

Youth, leaders detained amid protests demanding CEC's exit

Opposition parties, activists, and student groups hold protests across States seeking Gyanesh Kumar's resignation; hundreds detained in Delhi; Rahul condemns police action against demonstrators, saying, 'a lathi can stop a crowd, but not a question'

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Opposition parties, civil society activists, youth and student organisations held protests across the country on Friday demanding the resignation of Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Gyanesh Kumar.

In Mumbai, the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP)-led protests at Shivaji Park received support from actors and artists. In Delhi, police detained over 500 people, including former Chief Minister Atishi.

The Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, Rahul Gandhi, condemned the police action against the protesters and said hundreds are in custody. "Their only crime is that they dared to question vote theft," he said.

Thousands joined the protests on Gandhi Jayanti, demanding Mr. Kumar's resignation. "Bapu taught



Roll call: Protest against CEC Gyanesh Kumar near Jantar Mantar, in New Delhi, on Friday. SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

us exactly this – speak the truth, fight peacefully. And that's what scares this government the most. A lathi can stop a crowd, but not a question. Gyanesh Kumar will go. And the system that put him there will go too," Mr. Gandhi said.

CJP founder Abhijeet Dipke announced that if Mr. Kumar doesn't resign, "cockroaches from across India" will protest at Jantar Mantar on October 10. All India Students' Association

at Jantar Mantar, said the authorities denied permission for peaceful protests even at the designated protest site. "They have blocked Jantar Mantar, closed down the Metro stations and shut down the Internet... Senior leaders like Brinda Karat and M.A. Babby were detained," Mr. Rahim said.

New Delhi turned into a fortress owing to heavy police deployment and barricading at Jantar Mantar, restricting the entry of people trying to protest. The Students' Federation of India and DYFI had issued a call for the protest to begin from Mandi House. The National Students' Union of India began its march from Raisina Road and members of the Indian Youth Congress joined them.

Prohibitory orders were enforced under Section 163 BNSS in Parliament Street sub-division where the protest site is located,

restricting any public meeting. Hundreds of Delhi Police, CAPF and RAF personnel blocked the two entry points. The Delhi Metro Rail Corporation announced that entry and exit were closed at 12 stations, including those in the immediate vicinity of the protest site. Internet services were shut down.

Across India

In Keralam, district units of the CPI (M) organised rallies demanding the resignation of Mr. Kumar.

In Srinagar, scores of Congress leaders and workers assembled at the party headquarters on M. A. Road. They tried to march towards the main road, but were stopped by police. In Jaipur, the AAP held a protest at Shaheed Smarak.

EDITORIAL

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Cong. accuses EC of 'lying' about ECINet, demands accountability

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Congress on Friday accused the Election Commission (EC) of "lying" about the legality of its ECINet platform and violating electoral laws, with party general secretary Jairam Ramesh demanding accountability for what he described as "violations of the law and the Constitution".

Mr. Ramesh said the EC, in a September 26 press note, had announced the formation of a committee to certify that ECINet complied with the relevant Acts and Rules. He described the move as "damage con-

trol but actually damage enhancing".

"This should never have been in doubt at all in the first place if the intentions of CEC Gyanesh Kumar were honest – which they were not," he said.

ECINet was launched on January 22 with the stated objective of enhancing transparency and public trust. The EC had said at the launch that the platform had been "developed in strict accordance with the law". "All of this was a lie," Mr. Ramesh said.

He alleged that by restricting electoral registration officers' (EROs) access to the ECINet voter-roll system and overruling EROs

in Goa, West Bengal and other States, the EC had violated the Representation of the People Act, 1950 and the Registration of Electors Rules, 1960.

"Both these laws establish that the ERO has statutory authority over the electoral roll," he said, citing a September 24 letter from the Maharashtra Chief Electoral Officer seeking correction of the alleged irregularity.

"Starting today, the INDIA janbandhan, citizens and many civil society organisations will hit the streets across the country demanding accountability for these violations," Mr. Ramesh said.

INDIA bloc leaders take out march in Bihar; demand CEC's resignation

Amit Bhelari
PATNA

Leaders of the Indian National Developmental, Inclusive Alliance in Bihar on Friday said that the people's right to vote is under attack, and votes are being stolen. The leaders said this during the Save Democracy March organised in State capital, Patna, in which the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), Congress, and Left parties participated.

Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation general secretary Dipankar Bhattacharya led the march.

Addressing the gather-



CPI (ML) general secretary Dipankar Bhattacharya and others stage a protest at Gandhi Maidan in Patna on Friday. ANI

ing, Mr. Bhattacharya asserted that today Gandhi's land is ruled by those who follow Godse and the law and the Constitution are

being openly flouted. He alleged that elections are being influenced in favour of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

"On Gandhi Jayanti - a day when the entire nation should be pledging to uphold democracy and civil rights - those accused of vote theft are being shielded, while protesters are being arrested. This is utterly shameful," he said.

RJD leaders including former minister Alok Kumar Mehta, State General Secretary Ranvijay Sahu, former MLA Anwar Alam, and party spokesperson Ejaz Ahmed participated in the march. Mr. Ahmed said that the leaders and workers of the INDIA bloc, will march to the Election Commission office in Delhi on October 6.

Jantar Mantar protest: Area cordoned off, activists among over 500 detained

Pragynesh &
Nirbhay Thakur
New Delhi, October 2

AT 1 PM on Gandhi Jayanti, police officers were stationed along Janpath Road in Delhi, leaning against a line of barricades that blocked the way to Jantar Mantar. They watched as 50-60 protesters stood in scattered groups of five or six near a McDonald's outlet: some danced in protest, others shouted slogans.

"Should we get them inside a bus?" a police officer asked his senior. "Wait. If they gather in a group of more than 10, pick them up," the senior officer replied. Police had tightened security across Central Delhi ahead of demonstrations called by opposition parties and student outfits at Jantar Mantar over alleged irregularities in the SIR of electoral rolls and demands for the resignation of Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Gyanesh Kumar.

But the small groups were a far cry from the crowds that had filled Jantar Mantar and adjoining Parliament Street two months ago. In July, thousands had gathered after Cockroach Janta Party's Abhijeet Dipke began his hunger strike, leading protests that forced then-Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan to resign over the NEET-UG exam 'leak'.

This time, the police had decided to act soon.

By morning, the area around the Parliament Street



Protesters being detained by the police near Jantar Mantar on Friday. AMIT MEHRA

police station and Jantar Mantar had been sealed off. Officials said over 4,000 police personnel were deployed around the site, which was divided into multiple zones, each headed by a DCP-rank officer. Drones were also used to monitor the protest site.

The first prominent leader to arrive was AAP's Delhi chief Saurabh Bhargava, around 10.30 am. He was carried away by police and put in a bus. For the next five hours, police stuck to the same strategy: protesters who arrived from Ashoka Road, Janpath and Tolstoy Road were stopped at the roundabout near Parliament Street, loaded into buses, and taken to Fatehpur Beri and Badarpur police stations.

By the time All India Students' Association (AISA) na-

11 Metro stations closed, police issue traffic advisory

New Delhi: The Delhi Metro Rail Corporation announced on Friday that 11 Metro stations in the Capital would be closed amid Jantar Mantar protest.

The metro curbs were in place for Janpath, Patel Chowk, Central Secretariat, Rajiv Chowk, Seva Teerth, Mandi House, Lok Kalyan Marg, INA, Chawri Bazar, Ramakrishna Ashram Marg, and New Delhi. However, the stations were re-

tional president Neha Bora arrived, flanked by Swaraj India member Yogendra Yadav and RTI activist Nikhil Dey, 500 people had already been de-

opened later in the evening.

Meanwhile, earlier in the day, the Delhi Traffic Police issued a travel advisory warning commuters about traffic restrictions across Lutyens' Delhi.

"Traffic diversions/regulations will be in place around Connaught Place, Patel Chowk, GPO, Tolstoy Marg, Jantar Mantar Road, Parliament Street and adjoining roads," the social media post read. **ENS**

tained. Bora crossed Ashoka Road and tried entering Parliament Street. Pushed back by the police, she and Yadav sat down, with supporters chant-

ing slogans.

The three were swiftly picked up by four police officers and loaded into a bus — the 18th vehicle filled with protesters since morning.

Despite claims that over 700 were detained, police said the figure was around 550 protesters. These included former Delhi Chief Minister Atishi, AAP Rajya Sabha MP Sanjay Singh and Rashtriya Janata Dal MP Manoj Jha. By around 6 pm, police said all protesters were released.

A senior police officer said that prohibitory orders under Section 163 of the BNSS will remain in force in the area till October 21. A police source said no case has been filed yet but they are probing the roles of protesters. Police denied manhandling any protesters.

Glittering display



Reaping it rich: The Indian women's hockey team regained the gold medal after 44 years and sealed a berth for the Los Angeles Olympics. India also won three gold in boxing and one each in archery and wrestling at the Asian Games on Friday. R.V. MOORTHY (REPORT ON PAGE 14)

Centre yet to extend SoO pact with Kuki-Zo groups

Suspension of Operations pact to be kept in abeyance till Kuki-Zo groups surrender all weapons, say officials; Meitei, Naga groups have sought its abrogation; Shah set to visit Manipur next week

Vijaita Singh
NEW DELHI

Amid continuing violence between the Naga and Kuki groups in Manipur, the Union Home Ministry is yet to extend the Suspension of Operations (SoO) pact with the Kuki-Zo insurgent groups, a month after the one-year agreement expired.

On September 4, 2025, the Home Ministry, the Manipur government, and the Kuki-Zo groups had signed the SoO pact on "re-negotiated terms and conditions or ground rules," after the Manipur government in February 2024 refused to extend the agreement, in force since 2008, in the wake of the violence that erupted between the Meitei and Kuki-Zo people on May 3, 2023.

Pact in abeyance

Government sources told *The Hindu* that the pact is in abeyance till all weapons are surrendered by the Kuki-Zo groups. The presence of a large number of weapons with civilians is one of the prime drivers of violence and killings in the



Weapons seizure: Arms and ammunition recovered during a security forces operation in Imphal in June 2025. ANI

northeastern State, a government official said. Meitei and Naga civil society groups, including Deputy Chief Minister Losii Dikho, have demanded the abrogation of the SoO pact.

Due to Naga-Kuki ethnic tensions, more than 40 people have been killed in Ukhrul, Kangpokpi, and Kamjong districts since February 7, three days after President's Rule was revoked in the State.

A member of the Kuki-Zo SoO group said the one-year agreement expired on September 4, but they were yet to hear anything from the Ministry or Ajit Lal, Ministry's Adviser, Northeast, and the interlocutor for peace talks.

"The last meeting the SoO groups had with the interlocutor was on April 30. He had said that he will meet us every quarter. There has been so much violence in the State since February and he has not visited the affected areas even once," the SoO member said.

The member claimed that security forces conduct regular inspections of SoO camps and all weapons are accounted for. "Not extending the SoO pact does not mean it has been abrogated," the SoO member said.

During Union Home Secretary Govind Mohan's review of the security situation in the State on September 30, a senior go-

vernment official said that it was decided to send 30 more companies of the CRPF (around 3,000 personnel) and two battalions of CoBRA (around 2,000 personnel) for deployment in the State.

Union Home Minister Amit Shah is expected to visit Senapati, a Naga-dominated district in Manipur, on October 7. This will be his second visit to the State since the 2023 violence. He had visited Imphal in 2024 to address a rally ahead of the Lok Sabha elections.

History of the pact

The tripartite pact was signed in 2008 by the United Peoples' Front and the Kuki National Organisation, — a coalition of 24 insurgent groups — the Home Ministry, and the Manipur government following the Kuki-Naga clashes in the 1990s that killed hundreds. The insurgent groups demanded an independent land for the Kuki-Zo people. The pact has been extended periodically since 2008. After clashes erupted in 2023, there were strong demands from the valley areas to abrogate the SoO agreement.

Obstacle race

The Special Intensive Revision exercise is threatening universal adult franchise

On Gandhiji's birth anniversary, many Opposition parties, student groups and other citizens took to the streets in Delhi, Mumbai and elsewhere demanding the resignation of Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Gyanesh Kumar. Their grievance was that Mr. Kumar has presided over a Special Intensive Revision (SIR) exercise meant to "clean" the electoral rolls, but in practice has become an exercise in the serial disenfranchisement of lakhs of Indian citizens. The BJP-led Union and State governments reacted predictably, refusing permission for the protest and imposing prohibitory orders. In Delhi, the government shut down the Internet in the Jantar Mantar area, closed 11 Metro stations and detained over 700 protesters. In Mumbai, the police denied permission for the gathering at Shivaji Park, but the protesters turned up anyway. The reason for the anger is plain. Emboldened by a deferential Supreme Court verdict upholding the SIR's constitutional validity, the Election Commission of India (ECI) has taken the flawed method that it first adopted in Bihar, added a new exclusion criterion called "logical discrepancies" that it first implemented in West Bengal, and extended it from State to Union Territory (UT). The enumeration process puts the onus on electors to prove their eligibility, with many deleted first and verified later. Getting back onto the rolls after being struck off the draft is onerous, while dubious mass requests for deletion are easy to file and quick to process. Nearly 13.4 crore electors have been removed from the draft rolls across 30 States and UTs – about 14% of the electorate before the revision. Each phase has deleted more than the last: 8.3% in Bihar, 12.9% across the 12 States and UTs of Phase 2, and 17% in Phase 3.

The ECI has said that deleted electors can return during the claims phase, but only as fresh applicants provided they find that they have been struck off. The ECI's own members objected to the plainly illegal changes to procedure. Form 6 was altered without any amendment to the rules, asking applicants whether they, or their parents or grandparents, appeared on the roll of the last SIR. In West Bengal, 16.1 lakh requests were filed to remove electors whom judicial officers had already cleared. A centralised roll database in New Delhi helped make this possible. The ECI has now asked BLOs to restore deleted voters to the rolls; it is an implicit admission that the process disenfranchised many. The semi-corrective steps do not absolve the two Election Commissioners. As majority in the ECI, Sukhbir Singh Sandhu and Vivek Joshi could have overruled the CEC. The exercise, as it is being carried out now, is an obstacle not only to universal adult franchise but also to electoral democracy itself.

India standardises names of 28 places in Ladakh

Vijaita Singh

NEW DELHI

The Government of India, in consultation with the Union Territory administration of Ladakh, has identified 28 places and geographical features in the region by standardised names on the official Survey of India (SoI) map.

The government said the formal identification on the map was aimed at ensuring accurate recognition and creating greater awareness among the public. The latest notification comes days after India standardised the names of places in Arunachal Pradesh amid cartographic aggression by China.

The list in Ladakh includes 11 peaks, five mountains, six land areas, two glaciers, two passes, one valley, one river, one lake and one other water body.

Centre says formal identification on map is aimed at ensuring accurate recognition and creating greater awareness among the public

Among the peaks identified are Atisha Giri, Kanishka Peak, Martand Giri, Zorawar Peak, Rinchen Zangpo, Sakyasri Giri, Marpa Lotsava Ri, Milarepa Kangri, Shiva Ri, and Maheshvara Ri. The list also includes Karun Pir, Drak Karpo and Jolmori as mountains.

The government has identified Brangsa, Kuksel, Dehra Compass, Gogra, Kumarayana Point, Panglung, and Shamal Lungpa as land areas. Parpik and Skamri Glacier have been classified as glaciers, while Chapchinal Pass and

Shachmirk Pass have been identified as passes.

Other features on the list include Shkorga Valley, Yangpa River, Guru Rinpoche, which has been identified as a lake, and Hot Spring, classified as a water body.

The government said the map of Ladakh, incorporating the additional places and geographical features, can be viewed on the Survey of India website.

Since April 2020, the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) has amassed a large number of troops and armaments in eastern Ladakh and other areas along the 3,488-km-long LAC. The PLA moved into Indian territory and built fortified structures and defences, in an attempt to permanently alter the status quo on the ground.

Trade deal with India is not 'imminent', says U.S. official

T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan
NEW DELHI

While negotiations on an India-United States trade deal are nearing the end, the deal itself is not "imminent", U.S. Trade Representative Jamieson Greer indicated on Friday.

His comments followed a "constructive conversation" with Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal in the U.S. on the sidelines of the G20 Trade Ministerial conference. "We had a very constructive conversation, Minister Goyal and myself," Mr. Greer said at a press conference. "Our staff is meeting right now... We are continually trying to finish the trade deal with India." "I would characterise it, as we say in the U.S., we're in the short strokes," he added. "So I think we're toward the end of it. At the same time, I don't think there's something imminent."

Mr. Greer said that the two sides had identified the "universe of items" that are sticking points for both sides and are "working diligently" to address them. He added that U.S.



President Donald Trump and Prime Minister Narendra Modi had a "constructive call" on Wednesday, and said there may be another call between them "very soon" to assess progress on the deal.

A delayed deal

The India-U.S. trade deal has been heavily delayed ever since it was announced by Mr. Modi and Mr. Trump in February 2025 due to various tariff actions taken by the U.S.

The larger Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA) was supposed to have been concluded by "Fall 2025" (October-November 2025). Talks on a "mini deal" addressing only tariffs also failed to fructify. In February, the two leaders once again issued a joint state-

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JAMIESON GREER
U.S. Trade Representative

ment committing to finalising an interim agreement on trade, and continuing negotiating the BTA.

The interim agreement was to have been finalised by March-April 2026. Neither the interim deal nor the BTA has so far been finalised.

Mr. Goyal has been vocal in saying India will not sign a deal until it is made clear it will receive a comparative advantage over its competitors, as was agreed to in February 2026.

The U.S., on the other hand, has already levied an additional tariff of 10% on India for not doing enough to prevent the import of goods made using forced labour..

GOYAL AT G20 MEET
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'India has no excess capacity, bans forced-labour imports'

Mr. Goyal's remarks come even as U.S.T.R levied 10% 'forced labour' tariff on India imports and is in the process of investigating country for structural excess capacity, which may result in more tariffs

T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan
NEW DELHI

Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal told the G20 Trade Ministers meet in the U.S. India did not have structural excess capacity in sectors identified by Washington and it had taken steps to ban import of goods made using forced labour.

This comes at a time when the U.S. had already levied a 10% tariff on India for not doing enough to stop imports of goods made using forced labour, and is now probing it and other countries for structural excess capacity which could invite more tariffs.

On both issues, Mr. Goyal said steps must not be unilateral and be compliant with World Trade Organization (WTO) rules.

"Shri Piyush Goyal participated in the concluding day of the G20 Trade Ministers' Meeting in Milwaukee and spoke in sessions on structural excess capacity and production, updating the Most-Favoured-Nation principle, ending forced labour in global supply chains and the closing session," the Commerce Ministry said in a release.

The G20 Presidency is held by the U.S. for 2026.

On forced labour

The Office of the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR) had in July levied additional tariffs on 60 countries, including India, as a result of



Trade tangle: Goyal during a meeting with United States Trade Representative Jamieson Greer. PTI

its probe into whether the countries had done enough to stop the import of goods made using forced labour.

Tariff on imports from India was set at 10%.

On ending forced labour in global supply chains, Mr. Goyal said India's commitment to the elimination of forced labour is "absolute and unconditional".

"He noted Article 23 of the Constitution prohibits forced labour as a fundamental right, enforceable by the Supreme Court," it added. "He said India ratified International Labour Organization (ILO) Conventions 29 and 105 and, in July, amended Foreign Trade Policy to prohibit import of goods produced using forced labour."

'No unilateral actions'

He said steps at the border must be based on "specific and verifiable evidence rather than presumptions

about entire countries, regions or sectors" and must respect due process and WTO rules, adding ILO remains the competent, universal and tripartite body for labour standards.

"India supports the objective of eliminating forced labour and voluntary exchange of good practices among G20 members, provided such cooperation does not involve monitoring of members, create new obligations or result in information being used as a basis for unilateral trade action," Mr. Goyal said.

No excess capacity

The USTR is also in the process of probing 60 countries structural excess capacity and production and if this was hurting the U.S. economy. This could result in additional tariffs on imports from India.

On structural excess capacity and output, he Mr.

said India was the fastest-growing large economy in the world, with an economy driven by local demand and is building manufacturing value chains "from design to finished goods".

"He said India's manufacturing capacity serves its domestic and global needs and that, in the sectors identified by the G20 Presidency, India does not have structural excess capacity," the release said.

Mr. Goyal said India shares the concerns of many G20 members that trade-distorting support in some economies can lead to "dumping and predatory pricing".

'WTO-compliant steps'

However, he emphasised such concerns were addressed via steps consistent with the WTO, such as anti-dumping and countervailing duties, based on evidence and subject to judicial review.

"He emphasised industrial capacity in itself is not the issue while distortions can arise where geographical concentration of production is driven by hidden subsidies and support. Diversification of production and supply chains is a legitimate objective but cannot be used as a pretext for measures outside WTO rules or for shifting the burden of adjustment onto developing countries, which must retain policy space to industrialise."

G7 nations agree to release 100 million barrels of oil

Associated Press

WASHINGTON

The Group of Seven industrial nations said on Friday that they plan to release 100 million barrels of oil and fuel products in the coming weeks, starting with “substantial” amounts of diesel after the fuel recently hit record high prices in the United States.

President Donald Trump said the diesel release would happen “immediately,” while a G7 statement promised a “front-loaded substantial release” of diesel within the next 20 days.

Mr. Trump and his Republican Party face pressure to address surging prices ahead of the November 3 midterm elections, and Mr. Trump announced the action on Friday on so-



Emmanuel Macron

cial media. The President’s approval ratings on the economy hit a new low, according to an AP-NORC poll, as the Iran war and his trade battles have increased U.S. prices for oil and other goods.

Record high

Fuel prices in the U.S. and abroad have soared during the eight-month-long war, a cost Mr. Trump has repeatedly said is worth it for making sure Iran does not

obtain nuclear weapons.

The national average for a gallon of diesel in the U.S. was \$6.37 on Friday, according to AAA, after hitting a record \$6.52 on September 22.

France holds the rotating presidency of the G7 group and made the announcement in a statement released after video-conference talks that Mr. Macron presided over. The International Energy Agency will coordinate the effort to combat soaring fuel prices.

“We will implement our commitments with a coordinated release through the IEA of 100 million barrels (MB) to begin immediately over 4 months, including a front-loaded substantial diesel release within the first 20 days by G7 members and partners,” the statement said.

Pakistan govt. in talks with Imran Khan's Opposition party as protest threat looms

Agence France-Presse

ISLAMABAD

Pakistan's government and the party of jailed former Prime Minister Imran Khan held talks on Friday over planned protests by his supporters that threaten to bring Islamabad to a standstill.

In anticipation of the protests calling for Mr. Khan's release, shipping containers requisitioned by authorities have stood for weeks along major highways and at key entry points to the Pakistani capital to stop arriving



Restricted access: Vehicles drive past shipping containers blocking a road towards the Red Zone area in Islamabad on Friday. AFP

demonstrators.

President Asif Ali Zardari's office said representatives from the government and Mr. Khan's Pakistan

Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party were to meet on Friday to discuss the protests, planned for Sunday after being pushed back from

September 27.

State broadcaster PTV reported the meetings had concluded for the day and would resume on Saturday.

In a statement on Friday, PTI said it was prepared to go ahead with the protests, but party official Haleem Adil Sheikh said negotiations could move forward if the government showed flexibility on demands including the release of Mr. Khan's sisters, who were arrested last month.

"We are talking to the government today in a positive spirit," he said.

'Syrian officials, Hezbollah held secret talks in Turkiye to de-escalate tensions'

Syrian intelligence and Foreign Ministry officials took part in a meeting last month at the invitation of Turkish security agencies, sources say; officials say talks 'went well' and made 'progress on security issues'; both the nations deny such a meeting; Syria was under U.S. pressure to take on Hezbollah

Reuters

Representatives of the Syrian government and Lebanese militant group Hezbollah have held face-to-face talks in Turkey to try to calm tensions between them, according to six sources briefed on the first known meeting between the long-time foes.

The Syrian officials and the Iran-aligned group met secretly at least once last month, the sources – who include two Syrian officials, a United States (U.S.) official and a senior Lebanese security source close to Hezbollah – told Reuters.

After publication, the Turkish Presidency's communications directorate denied Reuters' report, saying that it was "entirely unfounded" that Syrian government officials and Hezbollah officials met in Turkey.

'Speculative info'

"The claims in these posts regarding the date, venue, content and contacts do not reflect any reality and are entirely fabricated and speculative," it said in a statement on X. The Syrian government's English-language account on X also denied such a meeting had taken place, saying "these claims are false."

Hezbollah for years dis-



Troubled ties: After former Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, a Hezbollah ally, was ousted in late 2024, tensions rose between Syria's new government and the Lebanese militant group. AFP

patched fighters to Syria to support former President Bashar al-Assad's government during the country's civil war. After Mr. Assad was ousted in late 2024 in a lightning rebel offensive, tensions rose between Syria's new government and Hezbollah – with Damascus accusing the group of transferring arms through Syria, and the U.S. encouraging Syria's military to send forces into Lebanon to fight Hezbollah.

The six sources said Hezbollah representatives and Syrian intelligence and Foreign Ministry officials

had taken part in the meeting last month at the invitation of Turkish security and intelligence agencies in an effort to de-escalate. All the sources spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the meeting.

The meeting focused on resolving points of tension between the two parties and went well, according to the U.S. official, the Syrian officials and the Lebanese source.

One of the Syrian officials said both sides agreed they held no hostility towards one another, and that Syria assured Hezbol-

lah that it would not intervene militarily in Lebanon to disarm the group.

In turn, Syrian officials asked Hezbollah to help stop cross-border smuggling attempts and dismantle its remaining sleeper cells, particularly in southern Syria, the official said.

Syria said on Tuesday it had captured a Hezbollah cell preparing to launch rockets in southern Syria.

Hezbollah denied on Wednesday that it was involved and said it "has no presence whatsoever on Syrian territory and has no involvement in any securi-

ty or military activity there."

The Syrian official said Hezbollah's representatives had not given a direct answer on the request to halt arms smuggling and dismantle its Syria-based cells, but did pledge not to interfere in Syria's affairs.

'No final agreement'

The Lebanese source, who has direct knowledge of the meeting and its outcomes, said the two sides "made a lot of progress on security issues."

"Hezbollah wants to protect its flank," the source said, referring to concerns about a Syrian attack on the group within Lebanon.

Both the Syrian official and the Lebanese source said no final agreement had been reached and that no announcement had been planned.

The Lebanese source told Reuters that contact between the two parties via Turkey had begun about two months ago.

Reuters could not confirm where in Turkey the September meeting was held, how long it lasted and whether other meetings had been held before or since.

Both Hezbollah and Syria's government had signalled they would be open to speaking to one another.

In July, Syrian Foreign

Minister Asaad al-Shaibani said Damascus was open to meeting the group.

A month later, Hezbollah chief Naim Qassem said in a televised address that the group had no objection to meeting Syria's leadership.

Ankara portrays itself as a key regional stakeholder in rebuilding and stabilising Syria. Under President Tayyip Erdogan, it has also sought to position itself as a facilitator of regional dialogue and is keen to boost stability in the region.

Three of the sources said it was Turkey, a key ally of Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa, that pushed for the meeting as it was keen to be directly involved in those efforts.

Absent from the meetings, however, was Hezbollah's main sponsor, Iran.

The Lebanese security source said Hezbollah attended the meeting with Iran's knowledge, but that Tehran was disappointed that it was not a direct participant and that Mr. Sharaa had rebuffed any notion of direct ties to Iran for now.

That disappointment was the main reason that no final agreement was reached and no announcement about the meeting was made, the source said. There was no immediate comment from Iran's permanent mission in Geneva.

China opens first overseas air base in Laos, widening military footprint

Agence France-Presse

BANGKOK

When China opened its first overseas air force base this week, a joint facility in isolated Laos, it was sending a signal – its foreign military foothold is set to grow, analysts said.

Beijing has long sought to increase its influence across Asia-Pacific, competing with Washington and its allies over crucial shipping routes and under-sea resource exploration, including in the disputed South China Sea.

Under leader Xi Jinping, the world's second-largest economy has sought to modernise its military, ramping up defence spending and pressure on Taiwan, which it claims.



A satellite image shows construction of an airport in Ban Keun, Laos, where China opened a military support and training centre. REUTERS

Until now, installations abroad were primarily naval bases. The Joint Flight Training and Support Centre in Laos is the “first air force base that China has abroad”, said Joshua Kurlantzick, a Southeast Asia expert at the Council on Foreign Relations.

He told AFP that more

will likely be established, in the region and in other nations friendly to China, as it experiments with how to run an air base beyond its borders.

China is “not building one base in Laos and stopping”, he said.

The two communist nations said the centre at Ban

Keun airfield, north of the Laotian capital Vientiane, was aimed at training Laotian air force pilots.

China's Defence Ministry added that the site would be “maintained for normal operations by both sides” and “did not target any third party.”

Security researcher Colin Koh said that China – Laos's largest creditor – was “trying to showcase that it is able to extend itself in defence diplomacy”, at least with “amenable countries”.

Training Laotian pilots will require China to put military assets there – whether modest transport aircraft or modern fighter jets. “From training then you have a [Chinese] military presence,” he said.

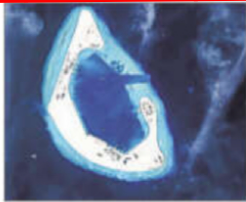
China builds new offshore base in disputed South China Sea reef

Reuters

Hong Kong, October 2

CHINESE CONSTRUCTION of a runway on Antelope Reef in the Paracels archipelago is well underway with analysts estimating it could be completed by mid-2027, strengthening Beijing's military control over the disputed South China Sea.

Satellite images show grading work, piles of gravel and concrete, and cranes in operation to build a full-scale runway that military attaches and security analysts say could be one of China's most important



A satellite view of Antelope Reef in the South China Sea. REUTERS

offshore bases in the region.

The images, taken on September 25 by commercial satellite imagery provider Vantor, also show a fully loaded gravel barge

heading to a newly built wharf.

A completed base at Antelope would be China's most significant military expansion in South China Sea, extending the reach of Chinese naval ships and military aircraft in a waterway that is an increasingly militarised arena of competition between Beijing and the US and its allies over Taiwan.

"If Fiery Cross is the guide, I'd expect the runway paved in the first half of 2027 and a first landing by mid-2027, possibly earlier," said Ben Lewis, founder of the open-source data platform PLATracker.

Taiwan's first F-16V fighter jets arrive to bolster air defence against China

Taitung: The first two of a batch of 66 new F-16V Block 70 fighter jets ordered in 2019 arrived in Taiwan on Friday, helping to strengthen an air force that has to scramble almost daily to shadow China's military.

Taiwan faces a rising military threat from Beijing, which claims the democratically governed island as its own territory. Taipei has complained of

repeated delays to weapons ordered from US. "This is an important development in strengthening Taiwan's air defence capabilities," President Lai Ching-te wrote on Facebook, thanking US for support.

Defence Minister Wellington Koo said there would be other new F-16Vs arriving soon, though he did not give details. REUTERS

Forex reserves fall to \$748 bn, down \$38 bn in three weeks

ENS Economic Bureau

New Delhi, October 2

INDIA'S FOREIGN exchange reserves slumped to \$747.56 billion on September 25, data released by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on Friday showed.

In the last three weeks, the reserves have fallen \$38.15 billion from the all-time high of \$785.71 billion, reached on September 4.

At \$747.56 billion, the forex reserves are at a one-month low. However, they are 7% higher from last year thanks to the \$133 billion that has come into the country under the concessional swap facility for Foreign Currency Non-Resident (bank) deposits between June 8 and August 31.

Another \$10 billion or so has come in under the swap window for External Commercial Borrowings and Overseas Foreign Currency Borrowings.

While these led to a sharp rise in forex reserves, they are now on the decline likely due to the RBI squaring off its short forward positions, which were at a record \$200 billion at the end of August. In forwards maturing in less than a month, the RBI actually had a net long book of \$12 billion as at the end of August. Being 'short' means RBI has sold dollars in the forward market and they have to be delivered in the future. With FCNR(B) deposits maturing in 3-5 years, forwards maturing in over 1 year – the exact duration is not disclosed — make up the bulk of the short forward book.

UPI volume jumps 27% to touch 145 bn in first half of FY27

Press Trust of India

NEW DELHI

UPI transactions through popular Unified Payments Interface (UPI) in volume terms have witnessed a 27% jump to around 145 billion in the first half of the current fiscal year.

This is against UPI volume 114 billion during April-September quarter of the previous financial year, as per data released by the National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI).

However, the UPI transaction during the value term rose a slightly lower rate of 20% to ₹177 lakh crore as against ₹148 lakh crore during the first six months of the current financial year. As regards September, the UPI volume moderated by 1.7% to 24.07 billion compared to 24.5 billion last month.

On a month-on-month basis, value, too, declined 1.5% to ₹29.37 lakh crore against ₹29.82 lakh crore in August. The figures come a fortnight ahead of the implementation of the new merchant discount rate fee on high-value UPI payments for merchants.

Industry watchers attributed the dip to the fact August has 31 days versus 30 in September and pointed out average transactions/day were higher in September at 802 million versus 791 million in August. NPCI, an initiative of the RBI and the Indian Banks' Association, is an umbrella organisation for retail payments and settlement systems in India. It runs UPI used for real-time payments between peers or at merchants' end while making purchases.