Ready to drop FIRs against student protesters, says SC

Top court agrees to invoke Article 142 to quash proceedings against students over NEET protests; it announces panel to examine protest issues; police yet to disclose list of FIRs, say petitioners

Krishnadas Rajagopal
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Tuesday agreed to use an exceptional power under Article 142 of the Constitution to quash first information reports (FIRs) registered against students who joined the nationwide protests against NEET-UG paper leaks that led to the resignation of Dharmendra Pradhan as Union Education Minister and compelled the government to introspect.

Seeking a list of FIRs in which only students were named, Chief Justice of India Surya Kant, heading a three-judge Bench, said: "We will quash these FIRs by invoking Article 142. FIRs involving elements with serious criminal antecedents would be decided subject to discussion in court." Advocate Vrinda Grover, defending the students' right to protest, pointed out that the Delhi police have not disclosed details regarding any of the FIRs. "But unless we have a list of these FIRs, how will we quash them?" Chief Justice Kant said.

Solicitor-General Tushar Mehta, appearing for the Central government and the Delhi police, said the police would confine their investigation to 2,873 people with "serious criminal background" who were identified at the protest site.

He said these persons included history-sheeters facing serious charges, including murder, rape, and child sexual abuse.

The Bench said it would form a high-powered panel to examine the issues over the NEET-UG protests, and invited suggestions from the advocates appearing in the case.

CONTINUED ON
» PAGE 10

We will quash these FIRs [naming only students] by invoking Article 142. FIRs involving elements with serious criminal antecedents would be decided subject to discussion in court

SURYA KANT
Chief Justice of India

We have identified 2,873 [with criminal antecedents]. The rest are students

TUSHAR MEHTA
Solicitor-General

Police's use of facial recognition under SC scrutiny

NEW DELHI
After a Delhi Police affidavit admitted to the use of facial recognition system during the NEET-UG protests citing "legitimate state interest", the Supreme Court on Tuesday said it will examine the "proportionality" of the system's usage. » PAGE 10

SHAURYA SSB TRG (8368104629)

Employment guarantee has slipped into limbo

Rural workers are paying a heavy price for the Union Government's ill-conceived tinkering with India's employment guarantee law. Indeed, evidence is mounting of an unprecedented crash in employment generation under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and its successor, the Viksit Bharat-Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) alias VB-G RAM G Act.

One aspect of this crash has been widely noted: the 50% decline in employment generation under VB-G RAM G in July 2026, *vis-à-vis* MGNREGA in the same month last year. The 50% estimate is actually based on a premature figure of 7.7 crore person-days for July 2026. The latest figure is 8.3 crore, and the final figure is likely to be around 9 crore according to the Ministry of Rural Development. But even if we accept this anticipated total for July, the decline *vis-à-vis* July 2025 would be above 40%, which is a massive setback.

Misleading excuse

The Ministry of Rural Development made a lame attempt to attribute this setback to the fact that a few States explicitly suspended VB-G RAM G in parts of July 2026 under Section 6 of the Act, but this is the mother of all red herrings. For one thing, these States account for a small share of total MGNREGA employment, and the July 2026 decline looks much the same in proportionate terms when these States are left out. For another, the July decline is just the continuation of a crisis that began earlier.

Jean Drèze

Independent scholar based in Ranchi, Jharkhand

Mohammad Zameer

Independent scholar based in Ranchi, Jharkhand

VB-G RAM G has driven employment guarantee into the ditch

Some background may help. A Bill paving the way for the replacement of MGNREGA with VB-G RAM G was rushed through Parliament in December 2025. The Rural Development Minister announced, at that time, that the replacement would take place on April 1, 2026. However, nothing of the sort happened on April 1. Evidently, the Ministry was not ready for the transition. The Rules, in particular, had not been framed. MGNREGA continued, by default.

On May 22, 2026, the Ministry released draft VB-G RAM G Rules for public consultation. These Rules are mainly a rehash of MGNREGA rules and orders. Release of the final Rules began at the end of June, just on time for the official replacement of MGNREGA with VB-G RAM G on July 1. VB-G RAM G wage rates were also notified on June 30, with a minimum norm of ₹300 per day – much the same as the earlier MGNREGA norm of ₹100 per day at 2009-10 prices.

The transition, the ground reality

During the first three months of this financial year (April to June), confusion prevailed. To paraphrase Gramsci, the old world of MGNREGA was dying, and the new world of VB-G RAM G was struggling to be born. In some districts, MGNREGA functionaries refused to open new works. In many areas, there was no MGNREGA work at all. This was a serious lapse, as MGNREGA is normally at a peak during these summer months (a slack agricultural season in large parts of India). The limbo continued in July 2026, when VB-G RAM G made a faltering start.

In 2024-25 and 2025-26, the first four months of the financial year (April to July) accounted for nearly 50% of annual employment generation – 128 crore and 119 crore person-days, respectively. In 2026-27, however, MGNREGA and VB-G RAM G generated only 70 crore person-days of employment in the same months – a decline of 43% from the average of the preceding two years.

Employment declined in all major States, but the decline was far from uniform across States (see *chart*). It was relatively small in a few States (example, Andhra Pradesh, Assam and Telangana), but larger than 40% in most States. In 10 out of 19 major States, the decline ranged between 60% and 85%. States where employment generation came to a virtual standstill in April-July 2026 include Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Jharkhand, some of India's largest and poorest States.

This crash in employment is all the more startling as the transition to VB-G RAM G was supposed to lead to a huge increase in employment generation. The VB-G RAM G allocation in the 2026-27 Union Budget is ₹95,692 crore – a little more than the actual MGNREGA expenditure in 2025-26. The total VB-G RAM G budget, inclusive of State contributions (40% of the total for most States), was due to shoot up to ₹1.5 lakh crore or so – an increase of about 70% *vis-à-vis* MGNREGA expenditure in 2025-26. With wages more or less unchanged in real terms, one would expect this enhanced budget to trigger a big increase in employment generation. Instead, the first four months of 2026-27 witnessed an unprecedented crash.

An uncertain road ahead

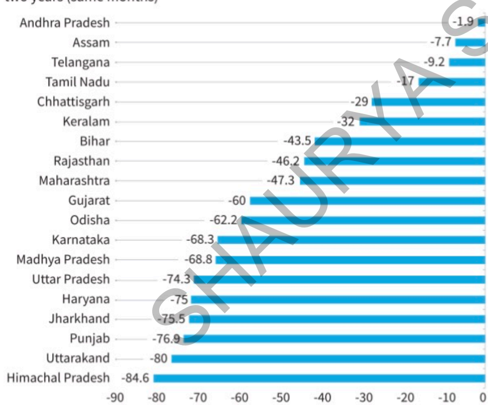
It is, of course, too early to pass judgement on VB-G RAM G. But the launch is certainly a damp squib as things stand. The fact that employment generation has been virtually nil for months in some of India's largest and poorest States is particularly alarming.

The situation may improve in the next few months, but it is hard to see how the projected VB-G RAM G expenditure of ₹1.5 lakh crore in 2026-27 is going to materialise. Wage payments may face serious problems too, with the imposition of facial recognition at the worksite and Centre-State cost-sharing. The outlook is bleak.

At Honnakiranagi village in Kalaburagi district, Karnataka. ARUN KULKARNI

Employment decline in April-July 2026

Percentage change in person-days, April-July 2026 versus average of previous two years (same months)



Source: Calculated from Report 5.1.4, MGNREGA and VB-G RAM G portals

SHAURYA SSB TRG

Time to push back

The U.S. has been emboldened to make increasing demands on India

The latest accusation levelled by the United States against India has the potential to be the most harmful to the Indian economy. A recent White House report, naming around 40 countries in all, has said that India ranks among the top 'enablers' of China's evasion of U.S. tariffs. The accusation is that India and these other countries are importing Chinese goods, making minor modifications to them, and then exporting them to the U.S. at lower tariffs than what Chinese goods would have faced. The fact that Chinese imports form a significant pillar of Indian manufacturing is no secret. Yet, the nature of these imports is slowly changing. India is gradually moving away from importing finished products, making cosmetic changes, and selling them. Instead, the share of intermediate goods in Indian imports from China has been steadily rising. That is, India is doing much of its own assembly and manufacturing in several sectors now, relying on China and other countries for the parts needed. This shift is an important step towards full-scale manufacturing in India. The U.S. has not yet announced punitive actions based on its assessment of apparent Chinese tariff evasion, though that eventuality is conceivable. However, should it do so, India must resist bowing to U.S. pressure on this issue. As even the government has admitted, Chinese imports right now are an important part of the Make in India story.

The fear of India bowing to U.S. pressure is based on precedent. In his first term as U.S. President, Donald Trump railed against India's tariffs on high-end motorcycles. In 2018, India cut these tariffs to 50% from the earlier 60%-75%, and then cut them further to 40% in February 2025, before trade deal talks had even started. Similarly, it slashed the import duties on shrimp feed and its components in the February 2024 Budget, a key ask of the U.S. It did the same with tariffs on frozen duck and turkey. The pressure of the 50% punitive tariffs pushed India to diversify away from Russian oil, despite India's strident claims of energy sovereignty and the discount it was receiving. Russia's share in India's oil imports fell to below 20% in January 2026, from nearly double that when the 50% tariffs were imposed six months earlier. This had happened with Venezuelan oil in 2019 as well. It was the West Asia crisis, and the U.S.'s temporary reprieve, that has seen India turning back to Russian oil. Allowing FDI in the e-commerce inventory model, as India recently did, was something Amazon had been lobbying for for a decade, and a dilution of India's long-held stance. The U.S. can wield immense pressure and so concessions are understandable. But that has emboldened it to make increasing demands. India needs to start pushing back.

SHAURYA SSB IRC (8368104529)

BRICS calls EU's carbon tax 'punitive, unilateral'

Ministers say it could undermine efforts of developing countries to address climate change; they urge developed nations to honour financial commitment agreed to at 2025 UN climate conference

Jacob Koshy
NEW DELHI

BRICS countries on Tuesday opposed what they described as "unilateral, punitive, discriminatory and protectionist" climate measures, including the European Union's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanisms (CBAMs), while calling for a significant increase in international funding to help developing countries adapt to climate change.

The positions were contained in the joint statement adopted at the 12th BRICS Environment Ministers' Meeting in New Delhi, held under India's chairship. The Ministers specifically said that carbon border measures such as CBAMs could "undermine developing countries' efforts to address climate change and build resilience".

The statement comes as the European Union's CBAM entered its definitive phase from January 1 this year. The mechanism requires importers of carbon-intensive products, consisting of iron and steel, aluminium, cement, fertilizers, hydrogen and electricity, to account for the carbon emissions associated with their production. The EU says the measure is intended to prevent "carbon leakage" – the shifting of carbon-intensive production outside the bloc because of differences in climate policies.

Union Minister Bhupender Yadav at the 12th BRICS Environment Ministers' Meeting in New Delhi on Tuesday. ANI

Significant exposure

India is among the countries with significant exposure to the mechanism, particularly through its steel exports. A recent analysis found that iron and steel account for about 90% of India's exports to the EU that fall within the CBAM framework. A June 2026 analysis in *Nature Climate Change*, based on shipment-level trade data and facility-level emissions estimates, found that high-emission Indian steel firms had reduced their export quantities and revenues to the EU during the CBAM reporting phase, while lower-emission firms maintained their export levels.

The BRICS position therefore comes as the EU and India move to implement a free trade agreement negotiated earlier this year, while Indian exporters face the additional carbon-related compliance requirements in the European market.

Hike adaptation finance

The Ministers also called for an urgent increase in adaptation finance from developed countries. They said support should be "new, additional, predictable, adequate and accessible", and should be provided through grants and concessional finance without increasing the financial vulnerabilities of developing countries. They urged developed countries to meet the commitment agreed at the 2025 UN climate conference to triple adaptation finance to developing countries by 2035.

Adaptation finance is used to help countries and communities cope with climate impacts, including measures to strengthen water security, agriculture, infrastructure, and so on.

SHAURYA SSB (6398104529)

Kathmandu talks

Chief of the Army Staff General Dhiraj Seth meets Nepal Prime Minister Balendra Shah at his office in Kathmandu on Tuesday. They discussed issues of mutual interest and ways to strengthen military ties. General Seth is on an official visit to Nepal from August 17-19 at the invitation of his Nepalese Army counterpart General Ashok Raj Sigdel. ANI

BRICS Environment Ministers oppose EU's Carbon Border Tax

Nikhil Ghanekar
New Delhi, August 18

BRICS ENVIRONMENT and climate ministers Tuesday opposed the European Union's (EU) Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) or Carbon Border Tax, calling it a unilateral, punitive, discriminatory and protection measure that is not in line with international law.

They reiterated that developed nations must urgently scale up climate finance, especially for climate adaptation. CBAM is an import levy on carbon-intensive goods like steel, iron, fertilisers, aluminium and cement. The tax was aimed as a measure to reduce the carbon footprint of imported goods, but the step has been seen as a trade barrier by developing countries.

Rolled out on October 1, 2023, with a reporting-only phase, CBAM was entirely effected from January 1, 2026, when importers were asked to purchase and surrender CBAM certificates tied to carbon emissions embedded in their goods.

Bloc of 9 developing economies has also pressed rich nations on climate finance

In the 'Adaptation and climate resilience' part of the joint statement, member nations "expressed concern" that measures like CBAM "undermine efforts by countries, specifically the developing countries", aimed at addressing the adverse impacts of climate change, increased adaptive capacity, and resilience. The meeting, chaired by India in New Delhi, brought together environment and climate ministers and senior officials from Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, United Arab Emirates, Indonesia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Ethiopia.

In a joint statement issued at the conclusion of the 12th BRICS Environment Ministers' meeting, the bloc of nine developing economies has also urged wealthy nations to deliver on the New Collective Quantified Goal (NCQG) reached at the COP (Conference of Parties) 30 held in Belem, Brazil, to triple adaptation finance to developing countries by 2035.

The joint declaration document invoked the principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities" (CBDR-RC), underscoring that all cooperation commitments — from forest fire protocols to circular economy standards — remain voluntary and calibrated to each country's national circumstances. It marked the culmination of a year of technical work by the BRICS Environment Working Group and its Contact Group on Climate Change and Sustainable Development. India formally handed over hosting duties for the 13th edition to China, which will lead the meeting in 2027.

SHAURYA SSB TRG (8368104529)

Employment guarantee has slipped into limbo

Rural workers are paying a heavy price for the Union Government's ill-conceived tinkering with India's employment guarantee law. Indeed, evidence is mounting of an unprecedented crash in employment generation under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and its successor, the Viksit Bharat-Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) alias VB-G RAM G Act.

One aspect of this crash has been widely noted: the 50% decline in employment generation under VB-G RAM G in July 2026, *vis-à-vis* MGNREGA in the same month last year. The 50% estimate is actually based on a premature figure of 7.7 crore person-days for July 2026. The latest figure is 8.3 crore, and the final figure is likely to be around 9 crore according to the Ministry of Rural Development. But even if we accept this anticipated total for July, the decline *vis-à-vis* July 2025 would be above 40%, which is a massive setback.

Jean Drèze

Independent scholar based in Ranchi, Jharkhand

Mohammad Zameer

Independent scholar based in Ranchi, Jharkhand

VB-G RAM G has driven employment guarantee into the ditch

Misleading excuse

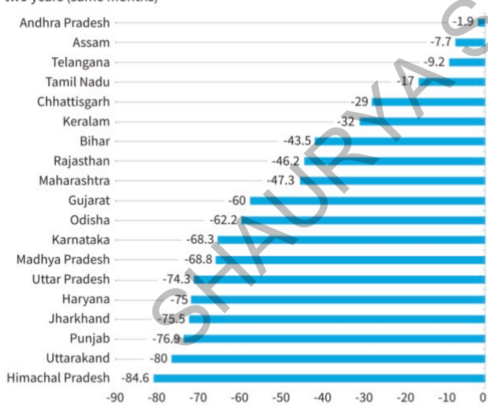
The Ministry of Rural Development made a lame attempt to attribute this setback to the fact that a few States explicitly suspended VB-G RAM G in parts of July 2026 under Section 6 of the Act, but this is the mother of all red herrings. For one thing, these States account for a small share of total MGNREGA employment, and the July 2026 decline looks much the same in proportionate terms when these States are left out. For another, the July decline is just the continuation of a crisis that began earlier.

Some background may help. A Bill paving the way for the replacement of MGNREGA with VB-G RAM G was rushed through Parliament in December 2025. The Rural Development Minister announced, at that time, that the replacement would take place on April 1, 2026. However, nothing of the sort happened on April 1. Evidently, the Ministry was not ready for the transition. The Rules, in particular, had not been framed. MGNREGA continued, by default.

On May 22, 2026, the Ministry released draft VB-G RAM G Rules for public consultation. These Rules are mainly a rehash of MGNREGA rules and orders. Release of the final Rules began at the end of June, just on time for the official replacement of MGNREGA with VB-G RAM G on July 1. VB-G RAM G wage rates were also notified on June 30, with a minimum norm of ₹300 per day – much the same as the earlier MGNREGA norm of ₹100 per day at 2009-10 prices.

Employment decline in April-July 2026

Percentage change in person-days, April-July 2026 versus average of previous two years (same months)



Source: Calculated from Report 5.1.4, MGNREGA and VB-G RAM G portals

The transition, the ground reality

During the first three months of this financial year (April to June), confusion prevailed. To paraphrase Gramsci, the old world of MGNREGA was dying, and the new world of VB-G RAM G was struggling to be born. In some districts, MGNREGA functionaries refused to open new works. In many areas, there was no MGNREGA work at all. This was a serious lapse, as MGNREGA is normally at a peak during these summer months (a slack agricultural season in large parts of India). The limbo continued in July 2026, when VB-G RAM G made a faltering start.

In 2024-25 and 2025-26, the first four months of the financial year (April to July) accounted for nearly 50% of annual employment generation – 128 crore and 119 crore person-days, respectively. In 2026-27, however, MGNREGA and VB-G RAM G generated only 70 crore person-days of employment in the same months – a decline of 43% from the average of the preceding two years.

Employment declined in all major States, but the decline was far from uniform across States (see *chart*). It was relatively small in a few States (example, Andhra Pradesh, Assam and Telangana), but larger than 40% in most States. In 10 out of 19 major States, the decline ranged between 60% and 85%. States where employment generation came to a virtual standstill in April-July 2026 include Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Jharkhand, some of India's largest and poorest States.

At Honnakiranagi village in Kalaburagi district, Karnataka. ARUN KULKARNI

This crash in employment is all the more startling as the transition to VB-G RAM G was supposed to lead to a huge increase in employment generation. The VB-G RAM G allocation in the 2026-27 Union Budget is ₹95,692 crore – a little more than the actual MGNREGA expenditure in 2025-26. The total VB-G RAM G budget, inclusive of State contributions (40% of the total for most States), was due to shoot up to ₹1.5 lakh crore or so – an increase of about 70% *vis-à-vis* MGNREGA expenditure in 2025-26. With wages more or less unchanged in real terms, one would expect this enhanced budget to trigger a big increase in employment generation. Instead, the first four months of 2026-27 witnessed an unprecedented crash.

An uncertain road ahead

It is, of course, too early to pass judgement on VB-G RAM G. But the launch is certainly a damp squib as things stand. The fact that employment generation has been virtually nil for months in some of India's largest and poorest States is particularly alarming.

The situation may improve in the next few months, but it is hard to see how the projected VB-G RAM G expenditure of ₹1.5 lakh crore in 2026-27 is going to materialise. Wage payments may face serious problems too, with the imposition of facial recognition at the worksite and Centre-State cost-sharing. The outlook is bleak.

SHAURYA SSB TRG

India's crude import bill up 41% in July on West Asia crisis

Saptaparno Ghosh
NEW DELHI

India's crude oil import bill surged more than 41% year-on-year to $13.7 billion in July, as per provisional data released by the Petroleum Planning and Analysis Cell (PPAC), as elevated global oil prices amid persistent uncertainty in West Asia pushed up the cost of shipments.

Crude oil imports rose 13.3% year-on-year in volume terms to 21.4 million metric tonne (MMT) in July. India's crude basket averaged $82.04/barrel in July against $70.95 a barrel a year earlier. Benchmark Brent crude prices were volatile during July on West Asia developments.

Brent crude futures were trading more than 1% higher at around $91.84 a barrel on Tuesday evening.


India imports 89% of its needs.

LNG imports stable

India's liquefied natural gas (LNG) imports rose 1.5% to 2,915 million standard cubic metre (MMSCM) in July.

India stays heavily dependent on overseas supplies to meet its energy needs with crude imports accounting for 88.5% of the country's total crude oil consumption, according to the provisional PPAC data.

Meanwhile, exports of petroleum products by Indian oil-marketing companies increased 10% year-on-year to 5.5 MMT in July.

Revenue from petroleum product exports rose to $5 billion during the month, compared with $3.3 billion a year earlier.

Overall, the country's net import bill for oil and gas - which is the difference between petroleum products, crude and gas imports and exports of petroleum products - increased more than 19% on a year-over-year basis to $11.2 billion.

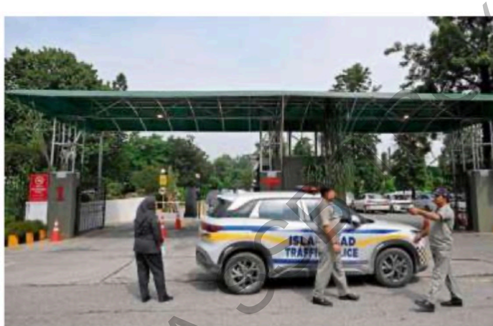
SHAURYA SSB TRG (8368104529)

Pakistan SC directs shifting of Khan from prison to hospital for check-up

The court grants former PM weekly meetings with family members and telephone calls with sons; ruling follows months of concerns from Khan's family and doctors about his health; authorities had restricted visitors because of 'security threats'

Associated Press
ISLAMABAD

Pakistan's Supreme Court on Tuesday ordered authorities to take imprisoned former Prime Minister Imran Khan to a private hospital in the capital for a medical examination, following months of concerns from his family and personal physicians about his health and access to medical care, his lawyers and party officials said.



Traffic police personnel stand outside the Shifa International Hospital in Islamabad, after the court ruling, on Tuesday. AFP

A three-judge panel ordered that Mr. Khan be taken to Shifa International Hospital in Islamabad in the coming days and examined by a medical board that will include specialists and one of his personal physicians, Faisal Sultan.

The court also ordered prison officials to allow Mr. Khan weekly meetings with family members and telephone calls with his sons. Mr. Khan's family has been struggling to secure access to him and have him examined by physicians of his choice.

Pakistan barred visitors earlier this year after receiving intelligence reports about a possible attack on the prison where he is being held.

Health at stake

The order came months after Mr. Khan petitioned the court, asking to be transferred from a high-security prison in the nearby garrison city of Rawalpindi to a hospital and to be allowed access to his personal physicians, family and lawyers.

The court said the order was being issued because Mr. Khan's health was at stake and access to medical care is protected under Pakistan's Constitution, according to Mr. Khan's lawyer Salman Akram Raja.

He urged Mr. Khan's supporters not to gather outside the hospital when the former premier is taken there, saying they should avoid inconveniencing other patients.

Earlier this year, Mr. Khan was repeatedly taken to a government hospital for treatment of an eye condition.

Concerns about Mr. Khan's health intensified in late January after his family said he had lost about 85% of the vision in his right eye, an assertion the government disputed.

GHALIBAF: REOPENING HINGES ON ENDING SANCTIONS, THREATS

No Iran talks planned, says Trump; Tehran fired missiles at us: UAE

Ship attacked while transiting strait, say maritime officials

Reuters
Dubai, Washington, August 18

A ship in the Strait of Hormuz near the beach of Bandar Abbas. FILE

US PRESIDENT Donald Trump said Tuesday no talks were taking place with Iran and none were scheduled, and he insisted the Strait of Hormuz was open, contradicting an earlier Iranian assertion that the critical waterway remained shut to shipping.

The receding prospects of a deal to end the nearly six-month conflict drove up oil prices again Tuesday, while stock markets sagged and borrowing costs for major economies including US hit multi-decade highs, amid concerns about long-term inflationary and fiscal impact of war.

A temporary ceasefire agreement expired on Monday and a senior Iranian official told *Reuters* that his country was moving to a "fully offensive" military posture due to the diplomatic stalemate, though there were no reports of fresh strikes by either side on Tuesday.

"There are no talks or conversations going on, or scheduled, with the Islamic Republic of Iran," Trump said in a post on Truth Social on Tuesday.

"The Naval Blockade remains in full force and effect. The Strait is open and operating. All water mines have been removed or detonated," he added.

Meanwhile on Tuesday, the UAE's defense ministry said it detected two ballistic missiles launched from Iran against the Gulf country. It said one fell inside territorial waters, while another fell outside, and stressed the UAE's readiness to deal with any threats.

Later, the UAEs interior ministry sent a phone alert stating that the situation was safe and people should resume normal activities after an earlier alert warning of a missile threat. There was no immediate comment from Iran.

On Monday, Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law and special envoy, had sounded an optimistic note, saying talks with Iran were still under way and were "probably more robust" than they had ever been.

Despite Trump's typically ebullient remarks about the situation in the Gulf, preliminary shipping data on Tuesday showed ship crossings via the Strait of Hormuz were still in single digits on Monday.

The United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations said it received a report on Tuesday that a vessel was struck by an unknown projectile while transiting outbound in the Strait of Hormuz, causing engine room damage and a crew casualty.

Top Iranian negotiator Mohammad Baqer Ghalibaf said in comments published by state media that the strait would remain shut until the US met the conditions of an interim deal signed with Iran in June.

These conditions include the US lifting its blockade of Iran ports, lifting oil sanctions, releasing Tehran's frozen assets, and ending threats and military operations, Ghalibaf said.

SHAURYA SSB TRG (8368104529)