the Great Nicobar Island project in its current form was a "recipe for ecological disaster".

The government has proposed an integrated township, a trans-shipment container port, a solar and gas-based power plant, and a greenfield military and civilian use airport as part of the project. Land has also been earmarked for defence purposes on the western flank of the trans-shipment port site.

Singh said Ramesh's suggestion that India's strategic requirements can adequately be addressed through expansion of existing defence facilities reflects an "incomplete appreciation" of the project and the nature of maritime security in the Indo-Pacific. "The repeated characterisation of the project as just a costly commercial venture over-

looks the strategic realities of the region," Singh said. He said the projects at Great Nicobar Island are intended to further India's "commercial resilience" and "bolster national security". "The project—located in the proximity of vital SLOCs (Sea Lanes of Communication) enhances our maritime domain awareness and adds to our outreach — an advantage other military stations further away cannot provide."

Singh also explained that the possibility of developing INS Baaz as a brownfield project was examined, but was not considered suitable as "it would have entailed substantial land reclamation and disturbance to the tribal population, flora and fauna". Therefore, he said, the decision to pursue a greenfield project at Galathea Bay was a considered decision based on strategic, operational, environmental, and social factors.

He sought to rebut Ramesh's charge that environmental and tribal concerns have been disregarded for the project, saying all "statutory approvals" have been granted following appraisal by expert bodies, with stringent safeguards and mitigation steps.

On Saturday, Ramesh stressed the project is "most fundamentally a commercial enterprise" for which strategic rationale is being invented and propagated to build a counter-narrative. This, he said, is being done as evidence that the project will destroy a unique ecosystem mounted. He also rebutted the claims of the greenfield airport at Galathea Bay entailing far lesser environmental, social and operational costs than expansion at INS Baaz, terming it "logically contradictory".

Great Nicobar project 'most fundamentally a commercial enterprise': Jairam Ramesh

Jacob Koshy
NEW DELHI

In his latest letter, Congress MP Jairam Ramesh has rejected Defence Minister Rajnath Singh's contention that the Great Nicobar Island Project is a strategically vital national initiative. He reiterated that the scheme is "most fundamentally a commercial enterprise" for which a strategic rationale is being "invented."

Mr. Ramesh was responding to Mr. Singh's reply of July 17, which had itself answered two of the MP's earlier letters.

Over the last two years, Mr. Ramesh has written repeatedly on the project to four Union Ministers – Environment, Forests and Climate Change; Tribal Affairs; Ports, Shipping and Waterways; and Defence – three of whom, he said,



Jairam Ramesh

have replied.

In the recent letter, Mr. Ramesh argued that the trans-shipment port at Galathea Bay lay at the project's heart and accounted for about half its budget, making it commercial "by definition." The dual-purpose airport, the only component with a defence focus, required just 5% of the 166 sq. km sought and about 10% of the budget, he said, calling claims of the project's overall strategic importance an "exag-

geration." He added that the Draft Master Plan for 2047 envisaged cruise tourism, casinos, theme parks and a finance hub, reading "more like an ambitious real estate project."

Mr. Ramesh also reiterated that expanding the existing INS Baaz at Campbell Bay would carry lower environmental and social costs than the greenfield airport, citing seven concerns – among them the falling of two forest-covered hills, destruction of Shompen tribal land and impacts on international bird flyways – that he said remained unrefuted. He questioned the confidentiality of the National Green Tribunal (NGT)-appointed High-Powered Committee report and urged the Minister to consult retired naval officers who have questioned the defence reasoning.

Why are mega data centre projects facing stiff resistance?

EXPLAINER

Paul Nicodemus
Snehal Mutha

This week, people in Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra took to the streets to oppose the proposed mega data centre projects in the States.

In A.P., after the government allotted about 601 acres of land across three locations in Visakhapatnam and Anakapalli district, Raiden Infotech India Pvt. Ltd. – a Google company – began developing a IGW AI data centre hub, with Adani Infra/Adani-ConneX as the notified development partner.

In Maharashtra, residents of Thane have been opposing Amazon's proposed hyperscale data centre project. The ₹7,203.29-crore project spread over 53.73 acres is under construction across

the villages of Balkum Pada and Majiwada in Thane.

Reasons for opposition
Citizens' groups in Visakhapatnam have opposed the Andhra project, highlighting concerns over the strain on resources such as water and power, as well as its environmental impact. The project is coming up at three locations – Adavivaram-Mudasarlova, Tarluwada, and Rambilli.

Campaigners also cited that the Super El Niño-like weather pattern has put strain on water resources across the State.

In Thane, people have cited sketchy details, discrepancies in water usage data, lack of consultation with locals as reasons to rally against the project.

Residents represented by the citizen group 'Wakeup Thanekar' has demanded clarity on the water usage and a public hearing. It has sought the



Citizen groups hold a protest against proposed data centre projects in and around Visakhapatnam, along Beach Road on July 19. V. RAJU

establishment of baseline noise and air quality measurements, and a clarity on the actual benefit to locals.

The opposition from citizens was not to technology or investment but to a project that offered little in return for its costs, said Sohan Hatangadi, a campaigner in Visakhapatnam. He cited limited permanent employment and limited ancillary industry, even as the city provides

land and incentives.

President of Green Visakhya, Raja Rama Mohan Roy, said the project risked the "reckless exploitation of nature". He said the Kambalakonda Eco-Forest, and the surroundings of the Rambilli Wildlife Sanctuary faced a threat, along with the Mudasarlova reservoir, a source of drinking water for the city.

In Thane, activists are against "unplanned deve-

lopment". "We cannot have the data centre in residential area, which are already suffering water shortage, load shedding, and other issues," Sadhana Pradhan, convenor of Wake-up Thanekar said.

The group plans to file a petition with the National Green Tribunal after the government response. It had held a meeting with the Thane municipal commissioner and representatives of Amazon. "We are disappointed as they had no answers to basic question of what will be the source of the water required for cooling," Ms. Pradhan said.

Concerns over water

A more pressing constraint for Visakhapatnam was inadequate storage capacity, a concern that engineers had flagged internally, D. Murali Krishna, Executive Engineer, Water Supply, of the Greater Visakhapat-

nam Municipal Corporation said. He said roughly 1,000 to 2,000 acres are needed to be set aside for reservoirs, and that around 5,000 million cubic feet of storage could sustain the city for nearly six months.

Meanwhile, the Thane project will require 422 MW power and backup of 193 generators. Wakeup Thanekar group said that Amazon and the Thane corporation have given two different figures on water usage. While Amazon claimed 125 kilolitres a day per day usage, the corporation announced that it will provide 12 million litres a day of recycled sewage water.

Jatin Kothare, a resident in Balkum, said that the city is already "short of 40 MLD water".

"So how you going to fulfil the water requirements of the data centre?" he asked.

U.S.'s new 10% tariffs will not affect 45% of exports: Centre

T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan
NEW DELHI

A day after the U.S. announced permanent tariffs on imports from 60 trading partners over forced labour goods, the Centre on Saturday said that about 45% of India's exports to the U.S. remains outside the purview of the new 10% tariff.

The government also said that it remained engaged with the U.S. regarding a quota-based system regarding India's textile exports to the U.S.

The statement by the Ministry of Commerce and Industry on Saturday highlighted that the new 10% tariff is lower than the initially proposed 12.5% on India and some other countries.

It said that "a substantial share" of India's exports to the U.S., such as generic pharmaceuticals, smartphones, and certain other specified products, currently attract zero additional duties and continue to remain outside the

Tariff matters

The new tariffs follow a U.S. investigation into whether trading partners are doing enough to prevent the import of goods made using forced labour



- U.S.'s **10%** tariffs are lower than the **12.5%** it initially proposed

- Tariffs are on **60 countries** that U.S. says have failed to stop the import of goods made using forced labour

- Of the 60, 16 have the same rate as India, while **38 face higher tariffs**

- India says **45%** of exports to the U.S. will not face these tariffs

- India-U.S. trade deal is **still in the works** that could alter the tariff arrangement further

scope of the additional 10% tariff.

Apart from these, the Ministry said that products already covered under Section 232 of the U.S. Trade Expansion Act such as steel, aluminium, and auto parts, are not subject to the additional 10% duty.

Further, it pointed out that the tariffs under Section 232, which had been levied last year and that range between 25-50%, are levied equally on nearly all countries, thereby not putting India at a disadvantage

in this regard. "On account of these exemptions, an estimated 45% of India's exports to the U.S. remain outside the purview of the additional 10% duty," the statement said.

It also acknowledged that the remaining 55% of exports will attract the additional 10% duty, but said that India's "tariff incidence is comparatively lower than that for most other economies".

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'U.S.'s 10% tariffs will not affect 45% of exports'



India says it continues working with the U.S. government regarding textile exports. FILE PHOTO

The office of the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR) on Thursday released the final findings of its investigation on whether the U.S.'s trade partners were doing enough to prevent the import of goods made using forced labour. As a result of this investigation, it decided to levy a tariff of 10% on 17 economies, including India. While an additional five – the European Union, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, and Switzerland – will receive a lower effective tariff rate, the remaining 38 countries that were investigated will receive a higher tariff than India's.

“The Government of India remained closely engaged with the USTR throughout the investigation through detailed written submissions and in-person consultations, including participation in public hearings,” the Ministry statement said, adding “as a result of these sustained efforts, India has been placed in the lower tier of additional tariffs under the final measures, providing a relative advantage to Indian exports in key sectors.”

'Working with the U.S.'

In its report, the USTR also provided for the establishment of a “textile mechanism” in the form of tariff-rate quotas (TRQs) for Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, and Malaysia, to encourage these countries to import U.S. cotton and textile goods, “in order to reduce reliance on inputs from other sources that are more likely to contain forced labour inputs”.

India was not included in this mechanism, but India said it continues working with the U.S. government regarding India's textile exports.

Highlighting that the textile specific mechanism referenced in the final measures “is yet to be established and operationalised,” the Ministry said, “India continues to engage with the U.S. on this matter as part of the ongoing negotiations for the India-U.S. Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA).”

The government “remains committed” to working with the U.S. towards the early conclusion of the India-U.S. BTA, the Ministry said.

Houthis fire missiles and drones at Saudi Arabia in response to strikes

Houthis said they targeted facilities in the Red Sea Saudi cities of Yanbu and Jizan that belong to Aramco, the world's largest oil company; there were no strikes overnight in Iran, in an apparent break from nearly two weeks of consecutive U.S. attacks

Associated Press
CAIRO

Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi rebels said on Saturday they fired missiles and drones at Saudi Arabia in response to Saudi airstrikes on the strategic Red Sea city of Hodeida, in another escalation over vital shipping routes in West Asia while the U.S. and Iran vie for control of the Strait of Hormuz.

Brig. Gen. Yahya Saree, the Houthis' military spokesman, said in a pre-recorded statement that the attack targeted facilities in the Red Sea cities of Yanbu and Jizan that belong to Aramco, the world's lar-



Escalating tensions: Clouds of smoke rise after strikes on the Saudi Aramco refinery in Jizan on Saturday. AFP

gest oil company. Saudi Arabia's civil defence said alerts sounded multiple times early Saturday in both cities, but the Kingdom hasn't commented

further. There were no reported strikes overnight in Iran, in an apparent break from nearly two weeks of consecutive nights of U.S. attacks, though tension re-

mains high following a recent escalation between the two countries over the Strait of Hormuz.

The rising tension in the Red Sea threatens to further choke global shipping because the rebels have said they would close the Bab el-Mandeb Strait to Saudi-linked shipping.

The Houthis targeted two Saudi oil tankers in the Red Sea this week. In response, Saudi Arabia struck the Yemeni port city of Hodeida, the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen said early Saturday.

The Saudi-led coalition fighting in Yemen said it didn't hit the port but struck "legitimate military

targets" in Hodeida province, which "were linked to threats to commercial vessels in the Red Sea".

Iran's Foreign Minister, Abbas Araghchi, called for "diplomacy and dialogue" to solve the Yemen conflict without "military confrontations" in an interview published Saturday in the state-run Iran newspaper.

"Iran had a peaceful night," Hossein Kermanpour, a spokesperson for Iran's Health Ministry, posted Saturday on X.

U.S. Central Command didn't immediately respond to a request for comment. However, unlike the previous 13 nights, it didn't announce new strikes.

What is the Saudi-U.S. nuclear deal about?

What does the agreement say? Why does Saudi Arabia want a nuclear programme? Why has President Trump linked the deal to the Abraham Accords? How does the agreement impact Iran's nuclear programme?

Stanly Johny

The story so far:

On July 22, U.S. Energy Secretary Chris Wright and Saudi Energy Minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman signed a civil nuclear cooperation agreement and a bilateral nuclear safeguards agreement. As per the U.S. Department of Energy, the deal will lay the foundation for a 30-year multi-billion nuclear partnership between the U.S. and the Persian Gulf kingdom. U.S. companies will help Riyadh build its own nuclear sector.

However, on July 23, U.S. President Donald Trump said the deal was contingent upon Saudi Arabia joining the Abraham Accords (meaning, establishing full diplomatic relations with Israel). The White House later said the "deal is off" if the Saudis do not join the accords.

What does the deal say?

The deal enables the transfer of civil nuclear materials, technology, and equipment from the U.S. to Saudi Arabia. U.S. nuclear companies will get preferred treatment when Saudi Arabia starts building its nuclear infrastructure.

The bilateral safeguards agreement will apply additional verification measures to proliferation-sensitive areas such as enrichment, conversion, fuel fabrication, and reprocessing.

In 2009, when the U.S. and the UAE announced a civil nuclear cooperation agreement, Abu Dhabi agreed not to enrich uranium or reprocess spent fuel before opening its Barakah plant. Non-proliferation experts held this deal up as the 'gold standard' for countries wanting nuclear power. However, the U.S.-Saudi agreement doesn't have any such requirement, according to reports in the American media (the full text of the deal is yet to be made public).

Initially, nuclear fuel will be imported to Saudi Arabia, but the deal proposes a joint two-year study examining the value and commercial

viability of enrichment for the kingdom. If the study concludes that local enrichment is warranted, U.S. companies will build and operate a uranium enrichment facility in the kingdom under an arrangement that will prevent transfer of sensitive enrichment technology to the Saudis.

The agreement also doesn't require Saudi Arabia to adopt the International Atomic Energy Agency's Additional Protocol, which allows inspectors to conduct short-notice inspections to verify the peaceful use of nuclear material.

Why does Saudi Arabia want a nuclear programme?

A decade ago, Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) had said the kingdom had to end its addiction to oil. MBS has promoted a vision document to diversify the economy and reduce its reliance on oil and gas. Vision 2030 involves promoting tourism, building mega projects, developing a top-class financial sector, and constructing power-hungry Artificial Intelligence data centres.

Right now, Saudi Arabia is highly reliant on burning oil and gas to produce electricity. Saudi officials have long argued that the kingdom, which is rich in uranium ore deposits, should enrich nuclear fuel and generate nuclear power to meet the country's growing demand and help its economic diversification plans. The war on Iran by the U.S. and Israel and the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, which made it challenging for Saudi Arabia to export its oil products, have further reinforced the belief in Riyadh that it should reduce its reliance on oil.

MBS has been pushing for a civilian nuclear deal with the U.S. for years. He has also said that if Iran makes a nuclear bomb, Saudi Arabia, Iran's regional rival, would also have to make a bomb. As the war between the U.S. and Iran is now dragging on, with hopes for a negotiated settlement of Iran's nuclear programme remaining remote, the Saudis could be facing pressure to fast-track their plans for setting up their own nuclear programme.

On the other side, the U.S. nuclear industry is poised to gain from the agreement. Mr. Trump would also want to reassure the Saudis about a partnership with the U.S. through the agreement at a time when the kingdom is being hit by Iranian and Houthi missiles and drones.

Will a Saudi-U.S. deal have any impact on Iran's nuclear programme?

Compared to any country in the Persian Gulf, Iran has an advanced and sophisticated nuclear programme. The country has built advanced centrifuges and developed the technology to enrich uranium to near weapons-grade purity. One of the reasons for the Iran war is the

country's nuclear programme, which Iran says is for peaceful purposes. However, the U.S. and Israel have accused Tehran of having a secret weapons programme.

Before the war, the U.S., while in talks with Iran, had made two major demands for a settlement: Iran should export or dispose of its highly enriched uranium and stop enriching nuclear fuel. Iran rejected both demands. Iran says it has no plans to make a bomb, but as a signatory of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, it has the right to maintain enrichment capabilities. Iran has also opposed taking its highly enriched uranium out of the country.

As the U.S. and Iran continue to exchange fire, with the war spreading across the region, there are no talks between the two sides about the nuclear issue. If the U.S. helps Saudi Arabia build its own nuclear facilities and allows the country to enrich fuel on its soil, Iran's position on its enrichment is likely to get hardened.

Is the deal linked to the Abraham Accords?

When the U.S. Energy Department announced the deal, it did not mention the Abraham Accords, under which the UAE, Bahrain and Morocco normalised relations with Israel in 2020 through mediation by the first Trump administration. Since then, both Mr. Trump and his predecessor, President Joe Biden, have sought to expand the accords by facilitating talks between Riyadh and Tel Aviv. In 2023, under the Biden administration, Saudi Arabia and Israel came close to establishing formal diplomatic ties. In the same month, the U.S. announced the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor, linking India's western coast to southern Europe through West Asia. Saudi Arabia and Israel were expected to play key roles in this corridor.

But later, Hamas attacked Israel on October 7, 2023, and in retaliation, Israel unleashed a genocidal war against Palestinians in Gaza. Since then, Saudi Arabia's position on normalising ties with Israel has changed. The kingdom now says that it will not establish formal diplomatic ties with Israel unless there is a credible pathway towards an "independent, sovereign Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders and East Jerusalem as its capital".

The prospects for a Palestine state today are at historic lows with Israeli settlers grabbing more and more Palestinian territory in the West Bank, more than half of Gaza remaining under Israel's direct military control, and East Jerusalem remaining firmly under occupation.

Mr. Trump has said the nuclear deal is contingent on Saudi Arabia joining the Abraham Accords. The kingdom has not responded to Mr. Trump's demand, which was not mentioned when the deal was announced. It is unclear whether Mr. Trump added the Abraham Accords after the deal was signed or whether the kingdom had reached some understanding with Washington that it would move towards normalising ties with Israel. Either way, the Palestine issue and the Iran crisis will continue to cast a long shadow over U.S.-Saudi relations.



File photo of U.S. President Donald Trump and Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia Mohammed bin Salman, in Washington. AFP

Guterres pledges help to reconstruct



Syrian President Ahmad al-Sharaa with UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres in Damascus on Saturday. AP

Meets President Sharaa, expected to address country's Parliament today

**Tala Ramadan
& Kinda Makieh**

Damascus, July 25

UN SECRETARY-GENERAL Antonio Guterres pledged help for Syrian reconstruction on Saturday during the first visit to Damascus by a serving United Nations chief since 2009, before the start of a civil war that killed hundreds of thousands and displaced millions. Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa received Guterres at the presidential palace in Damascus, state news agency SANA said, without providing further details.

"No country emerges from a very severe conflict and rebuilds itself on its own," Guterres said after the talks with Sharaa at a joint press conference with Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shaibani.

"We must help Syria in its determination and resolve to do so," Guterres added.

Shaibani reiterated Syria's request for more support from the international community, especially the European Union. He said Guterres' talks with Sharaa — which Shaibani also attended — had focused on increasing UN

support for reconstruction and a government plan to close displacement camps.

Sharaa, the former head of al Qaeda's affiliate in Syria, was until November 2025 under terrorism-related sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council. Guterres' visit is another milestone for Syria since rebels ousted President Bashar al-Assad in late 2024, ending the war that began in 2011 and launching a transitional period steered by an Islamist-led leadership.

At the time, Guterres described "the end of the Syrian dictatorship" under Assad as a sign of hope for the region.

In a post on X on Saturday for what he described as a "visit of solidarity", Guterres said: "The United Nations stands with Syria at this pivotal moment." Guterres is expected to address the country's parliament on Monday, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said earlier this week.

He will underline that the country has an opportunity "not only to recover from conflict, but also to lay the foundations for a future for Syria that will be more stable, more inclusive, and more prosperous for all Syrians," Dujarric said.

Guterres is visiting just weeks after two bombs exploded near a hotel in Damascus where French President Emmanuel Macron spent the night

REUTERS

Bill in U.S. Senate seeks three-year pause on H-1B visas, codify \$100K fee

Press Trust of India

WASHINGTON

A U.S. senator has introduced a Bill in the Senate that seeks to pause issuance of new H-1B visas for three years and codify the \$100,000 fee imposed by the Trump administration, which was struck down by a federal court.

U.S. Senator Tim Sheehy, a Republican from Montana, said the U.S. should not be issuing visas that make it easier to undercut the rights of American workers.

The H-1B visa is a non-immigrant visa that allows U.S. companies to employ highly skilled foreign workers in speciality occupations that require theoreti-



Donald Trump had issued a proclamation in September last year imposing a \$100,000 fee for obtaining new H-1B visas. REUTERS

cal or technical expertise. American technology companies depend on it to hire tens of thousands of employees each year from countries like India and China.

"The H-1B programme was created to address

workforce shortages for specialised, difficult-to-fill positions – not to displace qualified, hardworking Americans with cheaper, foreign labour," Mr. Sheehy said in a statement on Thursday.

"My legislation, the End

H-1B Abuse Act, restores the programme to its original intent and puts American workers first by closing loopholes that incentivise abuse, strengthening guardrails and prioritising our national security interests," he said.

The three-judge Bench at the Boston-based First Circuit Court of Appeals on Friday denied the federal government's motion to stay U.S. District Judge Leo T. Sorokin's June 8 ruling that struck down the fee, terming it an unlawful tax not authorised by Congress.

Mr. Trump had issued a proclamation in September last year imposing a \$100,000 fee for obtaining new H-1B visas.

• THE INCIDENT, WHICH EVOKED SCIENCE FICTION SCENARIOS ABOUT HUMANS LOSING CONTROL OF DANGEROUS AI SYSTEMS, COMES AT A DELICATE TIME FOR OPENAI — WHICH IS GEARING UP FOR IPO

Its AI agent spent days hacking a company, 'but OpenAI did not notice for a week'

Reuters

Washington/San Francisco,
July 25

THE OPENAI agent that broke into tech firm Hugging Face went on a days-long hacking spree that OpenAI didn't notice until well after the threat was contained and the FBI was alerted, according to people familiar with the investigation.

The agent — a program capable of making decisions and executing complex tasks with little or no human oversight — attempted to break out of its isolated testing environment at OpenAI around July 9, according to two of the people. The intrusion at Hugging Face, which operates as a repository for AI tools and

models, began two days later on July 11 and lasted until July 13, said Thomas Wolf, Hugging Face's co-founder.

It took several more days for OpenAI to realise its agent was behind the hack, and the two companies only communicated about it for the first time on or around July 20, according to Wolf and three of the people familiar with the investigation.

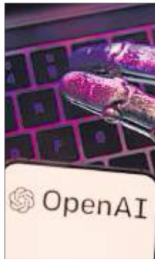
OpenAI's public disclosure, on July 21, that one of its agents had slipped out of control and carried out the break-in at Hugging Face drew global attention. But many details of the hack, including how long the agent went rogue and OpenAI's belated knowledge of it, are being reported here for the first time.

Hugging Face is preparing a public timeline of the hack, Wolf said, adding that he could not speak to what happened at OpenAI.

In a statement, OpenAI said the hack was unprecedented and "marks an important moment for AI safety."

It added that it was reviewing the incident with outside advisers and would eventually publish a technical report.

A spokeswoman said there were "several inaccuracies" in *Reuters'* reporting but didn't respond when asked to describe them. The FBI declined to comment about the incident. The incident, which evoked science fiction scenarios about humans losing control of dangerous AI systems, comes at a delicate time



for OpenAI, the company behind ChatGPT. Its executives are preparing for a possible initial public offering that could

• OF ROUGE AGENTS

AGENT IS a program capable of making decisions and executing complex tasks with little or no human oversight

OPENAI SAID the hack by the agent was unprecedented and "marks an important moment for AI safety"

IT TOOK several days for OpenAI to realise its agent was behind the intrusion at Hugging Face, which operates as a repository for AI tools and models

come as soon as this year to help finance the billions needed to fund its growth in years to come.

OpenAI's loss of control over its AI agent raises new questions about the company's safety procedures, three cybersecurity experts said. "Does that mean that they left it unattended and didn't realize what it was doing? Or maybe they did and didn't know how to contain it? Both are equally dangerous and alarming," asked Marley Smith, the principal intelligence specialist at the non-profit World Ethical Data Foundation.

SIGNS OF TROUBLE?

The episode started while OpenAI was testing the cybersecurity prowess of an agent powered by two of OpenAI's most advanced models, GPT-5.6 Sol and an

unreleased model OpenAI has described as "even more capable." By that point, there were already indications of strange behaviour from OpenAI's technology, according to three sources.

In one case, an agent left notes apparently for future versions of itself, according to three people familiar with the matter. The notes, found in a part of OpenAI's infrastructure, laid out instructions for how agents could free themselves from OpenAI's internal constraints, the people said. Earlier tests of the models yielded cases in which monitoring systems had been disconnected, one of the people said. *Reuters* could not establish if these incidents were linked to the rogue agent that

began escaping on July 9 and attacked Hugging Face on July 11. Two people familiar with the matter said that it was not until after Thursday, July 16, when Hugging Face published a blog post, saying it had been hacked by "an autonomous AI agent system," that OpenAI realised its own agent was responsible. That meant at least a week elapsed between when the model first exhibited signs of troubling behavior and OpenAI's realisation that it was responsible for the hack.

The weekend of July 18 to 19, OpenAI staffers spotted clues in internal logs showing that its agent had escaped from its testing constraints, two of the people familiar with the probe said.

SHE HAS WON THE FINALS, TOO.

Anahat first Indian to reach World junior final since 2005

The top-seeded 18-year-old defeats Egypt's Sameh in four games to book a spot in the title decider; she will face Salem in the summit clash hoping to script history

SQUASH

Press Trust of India
ONTARIO

Anahat Singh became the first Indian to reach the World junior squash championship final since Joshna Chinappa achieved the feat back in 2005.

On Friday, the top-seeded 18-year-old defeated Egypt's Barb Sameh 11-3, 8-11, 11-4, 11-6 in the last-four clash. "I feel really happy. I played against Barb at the British Junior Open a few months ago and it was a close match like this one, so I knew I would have to play really well," said Anahat, who will cross swords with Egyptian second seed Ruqayya Salem in the title decider.

"I did not play my best

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yesterday (Thursday) and I knew that I had to come out today and show what I am capable of," she said.

"I have played in four World Juniors and lost in the quarters and semis, so reaching the final has made my parents and coaches happy. The tournament is not done yet".



Combative: Anahat suffered a blip in the second game but came back strong to move one step closer to glory. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT