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NEcentral to India's growth strategy: President Droupadi Murmu

NEW DELHI

Addressing a joint sitting of Parliament, the President said India's growth in the decades following Independence had remained confined to a few cities and regions, creating sharp regional imbalances. That approach, she said, is now changing, with focused attention on eastern and northeastern India as part of the vision for a Viksit Bharat.

"After Independence, the progress of India got momentum from a few cities and regions. A large part of India and a significant portion of the population did not have access to adequate opportunities," Murmu said, adding that underdeveloped regions are now being transformed into new engines of growth.

Highlighting the Northeast's integration into the national mainstream, the President referred to the first-ever arrival of the Rajdhani Express in Aizawl, calling the public response an expression of enthusiasm that "brought joy to the entire nation".

Murmu also spoke of Assam's rising strategic and economic importance, noting



its civilisational heritage and emerging industrial profile. "Assam, in the northeastern region, is the land of great icons like Srimanta Sankardev. Soon, a semiconductor chip manufactured in Assam will become a lifeline for electronic products worldwide," she said, stressing that connectivity in the region is receiving unprecedented attention.

On infrastructure, the President said over 7,200 kilometres of national highways have been constructed in the Northeast over the past 11 years, improving access to remote, hilly, tribal and border areas. Under the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana, around 50,000 kilometres of rural roads have

been built, strengthening links to markets, schools and healthcare facilities.

Rail connectivity has also seen major expansion. Murmu said investments of more than Rs 80,000 crore have been made in the northeastern rail network during the last 11 years, with the capitals of Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura and Mizoram now connected through broad-gauge rail lines, boosting tourism, employment and economic activity.

Healthcare formed another key plank of her address. Describing the past decade as transformative for health infrastructure in the Northeast, the President cited institutions such as the State Cancer Institute in Itanagar and the medical college in Assam's Sivasagar as critical to improving access to quality treatment.

She also referred to the medical college at Sichey in Sikkim and the women and children's hospital in Agartala, saying these initiatives are gradually building a strong and resilient healthcare network across the northeastern states.

Live grenade, threat note recovered from Miss Manipur 2017 runner-up's residence



IMPHAL

Manipur Police on Wednesday recovered a live grenade along with a threatening note from the residence of Priyanka Gotimayum, first runner-up of the Miss Manipur 2017 beauty pageant, in Thoubal district.

Police said the handwritten note carried a direct death threat and bore the name of the banned outfit Kangleipak Communist Party-People's War Group (KCP-PWG). The message read: "We will give you a death sentence, Priyanka Gotimayum."

Priyanka Gotimayum is a resident of Thoubal Kiyam Siphai Thong

Ahanbi area under Thoubal Police Station in southern Thoubal district.

Following information received from police headquarters in Imphal, a Bomb Detection and Disposal Squad (BDDS) rushed to the spot at around 6 am. Security personnel cordoned off the area for nearly an hour as a precautionary measure before safely recovering the high-intensity explosive.

Police officials said the grenade was subsequently disposed of at a secluded location in Thoubal district in accordance with standard operating procedures.

A case has been registered in connection with the incident, and an investigation is underway to ascertain the motive behind the threat and identify those responsible. Priyanka Gotimayum was crowned first runner-up at the Miss Manipur 2017 contest held on December 9, 2017, at the Bishop's Olive Academy Trust Palace (BOAT) Compound in Imphal. Thounaojam Strela Luwang won the title that year, while Konthoujam Mangal Chanu finished as second runner-up.

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PERSPECTIVE

Never argue with an idiot.

Feb 8 Disclosure: Assam CM to Make SIT Findings Public in Gaurav Gogoi 'Pakistan Link' Case

GUWAHATI

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Monday said the state government has registered a case against Pakistani national Ali Tauqeer Sheikh and constituted a Special Investigation Team (SIT) to probe alleged links with individuals in India, including senior Congress leader and MP Gaurav Gogoi.

Addressing the media after a cabinet meeting on January 27, Sarma said an initial informal discussion on the matter had already taken place. He added that the state cabinet has directed the Home Department to place a formal discussion before it after the next cabinet meeting scheduled for February 7.

The Chief Minister said the cabinet has authorised him to make public the findings of the SIT, to the extent permissible under law, on February 8 at 10:30 am. He said the disclosure would be made in the presence of both national and local media.

Clarifying the scope of the investigation, Sarma claimed that the case directly relates to Congress MP Gaurav Gogoi. He alleged that three individuals have been accused of having links with Pakistan - Ali Tauqeer Sheikh, Gaurav Gogoi's wife, and Gogoi himself. According to the Chief Minister, the SIT has already made a presentation before the cabinet outlining its findings.

Sarma said the government would ensure full transparency while adhering strictly to legal boundaries, and emphasised that any disclosure would be based solely on the SIT's investigation. He added that the findings would be shared responsibly and in accordance with the law.

WHO SAID WHAT



For the next 30 years Assam has to practice politics of polarisation - and this polarisation is a fight to save our identity. It is between indigenous people of Assam and illegal Bangladeshis.

~ Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma, CM Assam

Manipur violence: Supreme Court extends Justice Gita Mittal panel's tenure till July 31



NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Tuesday extended the tenure of the Justice Gita Mittal-led committee supervising relief, rehabilitation and compensation for victims of ethnic violence in Manipur till July 31, 2026.

A Bench comprising Chief Justice Surya Kant and Justice Joymalya Bagchi passed the order after being informed that the committee's earlier mandate had formally expired in July 2025, although the panel continued its work thereafter. The court noted that the committee has so far submitted 42 reports addressing various aspects of relief and rehabilitation.

"Since no formal extension was granted since July 2025, the continuation of the committee shall be regularised and is granted time till July 31, 2026," Chief Justice Kant observed.

The committee was constituted by the apex court on August 7, 2023, to oversee relief measures, rehabilitation and compensation for those affected by the prolonged ethnic unrest in the northeastern

state. Former Maharashtra Director General of Police Dattatray Padsalgarkar was also appointed by the court to monitor investigations into criminal cases linked to the violence.

Headed by former Jammu and Kashmir High Court Chief Justice Gita Mittal, the three-member panel includes Justice (ret'd) Shalini P. Joshi of the Bombay High Court and Justice (ret'd) Asha Menon of the Delhi High Court. The committee reports directly to the Supreme Court, which continues to monitor proceedings arising from the violence.

The panel was set up days after the apex court described as "deeply disturbing" a video showing women being paraded naked during the unrest.

Ethnic clashes in Manipur began on May 3, 2023, following a 'Tribal Solidarity March' organised in hill districts against the Meitei community's demand for Scheduled Tribe status. The violence has since claimed over 200 lives, left hundreds injured, and displaced thousands across the state.

Heliborne Counter-Insurgency Operation Leaves Army Para Trooper Injured

IMPHAL

Elite Para Special Forces (Para SF) of the Indian Army, in coordination with the Assam Rifles, on Tuesday carried out a large-scale heliborne counter-insurgency operation in Manipur's Kangpokpi and Imphal West districts, officials said. The operation involved coordinated air deployment of troops using military helicopters in the Koutruk Ching hill range, a sensitive area that has witnessed heightened militant activity in recent months. During the mission, a para trooper sustained a hand injury after suffering a bad fall while being deployed. He was immediately evacuated by air and shifted to the Leimakhaong Military Hospital, located around 20 km from Imphal. His condition was reported to be stable.

According to officials, around a dozen para troopers and Assam Rifles personnel were airlifted from the Leimakhaong Military Base Camp and inserted into targeted locations in the hill range. The operation focused on dismantling abandoned bunkers allegedly set up by Kukli militant groups. Several such bunkers were destroyed during the operation, though no arrests were made, officials confirmed. The heliborne action comes amid escalating security concerns in Manipur, particularly following reports of militants using drones to carry out attacks. In September 2024, suspected Kukli militants had allegedly dropped explosive devices using weaponised drones in the Koutruk area, injuring three Meitei civilians, including a young girl. Officials said Tuesday's operation began around 7:00 am and concluded by 1:30 pm. The objective was to neutralise insurgent hideouts and counter the presence of what authorities described as "anti-national elements" (ANEs) operating in the region.

India-EU FTA to Open New Markets for Assam's Tea, Spices and Handicrafts: Himanta Biswa Sarma



GUWAHATI

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Monday said the newly signed free trade agreement between India and the European Union would create significant growth opportunities for key sectors of the state's economy, including tea, spices, handicrafts and minerals.

Reacting to the landmark India-EU free trade pact, which has been described as the "mother of all deals", Sarma said the agreement is expected to accelerate economic development

while deepening ties between two of the world's largest economies. The pact was unveiled by the top leadership of India and the European Union as part of a broader push to strengthen co-operation in trade, defence and global governance.

"The Mother of All Trade Deals! The #IndiaEUTradeDeal will open up new opportunities of growth for various sectors and propel development in two of the biggest economies of the world," the Chief Minister said in a post on X. He added that Assam stands to gain substantially from the agreement, particularly its traditional and resource-based industries.

According to Sarma, improved access to European markets is likely to boost exports from Assam, attract fresh investment and encourage greater value addition in sectors such as tea, spices and handicrafts, which form the backbone of the state's rural economy.

In addition to the trade agreement, India and the 27-nation European Union bloc also signed two key pacts on security and defence cooperation, as well as the mobility of Indian talent to Europe. The two sides also rolled out a comprehensive strategic agenda for the next five years. Overall, 13 agreements were finalised during the engagement, including the formal conclusion of negotiations on the free trade agreement, marking a major milestone in India-EU economic relations.

Meghalaya to Showcase Spice Trade in Mumbai with First State-Led Festival

SHILLONG

Meghalaya is set to make a concerted push into the national spice market with the launch of its first-ever Meghalaya Spice Festival, scheduled to be held from January 30 to February 1, 2026, at Jio World Drive in Mumbai's Bandra Kurla Complex. The state-led initiative aims to open new markets, strengthen value chains and create export opportunities for farmers and producer groups from Meghalaya.

Designed as a business-oriented platform, the festival will bring together farmer producer organisations, self-help groups, cooperatives and MSMEs from the state with buyers from across India. Exporters, retail chains, HoReCa players, nutraceutical brands and institutional purchasers are also expected to participate, with the objective of positioning Meghalaya as a dependable source of high-quality, traceable and sustainably produced spices.

Key products on display will include GI-tagged Lakadong turmeric, renowned for its high curcumin content, along with ginger, black pepper, bay leaves, cinnamon and indigenous spice blends. Offi-



cial said the line-up reflects the state's emphasis on natural and organic cultivation, certification, branding and value addition.

Chief Minister Conrad K Sangma said the festival is aimed at creating direct market linkages for farmers. "Meghalaya's strength lies in its farmers and in the rich natural resources of our land. Through initiatives like the Meghalaya Spice Festival, we are creating direct market linkages for our organic produce, enabling our farmers and producer

groups to access national and global platforms," he said.

He added that the initiative goes beyond product promotion. "This is not only about promoting Lakadong turmeric, ginger and other premium spices, but about ensuring sustainable livelihoods, stable incomes and long-term economic growth for rural communities," the Chief Minister said.

The three-day event will feature B2B meetings, buyer-seller interactions, culinary demonstrations and farmer-led

storytelling. A dedicated Brand Meghalaya pavilion will showcase government programmes linked to agriculture, livelihoods and rural enterprise development.

The festival aligns with the government's target of bringing one lakh hectares under organic cultivation by 2028 and its broader strategy to build resilient spice value chains that enhance farm incomes. Mumbai's status as a major commercial and trading hub is expected to provide direct access to domestic and international spice networks.

Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare Minister Timothy Shira said the focus was on strengthening the entire value chain. "The agriculture sector is the backbone of Meghalaya's economy, and our farmers are at the heart of this transformation. By opening new markets and encouraging value addition, we aim to enhance farmers' incomes, improve economic security and create resilient agri-based enterprises," he said.

Alongside the trade-focused activities, cultural performances under the Chief Minister's Meghalaya Grassroots Music Project will add a local cultural dimension to the festival aimed at expanding markets for Meghalaya's spices.

Manipuri Film Boong Bags BAFTA 2026 Nomination in Children's & Family Category

IMPHAL

Manipuri film Boong, written and directed by filmmaker Lakshmi Priya Devi, has earned a prestigious nomination at the BAFTA (British Academy of Film and Television Arts) 2026 awards in the Best Children's and Family Film category, marking a significant milestone for cinema from Manipur.

The film will compete alongside a strong international line-up that includes Arco, an animated science fiction feature by French director Ugo Biennvenu; Disney's live-action Lilo & Stitch, directed by Dean Fleischer Camp; and Zootropolis (Zootopia) 2, helmed by Jared Bush and Byron Howard. Produced by Excel Entertainment, Chalkboard Entertainment and Suitable Pictures, Boong first garnered global attention following its world premiere at the 2024 Toronto International Film Festival, where it was widely appreciated for its emotional depth and rooted storytelling.

Set in a Manipuri village, the film revolves around a young boy

living with his single mother after the unexplained disappearance of his father, Joykumar, who had once worked outside the state. Determined to give his mother "the best gift ever," the boy embarks on a journey with his friend to search for his missing father, forming the emotional heart of the narrative. Boong also saw a limited theatrical release in India, with screenings at PVR INOX cinemas in select cities in September 2025. Reflecting on the film's journey earlier, Lakshmi Priya Devi described Boong as a deeply personal project. "Boong is the book I could not write because of my bad English," she had said, adding that the film draws inspiration from her grandmother's folktales that brought her comfort during childhood. The film, she noted, is dedicated to the resilience of the people of Manipur.

The director also expressed disbelief and gratitude at the film's reception beyond the Northeast, saying she was overwhelmed that a Manipuri film was reaching audiences across mainland India.



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WORLD ORDER AND DONALD TRUMP

The global order that emerged after second World War was anchored upon predictability, multilateralism and institutional restraint. However the recent events have reshaped and shaken the order. The rise of Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States marked a dramatic departure from the established norms. Trump's foreign policy behaviour often impulsive, personality driven and transactional has accelerated the erosion of liberal international order, giving rise to what many experts describe as a chaotic and unstable world system. Unlike the traditional U.S Presidents, Trump relied heavily on personal instincts, social media declarations, and unilateral actions, often bypassing diplomatic channels and expert advice. So far, his decisions have been more reactive than strategic and also more personalized rather than institutional. This governance style has introduced strategic uncertainty, weakening the trust among allies and emboldening adversaries. Besides his decisions are also short term and politically driven. It is equally important to mention here that Donald Trump's decisions are more in line with "American First Doctrine". The core characteristic of the American First Doctrine is prioritizing U.S National interests and security above all other nations. This approach typically involves a foreign policy of non-intervention and economic nationalism, with focus on bilateral relations and skepticism of international institutions and multilateral agreements. Key characteristics include, prioritizing U.S Interests first, nationalism, skepticism of alliance and multilateralism, protectionist trade policy, bilateralism and energy dominance etc.

i) Trade Policy: Under Donald Trump's administration the United States have adopted an aggressive protectionist trade policy aimed at reducing the trade deficits and revitalizing domestic manufacturing. This included imposing high tariff on imports from major trading partners such as China, the Europe and later India, among others. These measures formed what economists referred to as Tariff War. The primary goal was to protect U.S Industries and labour by making foreign import more expensive thereby encouraging American production and consumption of American domestic goods. However, these tariffs also prompted retaliation threats and supply chains adjustment globally. While the administration argued such policies would shrink the United States trade deficit, many global institutions warned that tariff increase could slow world wide economic global growth and elevate inflation, as high cost of imported input and consumer good, filtered through economics. In the long term, persistent tariff conflicts can undermine the confidence in the rule based trading system, prompt other countries to form competing trade blocks and shift investment away from the U.S.

ii) Energy Dominance: Trump's foreign policy was deeply influenced by hydrocarbon geopolitics. Therefore the concept of energy dominance became a defining pillar of the strategic vision of Donald Trump. As per his belief, United States should maximize its domestic energy resources to secure economic growth strategic autonomy and geopolitical leverage. His approach marked a decisive departure from earlier emphasis on climate cooperation and multilateral energy governance. While the policy delivered short term gains for the U.S energy sector, its global repercussions, were complex, far reaching and in some cases destabilizing. It may not be out of context to mention here that this approach has reshaped the energy market. Donald Trump's aggressive stance towards Venezuela was driven by vast oil reserves, anti U.S leadership and ideological hostility to socialism. His order to U.S military to launch a military strike under code name "Operation Absolute Resolve" on Venezuela on 3rd January 2026 was an attempt to capture and delegitimize Venezuelan leadership. Under this operation, the United States launched a military strike on Venezuela and captured President Nicolas Maduro and his wife Cilia Flores. Maduro and Flores were flown unharmed to New York city by U.S forces to face trial there. More over the pictures of Maduro being handcuffed were also released. Although the U.S President Donald Trump and his administration justified the operation as law enforcement action, with military support citing that the president has inherent constitutional authority to undertake but the interim Venezuelan President Delcy Rodriguez denounced the capture as a kidnapping. It is surprising that the reactions of global leaders remained indifferent. Officials in the United Nation (UN), the United States, and other countries as well as international law experts said the raid violated the UN charter and Venezuelan's Sovereignty. Needless to mention here, that in modern era of technology the U.S has set up a "New Normal" for other powerful nations for punishing the elected leaders, who do not toe the line as per their whims and fancies. Taking clue from the "Operation Absolute Resolve", Pakistan's Defence Minister Khawaja Asif in a televised interview on 9th January stated that "United States should kidnap, Israel Prime Minister Just as the Venezuelan's President Nicolas Maduro was taken away". His bizarre statement was dubbed by journalist as uttered in amnesia. It is equally important to mention here that although U.S administration under Donald Trump succeeded in isolating the Maduro Government diplomatically yet it fell short of producing regime change, and hence intensified humanitarian suffering and geopolitical rivalry. The Venezuela thus stands as cautionary example of unilateral pressure tactics far reaching global consequences.iii) Withdrawal from 66 International Organizations: The United States under President Donald Trump has recently announced its withdrawal from dozens of UN-affiliated bodies and other international organizations. The rationale for the withdrawal is that the Trump administration considers these 66 organizations as misaligned with the U.S goals.a) Sovereignty and Independence. The whole house argues that these bodies represent a globalist agenda and sprawling architecture of "Global Governance" that constraints American Sovereignty and domestic policy. b) Fiscal Responsibility: As per officials these organizations are redundant, wasteful, and poorly run claiming billions in tax payer's dollar with little return. c) Ideological Divergence: The administration specifically targeted entities they, categorized as promoting diversity, radical climate policies and woke initiatives: d) Economic Interest Organizations promoting rapid decarbonization are viewed by Trump administration, harmful to U.S fossil fuel interest and economic growth.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

"Every heart sings a song incomplete, until another heart whispers back." - Plato

BTR PEACE ACCORD: A NATIONAL COMMITMENT FOR SUSTAINABLE PEACE AND DEVELOPMENT



PRAMOD BORO

The signing of the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) Peace Accord on 27 January 2020 by ABSU, NDFB factions and UBPO marked a historic milestone in India's long decades and complex journey of resolving internal conflicts through democratic dialogue. More than a regional settlement, the BTR Accord represents a national commitment to peace, inclusion, dignity, and development, reaffirming the Indian state's belief that lasting peace is achieved not through force, but through justice, trust, and participatory governance. For decades, the Bodoland region had witnessed cycles of political unrest, ethnic tensions, and economic stagnation. Aspirations for identity, autonomy, and equitable development often collided with violence, displacement, and mistrust. The BTR Accord transformed this trajectory by bringing former armed groups into the constitutional mainstream, ending violence, and replacing confrontation with cooperation.

Today, as I reflect on this journey, I am reminded that this Accord was born out of the unimaginable sacrifices of thousands of men, women, and children who endured the long, dark, and cold tunnel of bloodshed, hatred, killings, and uncertainty. It was a welcome light at the end of that seemingly unending tunnel. My heart is particularly heavy when I think of the surviving mothers of our martyrs and their orphaned children. We cannot forget that their sacrifice is the very foundation upon which our society is built.

This transition from conflict to constitutionalism demonstrates the strength of India's federal structure, where diversity is accommodated through dialogue, autonomy, and democratic institutions. The Accord reaffirmed that regional aspirations can accommodate within the unity of the Indian Union. Unlike many peace agreements that focus narrowly on ceasefire or rehabilitation, the BTR Accord is deeply rooted in a development-centric and peace building vision. It recognizes that peace cannot survive in conditions of instability, poverty, unemployment, and exclusion. Hence, the Accord integrates governance reform, economic investment, cultural protection, and social justice into a single framework with key objectives of Strengthening autonomous governance through the restructured BTR, Focused on investment in education, health, infrastructure, Sports, and livelihoods. Protection and promotion of language, culture, and identity, rehabilitation and dignified reintegration of former militants and also Inclusive

growth for all communities living in the region.

The BTR Peace Accord must be understood as a national responsibility, not a concession to a single community. Peace in Bodoland contributes to peace in Assam, stability in the North-East, and security for the nation as a whole. The region's strategic location as India's gateway to South-East Asia further elevates its importance in national economic and geopolitical terms. Sustained political support, timely financial devolution, administrative and policy cooperation from the Union and State governments are therefore essential. Peace accords do not implement on their own, they demand long-term commitment beyond political cycles and ideological hues.

The future of BTR depends on fair governance and transparency. Equal access to development opportunities for us, those who inhabit the remote fringes of the great Indian state. Protection of the right of the indigenous people as guaranteed in the Sixth Schedule of our constitution. Opportunity to youth participation and women's leadership. A culture of sharing of ideas and dialogue over division. Only when peace becomes people-centric, touching everyday lives, can it be sustained across generations. The real strength of the BTR Accord lies in its inclusive vision. Sustainable peace is not achieved by empowering one group at the cost of others. It requires mutual respect, shared prosperity, and social harmony among all communities where the Bodo and non-Bodo coexisted for centuries.

As India aspires to become a global leader founded in unity and pluralism, the successful realization of the BTR Accord will stand as a powerful example: that peace is not the absence of conflict, but the presence of justice, opportunity, and hope. The BTR Peace Accord is a reminder that the nation's strength lies in its ability to listen, reconcile, and rebuild. Its full realization will not only secure Bodoland's future but will also enrich India's democratic legacy. Sustainable peace and development in BTR are therefore regional dreams borne out of a national promise.

However, as we mark another anniversary, we must be honest with ourselves. A peace accord cannot be a museum piece. It cannot remain a mere document gathering dust in some administrative office, used only for commemorative speeches for electoral gains. For the Bodo Peace Accord to fulfill its destiny, it must be a living document, implemented in both spirit and word with the same urgency that was present on the day it was signed. While we have made historic strides, there has been a palpable lack of momentum in recent months regarding critical clauses that remain

unfulfilled. It is a living national pledge that seeks to heal historical wounds, to transform conflicts into harmonious co-existence, to convert our remote lands under an inclusive development paradigm, and to uphold democratic values in the face of diversity. It should not be subject to nonchalance and apathy.

We must never forget the cost of this peace. The BTR Accord should not be understood as a regional concession but as a national responsibility. Our path to this moment was paved by the blood of martyrs. Over the last few years, we worked to honor this sacrifice through a series of flagship missions that sought to address the hurt, grief, trauma, neglect and wounds of the past. But much remains unfulfilled to this day. The "spirit" of the Accord is currently being tested by administrative delays. I, along with other elected representatives of the United People's Party Liberal (UPPL), have been persistently highlighting, in various circles and forums, critical areas where progress has stalled.

The 125th Constitutional Amendment Bill, which is vital for the restructuring of the Sixth Schedule and the strengthening of BTR's financial and administrative powers, must be passed without further delay. This legal requirement is the backbone of the self-governance promised in Clause 4.3 of the Accord. Without these amendments, our ability to deliver sustainable development is hampered by limiting fiscal frameworks.

Furthermore, the inclusion and integration of villages from Sonitpur, Biswanath, Darrang, and Nalbari into the BTR must reach its logical and final conclusion. While 81 villages have been integrated, the process of boundary extension needs to be completed to satisfy the long-standing aspirations of the people living in those contiguous areas.

Equally pressing are the rehabilitation and release of former NDFB leaders and cadres who are still in incarceration. Clause 9.4 of the Accord was a promise of a fresh start. For the peace to be truly "inclusive," we must ensure that those who chose the path of the Constitution are not left to languish in legal limbo.

The commitment to include the Bodo-Kachari community residing in Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao in the ST (Hills) list of Assam remains an unfulfilled pledge from the 2003 and 2020 agreements. This is a matter of justice for our brothers and sisters who have waited far too long for their rights to be recognized.

Finally, the establishment of several key institutions listed in the Accord must be fast-tracked to ensure our students have access to world-class learning within their own region. The

spirit of the Accord demands the full provincialization of the remaining venture colleges, as well as elementary and high schools, to provide stability to our educators and quality to our learners. Again, we await the complete operationalization of the specialized institutes that include a central university, AIIMS campus, the polytechnics, paramedical colleges, and the Hotel and Tourism Institute which were envisioned to turn BTR into a hub of professional excellence.

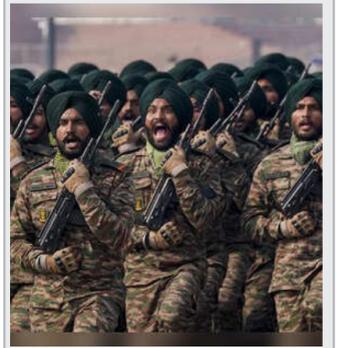
It should be noted that the complete fulfillment of these commitments

DIGITAL WAR OF WORDS

This one is my pick from the Republic Day Parade The Bhairav Battalion A reminder that victory is won by the spirit of the warrior, not just the strength of the hardware. I would not recommend messing with them.

~ Anand

Mahindra, Chairman, Mahindra Group



should not be viewed as a matter of administrative compliance only, but be held as the very foundation of respect and justice. I am afraid, when the implementation of an Accord slows down, it creates a vacuum that can be filled by doubt and the ghosts of the past. We must all remember that the success of the BTR Accord is a powerful example for the entire nation, a proof that India's federal structure can accommodate regional aspirations through dialogue and trust.

As we look toward the future, we must also realize that peace is fragile as there are already unfortunate events unfolding in BTR, once again, early this year. Therefore, let the Bodo Peace Accord be a living, breathing reality for all. We seek the complete implementation of every clause, in letter and spirit, to ensure that the light at the end of the tunnel never flickers. Calling for the implementation of our accord is not asking for more than what was promised. We simply ask that the promises be kept, and in a timely manner, for the sake of our martyrs, for the sake of our children, and for the sake of peace and unity.

(The author is the President of UPPL, former Chief Executive Member of BTR, and a signatory of the Bodo Peace Accord 2020)

'Absent on National Days': Himanta Biswa Sarma Targets Gaurav Gogoi Over Republic Day Absence

GUWAHATI

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Monday launched a sharp political attack on Assam Congress president Gaurav Gogoi over his absence during Republic Day celebrations in the state, questioning his commitment to Assam and making pointed remarks about his family background. Reacting to Gogoi's absence, Sarma said it was not an isolated instance. "Usually, Gaurav Gogoi does not stay in the state on Republic Day or Independence Day. This is not the first time. If one observes earlier occasions as well, he was never present on these national days," the Chief Minister said.

Taking the attack further, Sarma alleged that three members of Gogoi's family are foreigners and remarked that when three out of four family members are foreigners, the remaining one is compelled to follow the majority. He also claimed that had Gogoi not entered politics, he too would have been a foreigner by now.



The Chief Minister made the remarks while addressing a large public gathering at Mahmara in Charaideo district, where a cheque distribution programme was organised under the Chief Minister's Entrepreneurship Scheme at the Garaimari Rural Sports Project complex.

During the event, Sarma distributed cheques to 25,551 women beneficiaries. The programme began with a welcome address by Mahmara MLA and Cabinet

Minister Jogen Mohan. Guardian Minister Bimal Bora, MLA Dharmeswar Konwar and former MP and MLA Tapan Kumar Gogoi were also present.

Addressing the gathering, Sarma said the welfare schemes implemented by the BJP government were unprecedented and had gone far beyond what previous governments had delivered. He said the entrepreneurship scheme was not limited to providing ₹10,000 as one-time as-

sistance, but was aimed at transforming beneficiaries into "Lakhpati Didis".

He informed that 1,203 women in the Mahmara area had already achieved lakhpati status and said beneficiaries who received ₹10,000 on Monday would later be given ₹25,000 and ₹50,000 in subsequent phases.

The Chief Minister also inaugurated and laid foundation stones for several development projects, including the upgradation of the Garaimari Rural Sports Project at a cost of ₹12 crore and multiple road construction works, including the Sonari-Bhajo-Kakatibari-Moran road.

Concluding his address, Sarma said Mahmara had witnessed significant development under the leadership of Jogen Mohan and appealed to voters, particularly women, to ensure his victory in the upcoming Assembly elections to sustain the pace of development. Political observers see the remarks as a clear signal that Jogen Mohan is likely to be the BJP's candidate from Mahmara in the next Assembly polls.

Mizoram Govt to Introduce Monthly Hindi-Speaking Day in Schools

AIZAWL

The Mizoram government has decided to introduce a Hindi-speaking day in all schools across the state as part of efforts to improve students' proficiency in the language. School Education Minister Vanlalhansai said on Tuesday. Addressing a press conference, the minister said the initiative will be observed once a month under the supervision of the state school education department. On the designated day, both students and teachers will be encouraged to speak and converse exclusively in Hindi. Vanlalhansai said the move is aimed primarily at strengthening spoken Hindi among students, particularly those from rural areas. He noted that Mizoram, a hilly state largely inhabited by the Mizo tribal community, has limited exposure to Hindi due to the relatively small presence of Hindi-speaking populations. Mizo and English are the official languages of the state.

The minister pointed out that many Mizo students encounter language barriers when they travel outside the state for higher education or employment, where Hindi proficiency

often becomes necessary. To address this, Hindi teachers will be provided with additional training to help students develop fluency, while special support will be extended to those with little or no background in the language.

The government will issue a formal notification introducing the Hindi-speaking day in all schools. The syllabus for spoken Hindi will be prepared by the State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT), the minister said. In addition, the state government plans to introduce a home language day in all English-medium schools to encourage the use of local languages. Expressing concern over the increasing use of English at the cost of indigenous languages, even within homes and communities, Vanlalhansai said steps would be taken to preserve and promote local linguistic heritage.

He also announced that all teachers appointed under the state government would be required to learn at least five languages within five years of recruitment, in line with Teacher Eligibility Test (TET) provisions and Supreme Court directives.

Mobile Theft Dispute Sparks Late-Night Firing in Assam's Sribhumi, Two Critically Injured

SRIBHUMI

A late-night firing incident sent shockwaves through South Hafani village in Assam's South Karimganj constituency, after armed miscreants allegedly opened fire during a dispute linked to a mobile phone theft, leaving two persons seriously injured, police said on Tuesday.

According to preliminary information, several rounds were fired late Monday night, shattering the calm in the area and triggering panic among residents. Police rushed to the spot soon after receiving reports of gunfire and cordoned off the area.

Investigators recovered multiple empty cartridges from the scene, suggesting that the attackers fired indiscriminately. One of the injured has been identified as Anowar Hussain, while the identity of the second victim is yet to be officially confirmed. Both sustained serious injuries and were rushed to hospital, where their condition is reported to be critical.

Senior Superintendent of Police Leena Doley visited the site shortly after the incident and reviewed the situation on the ground. Preliminary findings indicate that at least two pistols may have been used in the attack, though the exact sequence of events is still being pieced together.

Police officials said the motive behind the firing is under investigation, with early inputs pointing to a dispute arising from a suspected mobile phone theft. Security has been tightened in the area, and teams have been deployed to trace and apprehend those involved.

A detailed probe is underway, and further details are awaited as the investigation progresses.

Security Forces Step Up Area Domination, Intensify Vigil in Vulnerable Zones



IMPHAL

Security forces have stepped up vigil across Manipur, intensifying coordinated search operations and area domination exercises in fringe and vulnerable areas across several districts, as authorities continue efforts to maintain law and order and secure key supply routes in the state.

Officials said the intensified deployment saw the establishment of 117 nakas and checkpoints across both hill and valley districts as part of preventive se-

curity measures. While thorough checks were conducted, no individuals were detained during the operations, indicating a focus on surveillance and deterrence rather than enforcement action.

In parallel, authorities ensured the safe movement of essential commodities, with 129 vehicles escorted along National Highway-37 under strict security arrangements.

Officials said armed security convoys were provided along sensitive stretches to guarantee the uninterrupted passage of supplies and prevent any disruption.

Security officials maintained that the sustained presence of forces and round-the-clock monitoring are aimed at deterring potential threats, reassuring civilians and restoring normalcy. They added that the operations would continue as part of a broader strategy to stabilise the situation and ensure the free flow of essential goods across Manipur.

Pending Bodo Peace Accord Clauses to Be Raised with Centre, Assam Govt: Hagrama Mohilary

GUWAHATI

Reiterating that key commitments under the historic Bodo Peace Accord remain unfulfilled, Bodoland People's Front (BPF) chief and Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) Chief Executive Member Hagrama Mohilary on Tuesday said the pending clauses of the agreement would soon be taken up with both the Assam government and the Centre.

Speaking at the observance of the 6th Bodo Peace Accord Day on January 27, Mohilary said the responsibility for the full implementation of the accord rests squarely with the state and central governments. He stressed that while the agreement had brought peace to the region, its unfinished agenda must now be addressed to ensure lasting stability and development.

The third and most comprehensive Bodo Peace Accord, signed on January 27, 2020, is a tripartite agreement between the Government of India, the Government of Assam and Bodo organi-



sations, including all factions of the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB). The accord marked a formal end to decades of insurgency in the region and laid the framework for political resolution and socio-economic progress.

The anniversary was marked by day-long programmes organised by the BPF-led BTC at the BTC Legislative Assembly Auditorium, Bodo Nagar, in Kokrajhar. Political leaders, civil society

representatives and members of the Bodo community participated in the event.

Addressing the gathering, Mohilary said the occasion should serve as a reminder of the commitments made to the Bodo people. "While we are celebrating the 6th Bodo Peace Accord Day, it must be remembered that it is the responsibility of the state and central governments to fulfil the remaining clauses of the agreement signed with ABSU, NDFB and UPPO," he said.

The BTC chief pointed out that several crucial provisions are yet to be implemented. These include enhanced financial and administrative autonomy for the BTC through the proposed 125th Constitutional Amendment, granting Scheduled Tribe (Hills) status to Bodo-Kachari communities in Dima Hasao and Karbi Anglong districts, and the expansion of the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) through the inclusion of additional villages.

Mohilary also flagged other

pending issues such as the complete rehabilitation of former NDFB cadres, the release of certain individuals linked to the armed movement, and structural reforms in council, municipal and village-level governance institutions.

Acknowledging delays in implementation, he said the matter would be taken up with the Assam government at the earliest. "There are a few clauses of the agreement that remain to be fulfilled. I will discuss these with the state government and explore ways to ensure their implementation," he said, adding that development commitments under the accord would be executed in a phased manner.

Widely regarded as a milestone in Assam's peace process, the Bodo Peace Accord continues to be seen as central to political stability and inclusive development in the Bodoland region, with stakeholders stressing that its full implementation is essential for sustaining peace.

Tripura Govt Will Not Allow Roman Script for Kokborok, Says CM Manik Saha

AGARTALA

Speaking on the sidelines of an event in Agartala, the Chief Minister said Kokborok is the mother tongue of most indigenous communities in Tripura and is central to the preservation of their cultural identity. He warned that adopting the Roman script would pose a serious threat to traditional and cultural values. "We will never allow Roman script for Kokborok because it threatens indigenous traditional and cultural values," Saha said.

The Chief Minister noted that Kokborok is spoken by about 19 tribal communities in the state, with a speaker base of nearly 14 lakh people. He urged tribal intellectuals and language experts to work collectively towards developing an appropriate script that would support the growth and long-term development of the



language. The government, he added, has not imposed Bengali or any other script on Kokborok.

Referring to demands raised by certain groups, Saha said that if communities such as the Chakmas have been able to develop their own script, Kokborok-speaking communities should also be capable of reaching

a consensus on a suitable script. He cautioned that continued confusion and disagreement over the issue could hamper the progress of the language.

Responding to political criticism, the Chief Minister claimed that only the BJP has consistently worked to protect the lives, culture

and traditions of indigenous people in Tripura. He said the present government has shown due respect to the Manikya dynasty and has no intention of undermining the state's historical and cultural legacy.

Saha also cited electoral performances to underline public support for the BJP in tribal areas, pointing out that the BJP-led alliance won 18 seats and formed the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC) in 2021. In the most recent council elections, he said, the BJP secured 11 seats while its allies won nine.

The Chief Minister noted that the tribal council covers nearly two-thirds of Tripura's geographical area and said the BJP continues to strengthen its presence among indigenous communities through governance-focused and development-oriented initiatives.

Wildfire Hits Nagaland's Dzukou Valley, Over 30 Trekkers Evacuated, Routes Sealed



KOHIMA

A wildfire raging in the southern stretch of Nagaland's picturesque Dzukou Valley has forced the evacuation of more than 30 trekkers and prompted authorities to suspend all trekking activities in the area, officials said on Tuesday.

The fire broke out in the high-altitude valley under Kohima district, leaving several trekkers stranded before they were safely evacuated. Containment operations were immediately launched by the district administration in coordination with the Southern Angami Youth Organisation (SAYO) to prevent the blaze from spreading further.

According to the Kohima District Disaster Management Authority (DDMA), the wildfire is believed to have started on Monday, although officials were alerted only on Tuesday. The exact cause and origin of the fire are yet to be ascertained.

Deputy Commissioner B Henok Buchem has constituted a special team for reconnaissance and rescue operations. "All available re-

sources shall be mobilised to contain the further spread of the fire," he said, adding that additional manpower would be deployed if the situation demands.

A DDMA official said an emergency meeting was scheduled for Wednesday afternoon to assess the situation and chalk out further measures.

SAYO president Zasisolie Beio said the organisation was informed about the fire on Monday afternoon after volunteers shared videos and photographs from the site. He said the immediate focus was on evacuating trekkers and enforcing precautionary restrictions to ensure safety.

As a preventive step, trekking has been temporarily suspended from both the Jakhama and Viswema entry points to Dzukou Valley until further notice.

The incident comes close on the heels of a major wildfire in the Khonoma-Dzukou Valley area in December last year, which had required a multi-agency firefighting operation to bring the blaze under control.

Gaurav Gogoi Calls Himanta Biswa Sarma 'Hindu Jinnah', Says Assam CM Driven by Fear of Losing Power

GUWAHATI

Assam Pradesh Congress Committee (APCC) president Gaurav Gogoi on Tuesday launched a blistering attack on Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, describing him as the "most fearful political leader in Assam's history" and branding him the "Hindu Jinnah".

Addressing a Mandal Convention at Abhayapuri in Bongaigaon district, Gogoi alleged that Sarma survives in politics by misusing the Home Department and police machinery, driven by a constant fear of losing power. He claimed that the Chief Minister practises politics purely for personal gain and abandons principles whenever he senses political danger.

"Himanta Biswa Sarma is haunted by fear. The day the BJP begins to decline, he will abandon the party," Gogoi said, addressing a gathering of thousands of Congress workers and supporters.

The convention was attended by several senior Congress leaders, including AICC observer Bandhu Turkey, AICC secretary Prithviraj Sathe, MP Rakibul Hussain, Leader of Opposition Debarata Saikia, former MP Abdul Khaleque and a number of party MLAs.

Gogoi asserted that the Congress would form the next government in Assam, citing what he described as a surge in public support across the state. "From Howrah to Moran, from Bihpu-



ria to Rangiya, the response is overwhelming. This clearly shows that a Congress government is coming," he said, predicting a "Congress tsunami" sweeping from Upper Assam to Lower Assam.

Referring to the recent Lok Sabha elections, Gogoi said the BJP had deployed its entire Cabinet in Jorhat and that the Prime Minister had visited repeatedly. "Despite the money power and the entire machinery, the people of Assam stood with self-respect and defeated them," he claimed, adding that Congress would repeat its performance in Dibrugarh, Kaziranga, Karbi Anglong and Lakhimpur.

Taking direct aim at the Chief Minister, Gogoi said Sarma now worries only about saving himself politically. Recalling a statement by Rahul Gandhi in Guwahati, he claimed Sarma fears imprisonment once Congress comes to power. "That fear drives him," Gogoi said.

He praised Rahul Gandhi's leadership, contrasting it with Sarma's politics. "Rahul Gandhi walked 4,000 kilometres from Kashmir to Kanyakumari spreading love in a marketplace of hatred. That is our leader," he said.

Gogoi further alleged that after Congress made it clear that Sarma would never be taken back into the party, the Chief Minister reached out to AIUDF chief Badruddin Ajmal to revive Assam politics in his favour. He accused Sarma of fuelling communal politics and claimed that syndicates involved in cow smuggling, coal and betel nut flourished under the BJP government.

Questioning Sarma's ideological stance, Gogoi asked whether India had ever seen a "Hindu leader" who allegedly thrives on cow-smuggling money. "You cannot claim to protect Hindu values while benefiting from such syndicates," he said.

Calling Sarma the "Hindu Jinnah", Gogoi al-

Quest!

People who sleep less than 6 hours a night are 4.2 times more likely to catch a cold compared to those who get more than 7 hours of sleep.

Greenland blues to Delhi red carpet: EU finds solace in India



NEW DELHI

Presiding over the signing of a major trade deal alongside Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Tuesday, EU chief Ursula von der Leyen broke into a large smile.

A diplomatic and economic coup, the EU-India pact comes as a welcome piece of good news for Brussels after a tumultuous few weeks dominated by US threats over Greenland.

Addressing a press conference in New Delhi, von der Leyen described it as a tale of "two giants who choose partnership" and "the best answer to global challenges".

In spite of its eye-tickling pollution, the Indian capital must have felt like a breath of fresh air for von der Leyen and European Council president Antonio Costa, who co-lead the EU delegation.

As they flew away from Brussels over the weekend, the pair left behind a just-defused crisis in transatlantic relations and internal squabbling over another trade deal with South American nations.

In New Delhi, authorities rolled out the red carpet for the pair, who were feted as guests of honour at India's Republic Day parade.

Posters emblazoned with their faces adorned lampposts across the city.

Costa, whose family hails from Goa, proudly flashed his Indian identity card at a press conference where Modi celebrated him as "the Gandhi of Lisbon".

Meanwhile local media praised von der Leyen's burundy and gold brocade outfit -- a nod to Indian fashion.

It was a far cry from the scorn and threats reserved for Europe by its traditional ally the United States at the World Economic Forum in Davos last week. European officials had been hoping to make progress on Ukraine at the Swiss ski resort -- a goal drowned out by US President Donald Trump's push to wrest control of Greenland from EU member Denmark. Trump made an about-turn after talks with NATO chief Mark Rutte -- a change of heart EU officials were keen to credit to Europe's firm response -- and the climb-down took the sting out of an emergency summit called on the Greenland issue.

One year into Trump's second term, Costa said the European Union has "learned how to manage" the ups and downs, and not to "react to each message".

"We need to keep calm and continue to have a polite, respectful relationship," the council chief told AFP. "At the same time, we need to diversify

our relationships".

But few in Europe believe the Greenland crisis was a one-off bump in the road, with the unpredictable US leader at the helm.

Maros Sefcovic, the EU's trade chief, told AFP he scours through newspaper headlines each morning in anticipation of "what else might happen".

Yet he said the same was true for most other countries, which in turn found renewed appeal in what Europe has to offer: partnership, predictability and stability.

India, for one, was left bruised by tariffs slapped on it by the White House over its purchase of Russian oil as New Delhi and Washington were negotiating a -- so-far-elusive -- trade deal.

"The last year has turbo-charged the European trade policy," Sefcovic said. Pushing to reduce its dependencies on the United States and China and lower the cost of US tariffs, the EU was negotiating or looking to open talks with an array of nations including the Philippines, Malaysia, the United Arab Emirates and Australia, he said. By cutting or eliminating tariffs on almost 97 percent of European exports, the deal struck in New Delhi will help ease access to India's 1.4-billion-people-strong market for cars, wine, pasta and other EU products.

But the signing also allowed Brussels to turn the page after a just-sealed pact with South American bloc Mercosur was cast into limbo by a legal challenge in the European parliament.

That setback added to rancorous divisions among member states over the deal's impact on European farmers, who remained deaf to the EU's arguments and staged months of tractor-mounted protests against the accord.

Maharashtra Deputy CM Ajit Pawar dies in Pune plane crash

MUMBAI

Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar and four other persons were killed after an aircraft carrying them crashed in Pune district on Wednesday morning.

The aircraft reportedly crashed while attempting to land near Baramati in Pune district earlier in the morning.

According to Flight Radar, the flight took off from Mumbai at 8.10 am and it disappeared from radar around 8.45 am.

A source told that the aircraft pilot had mentioned about poor visibility near the runway, before the aircraft attempted the landing.

Pawar was traveling to Baramati from Mumbai to address public meetings as part of the campaign for the February 5 zilla parishad elections in the state.

The Learjet 45 (LJ45), a mid-size business jet aircraft produced by the Learjet Division of Bombardier Aerospace, went off the runway while attempting to land at Baramati airport and burst into flames.

Meanwhile, an eyewitness told said that the locals could not rescue the people on board as the plane got engulfed in a massive fire. "This is really painful. When the aircraft descended, it seemed it would crash, and it did crash. It then exploded. There was a massive explosion. After that, we rushed here and saw that the aircraft was on fire. There were four to five explosions in the aircraft again. More people came here, and they tried to pull the people out (of the aircraft). But since this was a huge fire, people could not help. Ajit Pawar was onboard and this is really painful for us. I can't describe it in words."

The Directorate General of Civil Aviation confirmed that Ajit Pawar died in the crash. It said that a Learjet 45 aircraft (registration VT-SSK) operated by VSR crash-landed at Baramati.

There were five passengers, Deputy CM of Maharashtra Ajit Pawar onboard along with two more personnel (one PSO and one attendant) and two crew members (pilot in-command and the first officer), DGCA said.

The 66-year-old was the nephew of veteran politician and NCP founder Sharad Pawar, and a cousin of Lok Sabha MP Supriya Sule. Pawar



and Sule, who were in Delhi for Parliament's Budget Session, have already departed for Maharashtra.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi expressed deep sorrow over the tragic death of the NCP leader.

In a condolence message, Prime Minister Modi said he was "deeply saddened by the tragic air crash in Baramati, Maharashtra," adding that his thoughts were with the families who lost their loved ones in the incident. He prayed for strength and courage for the bereaved families in this moment of profound grief. Rahul Gandhi, on a post on X, wrote that the passing of Maharashtra's Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar is extremely heartbreaking and expressed condolences to the Pawar family.

"The news of the demise of Maharashtra's Deputy Chief Minister Shri Ajit Pawar Ji and his fellow travellers in an airplane accident today is extremely heartbreaking. In this moment of grief, I stand with the people of Maharashtra. I extend my

condolences to the entire Pawar family and their loved ones during this hour of sorrow," Gandhi wrote on X.

Union Home Minister Amit Shah is learnt to have left for Pune after getting information about the crash.

In a post on X, the Union Home Minister said he was "deeply distressed". "The way Ajit Pawar ji dedicated himself to the welfare of every section in Maharashtra cannot be described in words. His death is a personal loss for me."

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh has said he is "deeply shocked and pained". "Throughout his long public life, he remained committed to the development and prosperity of Maharashtra. He was known for his compassion for the people and his unwavering dedication to public service. I extend my heartfelt condolences to his family, well-wishers, and admirers," he said.

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee also expressed shock and grief over the sudden

demise of Ajit Pawar and his co-passengers. Calling the incident a "deep personal loss," she extended her condolences to Pawar's family, including his uncle Sharad Pawar, and to his friends, followers, and supporters. She also emphasized the need for a proper investigation into the incident. Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge described Pawar's demise as a profound loss to Indian politics and offered his heartfelt condolences to the bereaved family, supporters and well-wishers during this difficult time. He recalled Pawar's long years of public service and commitment to the people of Maharashtra, highlighting his contributions to the state's governance and development.

In his message, Kharge also extended sympathies to all those affected by the accident, praying for strength and peace to the family and followers of the late leader.

Leaders across party lines have expressed condolences, mourning the loss of a senior political leader.

INTERNATIONAL

South Korea's ex-first lady jailed for 20 months for corruption



SEOUL

A South Korean judge handed the country's former first lady Kim Keon Hee 20 months in jail for corruption on Wednesday but acquitted her for alleged stock manipulation and other charges.

Controversy has long surrounded 53-year-old Kim and accusations of corruption, influence peddling and even academic fraud dominated her husband Yoon Suk Yeol's time in office.

Both are now in custody -- Yoon for actions taken during his disastrous declaration of martial law in December 2024 and its chaotic aftermath, and Kim for alleged

stock manipulation and receiving gifts from the cult-like Unification Church.

She was also accused of accepting lavish bribes from businesses and politicians totalling more than \$200,000 -- including two Chanel bags and a Graff necklace from the leader of that sect.

On Wednesday, Judge Woo In-sung of the Seoul Central District Court found her guilty of corruption and sentenced her to 20 months in prison.

She was however found not guilty of stock manipulation and violations of South Korea's campaign financing laws.

Kim sat in the court as the

sentence was read out, wearing a black suit, a white face mask and glasses. Prosecutors in December said Kim had "stood above the law" and colluded with the Unification Church to undermine "the constitutionally mandated separation of religion and state".

Prosecutor Min Joong-ki also said South Korea's institutions were "severely undermined by abuses of power" committed by Kim.

She has also been accused of meddling in parliamentary elections.

The former first lady has denied all the charges, claim-

ing the allegations were "deeply unjust" in her final testimony last month.

But she has also apologised for "causing trouble despite being a person of no importance".

"When I consider my role and the responsibilities entrusted to me, it seems clear that I have made many mistakes," she said in December.

A self-professed animal lover known internationally for her work campaigning for South Korea to ban dog meat, Kim's scandals frequently overshadowed her husband's domestic political agenda.

In 2023, hidden camera footage appeared to show Kim accepting a USD 2,200 luxury handbag in what was later dubbed the "Dior bag scandal", further dragging down Yoon's already dismal approval ratings.

The scandal contributed to a stinging defeat for Yoon's party in general elections in April 2024, as it failed to win back a parliamentary majority.

Yoon vetoed three opposition-backed bills to investigate allegations against Kim, including the Dior bag case, with the last veto in November 2024.

A week later, he declared martial law. Kim's court appearance came days after former prime minister Han Duck-soo was sentenced to 23 years in prison -- eight years longer than prosecutors demanded -- for aiding and abetting Yoon's suspension of civilian rule.

The probe into Kim also led to the arrest of Han Hak-ja, leader of the Unification Church, which claims 10 million followers worldwide and runs a vast business empire.

A Seoul court will additionally sentence top lawmaker Kwon Seong-dong, also accused of taking bribes from the sect, on Wednesday.

Tens of thousands flee northwest Pakistan over fears of military operation

BARA

More than 70,000 people, mostly women and children, have fled a remote region in northwestern Pakistan bordering Afghanistan over uncertainty of a military operation against the Pakistani Taliban, residents and officials said Tuesday. Pakistan's Defense Minister Khawaja Mohammad Asif has denied the claim by residents and provincial authorities. He said no military operation was underway or planned in Tirah, a town in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. Speaking at a news conference in Islamabad, he said harsh weather, rather than military action, was driving the migration. His comments came weeks after residents started fleeing Tirah over fears of a possible army operation. The exodus began a month after mosque loudspeakers urged residents to leave Tirah by Jan. 23 to avoid potential fighting. Last August, Pakistan launched a military operation against Pakistani Taliban in the Bajaur district in the northwest, displacing hundreds of thousands of people.

Shafi Jan, a spokesman for the provincial government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, posted on X that he held the federal government responsible for the ordeal of the

displaced people, saying authorities in Islamabad were retracting their earlier position about the military operation.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Chief Minister Suhail Afridi, whose party is led by imprisoned former Prime Minister Imran Khan, has criticized the military and said his government will not allow troops to launch a full-scale operation in Tirah.

The military says it will continue intelligence-based operations against Pakistani Taliban, who are known as Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, or TTP. Though a separate group, it has been emboldened since the Afghan Taliban returned to power in 2021. Authorities say many TTP leaders and fighters have found sanctuary in Afghanistan and that hundreds of them have crossed into Tirah, often using residents as human shields when militant hideouts are raided. Caught in the middle are the residents of Tirah, who continued arriving in Bara. So far, local authorities have registered roughly 10,000 families -- about 70,000 people -- from Tirah, which has a population of around 150,000, said Talha Rafiq Alam, a local government administrator overseeing the relief effort. He said the registration deadline, originally set for Jan. 23, has been extended to Feb. 5.

He said the displaced

would be able to return once the law-and-order situation improves.

Among those arriving in Bara and nearby towns was 35-year-old Zar Badshah, who said he left with his wife and four children after the authorities ordered an evacuation. He said mortar shells had exploded in villages in recent weeks, killing a woman and wounding four children in his village. "Community elders told us to leave. They instructed us to evacuate to safer places," he said. At a government school in Bara, hundreds of displaced lined up outside registration centers, waiting to be enrolled to receive government assistance. Many complained the process was slow.

Narendra Singh, 27, said members of the minority Sikh community also fled Tirah after food shortages worsened, exacerbated by heavy snowfall and uncertain security.

"There was a severe shortage of food items in Tirah, and that forced us to leave," he said.

Tirah gained national attention in September, after an explosion at a compound allegedly used to store bomb-making materials killed at least 24 people. Authorities said most of the dead were militants linked to the TTP, though local leaders disputed that account, saying civilians, including women and children, were among the dead.

5 years on from the junta's coup, Myanmar's flawed elections can't unite a country at risk of breaking apart

Five years ago, on February 1 2021, Myanmar's top generals decapitated the elected government. Democratic leaders were arrested, pushed underground or forced into exile.

Since then, the economy has spluttered and foreign investors have headed for the exit. The only growth industries – mostly scam centres, drugs and other criminal activities – enrich those already well-fed.

The military junta has kept its stranglehold via draconian curbs on civil and political liberties. It has bolstered its fighting forces through ruthless conscription, including of child soldiers. They now face rebellions in almost every corner of the ethnically diverse country.

It helps that the military brass can still depend on international support from Russia. China, meanwhile, is playing a careful game to ensure its interests – including prized access to the Indian Ocean for oil and gas – are secured.

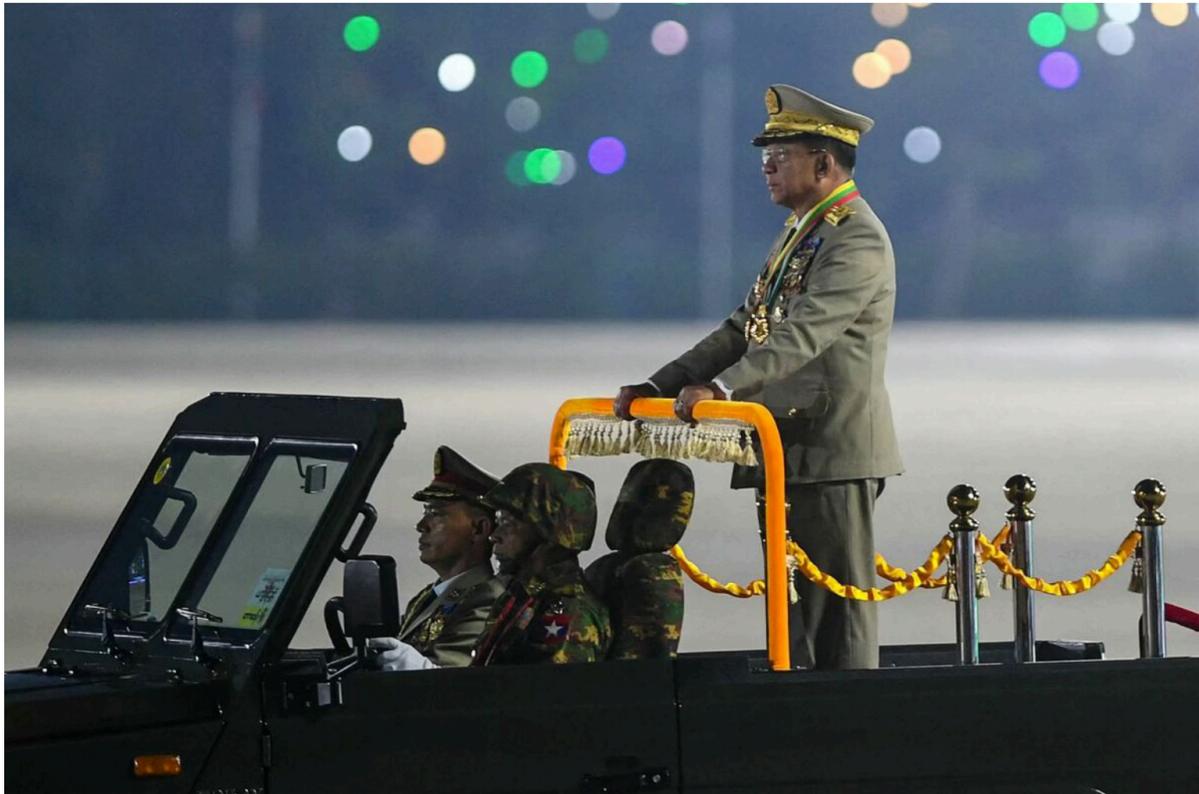
And US President Donald Trump's second term in office has introduced newly unpredictable and detrimental elements to great power politics.

The US government last year cited "notable progress in governance and stability [and] plans for free and fair elections" as justification for removing the Temporary Protected Status designation for immigrants from Myanmar. Although a federal judge blocked this decision a few days ago, this may eventually force previously protected Myanmar citizens to return home.

However, far from being free and fair, the month-long elections that just concluded in Myanmar have been devoid of meaningful democratic practice.

They will entrench the junta and provide little more than a patina of legitimacy that anti-democratic major powers will use to further normalise relations with Myanmar's military leaders.

The multi-stage elections were being held in only a fraction of the country currently under the military's authority. Elections were not held in opposition-held territory, so



to the military's proxy, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP). Civil and political space is also heavily restricted, with criticism of the election itself being a criminal offence.

The main opposition would be the National League for Democracy (NLD) party, which has won by a landslide in every national election it has participated in since 1990. But it has been banned, along with dozens of other opposition political parties. Its senior leaders, including Aung San Suu Kyi, have been imprisoned.

Citizens have been coerced into taking part in an election with only electronic-voting machines. This is against a background of expanded surveillance and pervasive fear.

Break up of Myanmar?

Despite recent military gains by the junta, supported by Russian

Since the coup there are many areas now under full opposition control. Take, for instance, a recent declaration of independence by a breakaway ethnic Karen armed group. While they represent only one part of the Karen community in eastern Myanmar, this could well precipitate a flood of similar announcements by other ethnic minorities.

Other groups might declare themselves autonomous and seek backing from governments and commercial and security interests in neighbouring countries such as China, Thailand, India and Bangladesh.

Most neighbouring countries will be uneasy about any further fracturing of Myanmar's territorial integrity. Some, however, see potential benefits. China, for example, supports some ethnic armed groups

The Hague. It faces claims it committed genocide against the Muslim Rohingya ethnic minority, particularly during the massacres of 2017.

During the three-week hearings, the junta has argued its "clearance operations" were merely counter-terrorism activities, despite the 700,000 refugees it created.

Given the disdain for international law shown by Russia, China and the Trump administration in the US, any finding against the junta will have limited practical impact anyway.

What next?

Meanwhile, some countries in the the ASEAN bloc appear to be softening their opposition to the junta.

Recently, the Philippines foreign secretary met with Myanmar's senior military leadership in the country's first month chairing the bloc. This highlights the conundrum faced by regional leaders.

In the years immediately after the coup, ASEAN sought to keep Myanmar's junta at arm's length. But a number of key ASEAN players, particularly the more authoritarian regimes in Southeast Asia, would prefer to find a way to normalise engagement with the generals.

From that perspective, the flawed elections are a chance to embrace superficial democratisation and renewal.

This leaves the Myanmar people – millions of whom have fought hard against the coup and its negative consequences – with invidious choices about how to best pursue their independence and freedom.

There is little positive economic news on the horizon. The IMF projects inflation in Myanmar will stay above 30% in 2026 with a real GDP fall of 2.7%. This would compound an almost 20% contraction since the coup. The currency is worth around one quarter of what it was five years ago at the time of the coup.

In practice, this means many Myanmar families have gone backwards dramatically. An untold number are now entangled in illicit and often highly exploitative businesses.

The military's proxy, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), will undoubtedly form government after the elections. But unlike the USDP-led government that formed after the similarly flawed 2010 election, this new administration is unlikely to pursue political and economic liberalisation sufficient to entice opposition forces to play along.

The people of Myanmar have now been betrayed and brutalised by the military far too often to believe their easy promises.



We fear rejection, want attention, crave affection, and dream of perfection.

many otherwise eligible voters were disenfranchised.

As such, there is no serious opposition

military technology and Chinese government pressure, the lines of control may be starting to solidify into an eventual Balkanisation, or break up, of Myanmar into hostile statelets.

The prospects for a future federalised democratic Myanmar seem increasingly remote.

to protect its strategic economic assets and maintain stability and influence along its borders.

Will international rulings have any impact?

While the conflict continues at home, Myanmar's military leadership is defending itself at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in

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“Assam: Where My Rifle Met History”

**COL (DR.) ASHWANI KUMAR,
M-IN-D, VSM (RETD)**

A Soldier, Historian's Journey from the Mahabharata to Modern Battle Lines.

I first arrived in Assam not as a pilgrim or a scholar, but as a young soldier posted between 1992 and 1993, when the region was tense, restless, and unforgiving.

The Brahmaputra still flowed wide and calm, as it must have in the age of Bhagadatta of Pragjyotisha, but the forests whispered differently then. Somewhere beyond the tea gardens and railway lines, insurgents watched, waited, and vanished into the same jungles that had sheltered warriors for millennia.

That was when I understood, Assam does not merely appear in Indian history. It continuously tests it.

Pragjyotisha: When the East First Took Up Arms.

As a soldier with a historical bent, I often reflected on the Mahabharata during long nights of duty.

This land, then known as Pragjyotisha sent Bhagadatta, son of Naraka, to Kurukshetra with elephant divisions and hill fighters trained in terrain warfare. His army came from forests, rivers, and high ground the same tactical challenges we faced centuries later.

When we planned jungle domination exercises or river crossings, I realised we were not inventing doctrine.

We were inheriting it.

Kamarupa: Where Learning and Defence Walked Together.

Between patrols, I visited ancient temples and broken stone inscriptions swallowed by vegetation silent witnesses to Kamarupa, the early historical kingdom of Assam. Founded by Pushyavarman (c. 350 CE) and elevated under Bhaskaravarman (7th century CE), Kamarupa stood as a civilisational bridge between mainland Bharat and Southeast Asia.

The Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang, who visited in 643 CE, described a learned land, disciplined administration, and spiritual depth.

In 1992, I saw the same character, quiet dignity in villages Deep respect for uniform.

An intuitive understanding of land and survival

Civilisation here had never been ornamental, it had always been functional.

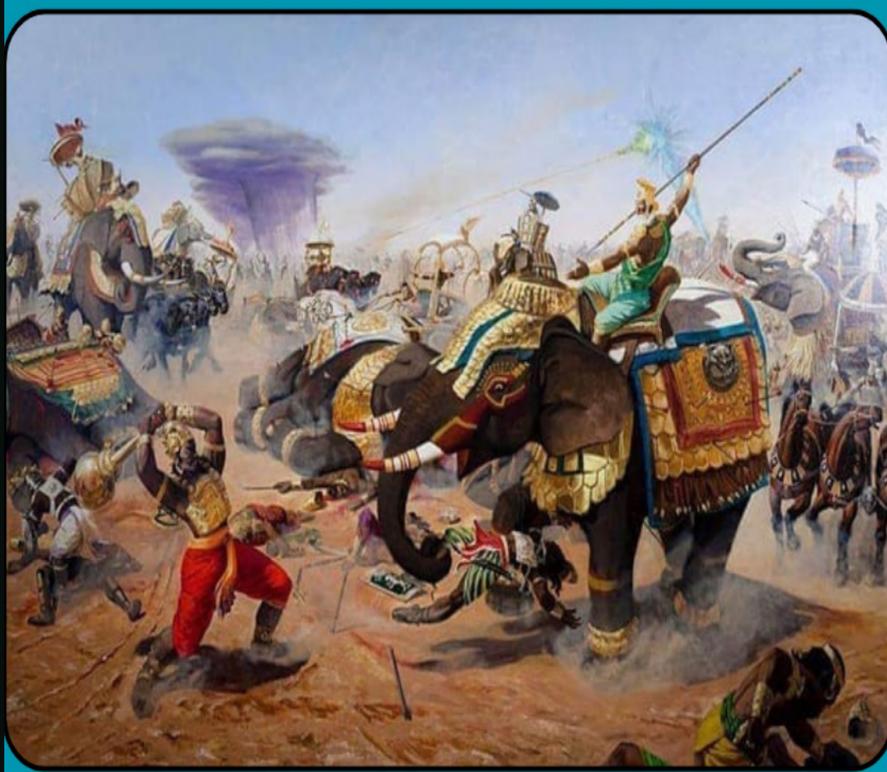
Kamakhya: Where Even Armed Men Speak Softly.

During one night as a duty officer, I went to Kamakhya Temple.

I had carried weapons for months, but there I felt no need to assert strength. The power of the place was not in stone or ritual, but in silence.

Kamakhya one of the greatest Shakti Peethas has anchored Assam's spiritual life for centuries. It preserved India's Tantric traditions when much of the subcontinent faced repeated invasions.

Every soldier who has served in Assam understands this unspoken truth, Faith here is not loud. It is steady like the land



Assam: Where My Rifle Met History

itself.

Ahoms, Lachit, and the Warrior's Code.

In military circles in Assam, one name is spoken with reverence Lachit Borphukan.

The Ahom dynasty (1228–1826) ruled for nearly six centuries, defeating Mughal invasions repeatedly. At Saraighat (1671), Lachit's riverine tactics crushed a superior Mughal force.

During our jungle warfare training and river patrols, instructors often reminded us:-

“This terrain defeated empires. Respect it.”

Lachit's discipline, his insistence on duty over blood ties, resonated deeply with every soldier posted here.

1992–93: Modern War in an Ancient Land.

The Assam of 1992–93 was not peaceful. There was real fear, physical, and constant. There was courage quiet, disciplined, and unspoken. We moved through. Tea gardens, beautiful and deceptive, where mist hid both sunrise and threat

Railway stations, lifelines of movement and intelligence. Dense jungles, where insurgents blended with terrain and night

Jungle warfare here was not textbook. It was instinctive, Listening more than speaking

Reading broken twigs and displaced leaves. Trusting local inputs

Knowing when not to fire Operations were followed by long silence.

And then there was Silchar. Ass a soldier it was a tough life for anyone. To speak to my wife and family, I would sometimes travel 50 kilometres or more, just to make a phone call. There were no mobiles, no quick messages only patience and longing we used to wait for the letters a big craze, many times a jawan used to get his letter more than an officer one used to feel jealous, but that was a life

Standing in a queue, carbine

slung, heart elsewhere, I realised: This is also soldiering waiting, missing, enduring.

Colonial and Post-Independence Assam: The Tested Frontier.

The British entered Assam in 1826, extracting tea, oil, and timber. Resistance followed, quietly and persistently.

After Independence, Assam became critical during the 1962 war

It bore the brunt of insurgencies

It emerged as India's eastern military anchor

I saw firsthand how formations, convoys, and air support moved through Assam often unnoticed, always essential.

Assam does not demand attention.

It delivers stability.

Third Generations, One Land.

My connection to Assam is not limited to a single posting.

Three generations of my family have served this land, in uniform and in duty. What I write is shaped by,

Ground visits over decades

Operational experience

Memorials without names in newspapers

Conversations with soldiers who never complained

This story is not nostalgia. It is acknowledgment.

Why Assam Matters: A Soldier's Concluding words.

Assam matters because, It defended Bharat before the idea of India existed

It blends spirituality with strategy

It absorbs conflict without losing soul

It teaches soldiers humility before terrain and time.

Closing Reflection.

History calls Assam a frontier. A soldier knows better.

Assam is India's eastern conscience ancient, alert, and unyielding.

When the evening light settles over tea gardens and the Brahmaputra mirrors the sky,

I remember those long nights of duty and understand why this land has never fallen.

Author Profile: Northeast India.

Ashk Machhanvi is a retired Indian Army officer and soldier historian whose understanding of Northeast India is rooted in direct operational service and long-term engagement with the region. He served in Assam and Northeast during the formative years of 1992–93 and has revisited the Northeast on multiple subsequent assignments officially and on personal visits, allowing him to develop a layered and longitudinal perspective on its security environment, cultural complexity, and civilisational depth.

His work reflects a nuanced understanding of Assam and the wider Northeastern states, shaped by close interaction with local communities, terrain familiarity, and an appreciation of the region's historical role as India's eastern civilisational gateway. Writing as a curative historian, Machhanvi integrates military ethics, historical memory, and cultural demography to counter fragmented or externally imposed narratives about the Northeast. Rather than viewing the region solely through a security lens, his scholarship emphasises continuity linking ancient routes, temple traditions, border cultures, and modern strategic realities.

Drawing upon both military experience and lived social exposure, he writes with authority on the resilience of frontier societies, the complexities of identity in borderlands, and the enduring civilisational links between the Northeast and the broader Bharatiya tradition. All operational references in his work are non-sensitive and reflective in nature, intended to provide context and understanding rather than tactical detail.

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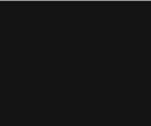


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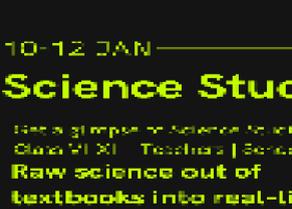


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