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PERSPECTIVE

Change is good, it keeps life interesting.

Supreme Court to examine validity of anti-conversion laws in 12 states

GUWAHATI
The Supreme Court on Monday agreed to examine the constitutional validity of anti-religious conversion laws enacted by 12 states, following concerns raised by Christian organisations that the statutes encourage vigilante action against religious minorities. A Bench headed by Chief Justice of India Surya Kant issued notices to the Union government through the Ministry of Law and Justice, as well as to the governments of Himachal Pradesh, Odisha, Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Haryana, Arunachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Jharkhand and Rajasthan.

During the hearing, senior advocate Meenakshi Arora, appearing for the National Council of Churches in India (NCCI), argued that the structure of the anti-conversion laws emboldens vigilante groups and incentivises the filing of false complaints. She submitted that the provisions often lead to arrests even where no offence has been committed.

"These Acts are framed in a manner that rewards such actions. Even where there is no case, a complaint can be made and a person can be arrested," Arora told the court, urging it to stay the operation of the laws. Appearing for the Centre, Solicitor General Tushar Mehta rejected the petitioners' claims, describing them as "not factually correct". He told the court that the issue had already been settled by a Constitution Bench judgment and said the Union government would place its response on record.

Mehta referred to the Supreme Court's 1977 judgment in Rev. Stainislaus vs State of Madhya Pradesh, in which a five-judge Bench upheld the constitutional validity of the Madhya Pradesh Dharma Swatantraya Adhiniyam, 1968, and the Orissa Freedom of Religion Act, 1967.

WHO SAID WHAT



Hon'ble PM Shri Narendra Modi Ji has given highest respect to the Northeast, its culture, heritage and people. It is for this reason we consider Modi ji one of our own.

~ Sarbananda Sonowal, Union Minister for Ports, Shipping & Waterways, Goa

IMPHAL/DELHI

The BJP Parliamentary Board on Monday appointed party national general secretary Tarun Chugh as the central observer for the election of the Manipur BJP legislature party leader, signalling renewed efforts to restore an elected government in the state as President's rule nears its end.

The decision comes just days before the second spell of President's rule in Manipur is set to expire next week. The move has triggered fresh political activity, with several NDA MLAs from the state arriving in New Delhi following summons from the BJP's central leadership, fuelling speculation that a decision on government formation is imminent.

Confirming the appointment, BJP national general secretary Arun Singh said Chugh would oversee the process of electing the BJP legislature party leader in Manipur. A meeting of the BJP legislature party is expected on Tuesday, though the venue has not yet been disclosed.

Manipur has been under President's rule since February 13, 2025, following the resignation of the BJP-led government



headed by then chief minister N Biren Singh on February 9. The 60-member Manipur Assembly, whose term runs until 2027, was placed under suspended animation amid prolonged ethnic unrest in the state.

Nearly 20 MLAs reached the national capital on Sunday night, with more joining on Monday. Those present include former chief minister N Biren Singh, Assembly Speaker Satyabrata Singh, former minister Y Khemchand Singh and BJP state president A Sharda Devi.

Sources said the BJP leadership has held several rounds of consultations over recent months with Meitei and Kuki MLAs, alliance partners such as the National People's Party (NPP) and the Naga People's Front (NPF), as well as independent legislators, to assess whether conditions are conducive to forming a popular government. A joint meeting of Meitei and Kuki BJP MLAs was held in Delhi on December 14, 2025, under the supervision of senior BJP leaders B L Santhosh and Sambit Patra.

The BJP currently has 37 MLAs in the Manipur Assembly. The party won 32 seats in the 2022 Assembly elections, with its strength later increasing after five JD(U) legislators joined the BJP. The NPP has six MLAs, the NPF five, the Congress five, the Kuki People's Alliance two, one JD(U) MLA and three Independents. One Assembly seat is vacant following the death of a sitting legislator. President's rule was imposed after months of ethnic violence between the Meitei and Kuki communities, which began in May 2023 following a 'Tribal Solidarity March' in the hill districts opposing the Meitei demand for Scheduled Tribe status. The violence claimed at least 260 lives and displaced thousands. During central rule, Governor Ajay Kumar Bhalla initiated a series of measures aimed at restoring normalcy, including appeals for the surrender of looted weapons. The appointment of a central observer is now being seen as a critical step towards ending the prolonged political uncertainty and restoring an elected government in Manipur.

Governor Ajay Kumar Bhalla presents Governor's Award 2025 for arts, music and literature in Kohima



KOHIMA

Nagaland and Manipur Governor Ajay Kumar Bhalla on February 2 conferred the Governor's Award for Distinction in the Fields of Arts, Music and Literature 2025 at a formal ceremony held at Dr Imkongliha Ao Hall, Lok Bhavan, in Kohima.

Addressing the gathering, Governor Bhalla said the occasion was a celebration of Nagaland's rich creative spirit, cultural depth and intellectual vitality. He noted that the awards recognise not only individual excellence but also the enduring power of creativity to inspire, uplift and unite society.

Highlighting Nagaland's vast cultural wealth, the Governor said the state's traditions, languages, folklore, music and artistic expressions reflect its living memory and collective identity. He observed that arts and literature are deeply embedded in everyday life in Nagaland and form the soul of its people.

In the context of a rapidly changing world, Governor Bhalla underlined the role of artists, musicians and writers as custodians of heritage as well as pioneers of new ideas. Through their

work, he said, they help society move forward while remaining rooted in its cultural foundations.

Congratulating the awardees, the Governor said their achievements reflect perseverance, passion and purpose, and serve as an inspiration for young people to pursue creative paths that are both meaningful and nation-building. He also acknowledged the role of families, mentors, institutions and cultural organisations in nurturing creative talent.

Emphasising the need for balanced development, Bhalla said cultural growth must go hand in hand with economic and technological advancement. He called upon educational institutions, government departments and civil society organisations to continue supporting artistic expression and expanding platforms for creative engagement.

The Governor also noted that the Nagaland government has taken commendable steps to promote cultural and creative expressions, which not only strengthen identity but also generate livelihoods and enhance the state's presence at national and international levels.

NIA court frames charges against Kukiland outfit chief Mark Haokip

IMPHAL

A special court of the National Investigation Agency (NIA) in Imphal West on Monday framed charges against Mark Thangmang Haokip, president of the self-styled Government of the People's Democratic Republic of Kukiland, in a case related to alleged secessionist activities.

Haokip (40), a resident of Molnom village in Churachandpur district and son of Limkhosei Haokip, has been accused of conspiring to secede from India and of waging, or attempting to wage, war against the Government of India. The court framed charges against him under Section 13 of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967, and Section 64B of the Indian Penal Code. The Special NIA court fixed February 9, 2026, for recording Haokip's plea. He was produced before the court through video conferencing during the hearing. According to the charge sheet, Haokip was arrested on May 30, 2022, from Kishangarh in New Delhi for allegedly using social media platforms to spread propaganda aimed at creating instability, fuelling communal hatred and inciting violence to advance the objectives of the Democratic Republic of Kukiland.

Investigators said his alleged activities contributed to the escalation of communal tension and hostility between the Meitei and Kuki communities in Manipur. The charge sheet further stated that a diary recovered from Haokip revealed plans to establish sovereign authority over a proposed "Kukiland", allegedly encompassing territories in India, Myanmar and Bangladesh. Authorities also claimed to have seized materials indicating his involvement in forming an organisation that operated a website, www.kukigovt.com, to disseminate its ideology and allegedly conspire against the Union government.

Centre plans underground rail corridor through 'Chicken's Neck' to secure Northeast connectivity

NEW DELHI

The Centre is planning to construct underground railway tracks along a 40-km strategic stretch of the Siliguri Corridor in West Bengal—often referred to as India's 'Chicken's Neck'—to strengthen connectivity with the Northeast amid heightened security concerns.

Union Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw said on Monday that special planning is underway for the critical corridor linking the Northeastern states with the rest of the country. Speaking via video conference while outlining Union Budget allocations for the Railways, Vaishnaw said the proposal includes laying underground railway tracks and expanding existing lines to enhance capacity and redundancy.

"There is special planning for the 40-km strategic corridor connecting the Northeast with the rest of the country. The planning is on to lay underground railway tracks and also to convert the existing lines into four-line tracks," the Minister said.

Providing operational details, Northeast Frontier Railway (NFR) General Manager Chetan Kumar Shrivastava said the proposed underground section would run between Tin Mile Haat and Rangapani railway stations in West Bengal. He said the underground alignment is significant from a security perspective.

"One of the lines will go towards Bagdogra, which is vital for the country's air defence mechanism," Shrivastava said, adding that the tracks would be laid at a depth of around 20 to 24 metres beneath a largely plain terrain.

NFR Chief Administrative Officer (Construction) Hitendra Goyal said that alongside the underground section, the existing double-line track on the corridor will be converted into a four-line system. Once completed, the corridor would effectively have six railway lines—four overground and two underground—officials said.

The Siliguri Corridor, a narrow land strip connecting mainland India to the Northeast, has long been viewed as a strategic vulnerability. In recent years, evolving regional geopolitics and security developments have renewed focus on the area.

On November 2025, former Eastern Army Commander Lt Gen Rana Pratap Kalita (ret'd) had flagged growing security concerns surrounding the corridor. He pointed to increasing Chinese activity near the region and political changes in Bangladesh as factors necessitating heightened vigilance.

"The Chicken's Neck has always been a security concern. Growing Chinese footprints near the region and changes in the government in Bangladesh are major concerns. Strengthening connectivity and creating redundancies are essential, and demographic changes in the area also need close attention," Kalita had said.

Security concerns intensified last year following reports that Bangladesh was constructing an airbase at Lalmonirhat in Rangpur division, located about 20 km from the Siliguri Corridor. While details of the project remain unclear, reports of possible Chinese involvement have raised red flags in India.

Trump Announces India-US Trade Deal, Cuts Tariffs After Call With PM Modi

INDIA-BHUTAN RAIL LINK: Kokrajhar-Gelephu line expected to be completed in three years

KRC TIMES NEWS DESK

WASHINGTON/NEW DELHI: US President Donald Trump on Sunday announced that the United States and India have reached a new trade deal after a phone conversation with Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The agreement marks a major shift in trade ties between the two countries.

As part of the deal, the US will immediately reduce its "reciprocal tariff" on Indian goods from 25 percent to 18 percent.

Trump shared the announcement on Truth Social, calling it a result of "friendship and respect" between the two leaders.

In return, India has agreed to remove most tariffs and non-tariff barriers on American products, effectively bringing them down to zero in many cases.

India has also committed to stopping purchases of Russian oil and instead buying large quantities of energy from the United States, and possibly Venezuela.

Trump further said India has pledged to buy more than \$500 billion



worth of US goods, including energy, technology, agriculture, coal, and other products. He described this as a strong "Buy American" commitment and said both leaders "get things done." Prime Minister Modi welcomed the announcement and said he was delighted with the tariff reduction for "Made in India" products. Thanking Trump, Modi said closer cooperation between the world's two largest democracies would benefit their people and create new opportunities.

The deal follows months of negotiations that began in early 2025 after Modi's visit to the US following Trump's inauguration. While both sides have hailed the agreement as a boost to India-US relations, detailed timelines and product-specific terms are yet to be officially released.

IMPHAL

The proposed railway line connecting Kokrajhar in Assam with Gelephu in Bhutan is expected to be completed within three years of the start of construction, senior Northeast Frontier Railway (NFR) officials said on Tuesday, pointing to steady progress in Assam compared with delays faced in West Bengal. Speaking at a press conference, NFR General Manager Chetan Kumar Shrivastava said Indian Railways is pursuing two key cross-border rail connectivity projects with Bhutan. These include a 69-kilometre railway line from Kokrajhar to Gelephu and a 20-kilometre link from Banarhat in West Bengal to Samtse in Bhutan. Hitendra Goyal, Chief Administrative Officer of NFR (Construction), said the Kokrajhar-Gelephu project is on a strong footing and could be completed within three years once work begins. He attributed the positive outlook to the proactive and cooperative approach of the Assam government in facilitating the project, particularly on issues related to land and administrative clearances.

In contrast, officials said progress on the Banarhat-Samtse line has been slow due to land acquisition hurdles in West Bengal. The proposed alignment passes through four tea gardens, and delays at the state level have prevented the Railways from setting a clear timeline for completion. Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw has earlier described both rail projects as strategically significant, with the potential to boost trade, tourism and people-to-people ties between India and Bhutan. Gelephu and Samtse are among Bhutan's key trade centres along the nearly 700-kilometre-long India-Bhutan border.

Officials also pointed to Bhutan's plans to develop Gelephu as a "mindfulness city" and Samtse as an industrial town, highlighting the long-term economic potential of enhanced rail connectivity. The Kokrajhar-Gelephu line has been designated a Special Railway Project, a status that enables faster clearances and expedited land acquisition, strengthening confidence that the project will adhere to its projected timeline.



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WHITE-COLLAR TERRORISM

Terrorism is no longer confined to gunmen and sleeper cells. It has adapted to changing social realities shaped by technology and governance. Expanded access to education, information, and digital networks has altered the terrain of radicalisation, allowing extremist ideologies to circulate through less visible but more socially embedded pathways. This shift has produced a disturbing mutation: white-collar terrorism, where educated professionals misuse institutional trust, professional access, and social credibility to enable or legitimise violence. Low in visibility but high in impact, this form of terrorism corrodes the state from within.

Public attention to this trend sharpened after investigations into the 2025 Red Fort blast in Delhi, which killed fifteen innocent civilians and exposed a Faridabad based terror module involving educated facilitators. The case challenged the assumption that terrorism is driven primarily by illiteracy or marginalisation. Yet, in Jammu and Kashmir, the involvement of educated individuals in militancy is not a recent phenomenon.

From the early years of insurgency, several figures associated with organisations such as the National Liberation Front (NLF) and the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), and other militants like Maqbool Bhatt, Yasin Malik, Burhan Wani names that still echo in security briefings were notably well educated. This demonstrates that access to modern institutions does not automatically insulate individuals from extremist ideas; in some cases, it can even enable them.

Over the past three decades, sustained counter terror operations, financial crackdowns, and intelligence led by Jammu & Kashmir Police particularly against networks backed by Pakistan's ISI have degraded the conventional militant ecosystem. Leadership attrition, disrupted funding channels, and tighter surveillance have increased the costs of overt violence on part of terrorist organisations.

As traditional terror spaces are squeezed and pressure increases, Pakistan sponsored terror networks mutate rather than disappear. Sophisticated adaptation involves cultivating a new layer of over-ground workers marked by "hybrid terrorists", increasingly drawn from white-collar professions such as healthcare, education, engineering, and administration. Groomed ideologically and psychologically, these individuals often lack criminal antecedents, allowing them to evade traditional profiling and operate within everyday professional spaces. This is a calculated choice when armed mobilisation becomes costly, infiltration in the institutions becomes strategic. White-collar terrorism works because insiders know the system. They are trusted figures, and this social credibility is exploited to pass money, and support terror groups without drawing attention.

The concern deepens when Government employees themselves are implicated. Official records indicate that over 84 Jammu and Kashmir government employees were dismissed from service since 2020 for links with extremist or separatist activities, signalling the presence of rogue elements within public institutions. White-collar terrorism mirrors the game Among Us, where impostors hide among crewmates, pretending to work, white-collar terrorists do the same by blending among trusted professionals while quietly aiding terror networks. In a way, financial incentive combine with ideological commitment, reinforcing sustained participation. Clearly, we need continuous, rather than episodic, vigilance and surveillance. Regular verification of employees' criminal antecedents by police and intelligence agencies must become routine. Equally important is monitoring patterns of online behaviour that indicate radicalisation and also ensuring to track covert coordination through specialised and technologically equipped units.

The rise of white-collar terrorism does not signal the end of violence but its strategic reconfiguration. It reflects adaptation by terror networks under pressure rather than ideological retreat. Addressing this threat requires moving beyond a battlefield centric understanding of counterterrorism towards recognising institutional vulnerability, radicalisation, and the misuse of professional position. It should not come as a surprise that when white-collar terrorism takes root in urban settings, it finds its most enabling environment there. Cities concentrate institutions, professional networks, digital infrastructure, and a degree of anonymity that can be exploited. Universities, hospitals, offices, and bureaucratic spaces built on public trust can inadvertently become sites of ideological subversion. Urban space, therefore, is not merely the backdrop of white-collar extremism but one of its suitable conditions. Given these realities, the likelihood of similar cases emerging in the future should not be ruled out. Strengthening the security grid and resilience of urban institutions must therefore become a priority. In a way, white-collar terrorists prove more dangerous as the acts as an intellectual and logistical backbone of terror networks and their ability to remain undetected constitutes their primary success. While traditional terrorists have limited gestation periods, these white-collar operatives function as sleeper cells, quietly preparing ground for long-term subversion. Since traitors hide in our midst, common citizens must stay aware and adopt simple precautionary checks: ensuring proper documentation for used vehicle transactions; requiring mobile dealers to verify buyer's identities for phones and SIMs; municipal waste inspections; covering sensitive entry/exits with CCTV; and flagging alarming social media content to Police. Pakistan-sponsored terror now employs a "master of terrain" strategy deploying foreign terrorists familiar with local geography while using professional experts as white-collar facilitators.

The real challenge is whether society and institutions can detect extremist subversion before it manifests as harm. Acts of violence create immediate shock, but ideological sympathy for radical networks spreads quietly, often beyond the reach of conventional security framework. Public awareness and timely reporting of warning signs must become part of national security. Citizens can play a supportive role by acting as extended eyes and ears of security agencies by staying alert in workplaces and institutions to identify patterns like sudden behavioural shifts, rigid ideologies, or repeated violence justifications. Early recognition, action, and reporting such signals can help prevent harm to public trust and national security.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

"It is curious that physical courage should be so common in the world and moral courage so rare."

- Mark Twain

Budget 2026-27 : Balancing Fiscal Prudence with an Infrastructure Push



MEENAKSHI RAJEEV

The Budget 2026-27 is presented at a time when the Indian economy is on a relatively strong growth trajectory, accompanied by a low inflation environment. Headline inflation eased to around 1.33 per cent in December 2025, creating space for the Reserve Bank of India to adopt an expansionary monetary stance. This easing of inflation and expansionary monetary policy with the lowering of interest rates has supported consumption demand and, in turn, reinforced overall GDP growth. The First Advance Estimates (FAE) for FY26 released by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) place real GDP growth at 7.4 per cent, reaffirming India's position as one of the fastest-growing major economies.

Sectoral performance during the second quarter of FY26 as well reflects broad-based growth. Gross Value Added (GVA) data indicate that agriculture grew by 3.5 per cent, manufacturing by 7.9 per cent, and services by 9 per cent, suggesting satisfactory momentum across all three major sectors of the economy. On the demand side, domestic demand continues to anchor growth, supported by a strengthening pace of capital formation. According to the RBI data, the share of Private Final Consumption Expenditure (PFCE) in GDP rose to 61.5 per cent in FY26, the highest level since FY12. High-frequency indicators for the third quarter of FY26 including automobile and tractor sales and air passenger traffic also signal the persistence of robust demand conditions. Given the robustness of domestic demand, a reduction in income tax was not anticipated and has not been announced as well.

Despite these positives, several concerns remain. The share of manufacturing in GDP continues to be modest at 12.8 per cent, well below the desired level for a structurally balanced economy. External trade has emerged as a drag on growth, with the Reserve Bank of India noting a widening merchandise trade deficit, which rose to a record USD 25 billion. This reflects faster growth in imports relative to exports in December 2025. Additionally, the depreciation of the rupee

has raised concerns regarding rising import costs and external payment pressures. These mixed signals underscore the importance of sustaining economic momentum at this critical juncture.

Against a backdrop of heightened global uncertainty, the Budget places strong emphasis on infrastructure investment as a means of strengthening domestic growth and advancing India's aspiration of becoming a Viksit Bharat. At the same time, the government has continued its commitment to fiscal consolidation. As highlighted in the Economic Survey 2026, the fiscal deficit declined sharply from 9.2 per cent of GDP in FY21 to 4.8 per cent in FY25. Over this period, the revenue deficit has narrowed steadily to its lowest level since FY09, creating greater fiscal space for capital expenditure and reflecting an improvement in the quality of public spending. The decline in the primary deficit-to-GDP ratio further indicates that incremental borrowings are increasingly being used to service past liabilities rather than finance current expenditure. In the current budget the fiscal deficit for 2026-27 is projected at 4.3 per cent of GDP. This reflects adherence to the medium-term fiscal prudence framework and debt consolidation objectives.

An important institutional innovation by the Government is the adoption of behavioural economics through the NUDGE (Non-Intrusive Usage of Data to Guide and Enable) approach by the Income Tax Department. As the economic survey mentions, by relying on data-driven nudges rather than coercive enforcement, the department has achieved notable success. For instance, the Foreign Asset Campaign led nearly 25,000 taxpayers to revise their returns, with over 61 per cent responding positively. This resulted in the disclosure of foreign assets worth more than Rs 29,000 crore and foreign income exceeding Rs 1,000 crore, much of it through belated filings.

With fiscal consolidation, the budget presented by the Finance Minister rightly emphasised on the infrastructure and capital investment. Public capital expenditure has increased significantly from Rs 2 lakh crore in FY2014-15 to Rs 11.2 lakh crore

in BE 2025-26, and is proposed in this budget to be further raised to Rs 12.2 lakh crore in FY2026-27. To mitigate risks faced by private developers during the infrastructure development phase, the government has proposed setting up an Infrastructure Risk Guarantee Fund to provide partial credit guarantees to lenders. This will perhaps help the financial institutions mitigate the risks of the non-performing assets while lending for such long duration high value projects.

The Budget also prioritises environmentally sustainable logistics through initiatives such as new Dedicated Freight Corridors, the operationalisation of 20 additional National Waterways, and a Coastal Cargo Promotion Scheme aimed at increasing the share of inland waterways and coastal shipping to 12 per cent by 2047. These measures are expected to generate employment, build specialised skills, and reduce logistics costs.

One of the major emphases of the Finance Minister's Budget speech is the development of Tier II and Tier III cities. With large metropolitan cities increasingly getting saturated and environmental pressures mounting, this strategic shift is a welcome move—especially for Union Territories such as Jammu and Kashmir, where smaller cities dominate the urban landscape.

As stated by the Finance Minister, the government will continue to focus on developing infrastructure in cities with populations exceeding five lakh, which have emerged as new growth centres.

To this end, City Economic Regions (CERs) will be created, particularly focusing on Tier II and Tier III cities and temple towns requiring modern infrastructure and basic amenities. An allocation of Rs 5,000 crore per CER over five years has been proposed to implement region-specific development plans, which states can take advantage of to develop smaller towns or cities.

However, for India to truly achieve the goal of a Viksit Bharat, growth must be broad-based and inclusive. This necessitates renewed attention to the agriculture and the informal sectors, that is, to both farm and non-farm. Credit is a critical component for these sectors, and we

observe in this budget that schemes such as interest subvention for credit to farmers continue with an allocation of Rs 22,600 crore. This remains unchanged from the previous year. Similarly, the allocation for the Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana has marginally declined to Rs 12,200 crore. Farmer producer organisation head also saw an allocation of Rs 500 crore, slightly lower than the previous year. Allocation to the crop husbandry sector remained unchanged at Rs 76387 crore, and allocation

DIGITAL WAR OF WORDS

No cement is strong enough to hold on to our bulldozers who are on a mission- to free Assam from encroachments. An extensive eviction drive is underway in Hailakandi to free our forests and restore greenery. Our Aim: Reclaiming every inch of what belongs to us.

~ Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma, Assam CM
#AssamEvictions



to the MNREGA has declined. Adjusted for inflation, these allocations effectively imply a contraction in real terms. The unorganised (manufacturing, trade and other services) sector, which remains the second-largest employer in the economy, continues to face constraints in access to credit, technology, and digital platforms, as evidenced by the Unorganised Sector Survey data.

Notably, there are programmes for the agriculture and small-scale industries sector announced in this budget, which may help these sectors.

In this context, the High-Level Committee on Banking for Viksit Bharat announced in this budget is expected to play a crucial role in addressing these structural challenges and steering the economy towards a more inclusive growth path, where the sectors earning lower per capita income and employing the bulk of the population can flourish.

Manipur NDA MLAs head to Delhi as BJP reviews path ahead of President's rule deadline

NEW DELHI/IMPHAL

Legislators from the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in Manipur have begun arriving in the national capital at the BJP's behest, as the party's central leadership weighs options on whether a popular government can be formed before the current spell of President's rule expires next week.

Sources said nearly 20 NDA MLAs reached Delhi late Sunday, with others arriving on Monday, February 2. A meeting with senior BJP leaders is scheduled for Monday evening to review the political situation and assess the feasibility of installing a party-led government in the state.

The consultations come days before the second phase of President's rule ends. Central rule was first imposed on February 13, 2025, for six months in the wake of prolonged ethnic violence, and was extended in August 2025 for another six months.

Among those in Delhi are former



chief minister N Biren Singh, Assembly Speaker Satyabrata Singh, and former minister Y Khemchand Singh. BJP state president A Sharda Devi is also part of the discussions. The BJP-led government resigned on February 9, after which the 60-member Assembly-whose term runs until 2027-was placed under suspended animation.

Over the past several months, the BJP's central leadership has held multiple rounds of consultations with MLAs from both Meitei and Kuki communities, alliance partners including the National People's Party (NPP) and the Naga People's Front (NPF), as well as Independent legislators, to gauge whether conditions are conducive to forming a government. On December 14, 2025, BJP national general secretary (organisation) B L Santhosh and the party's Northeast coordinator Sambit Patra met Meitei and Kuki BJP MLAs together in Delhi.

However, sources said a key hurdle remains the reluctance of BJP's Kuki MLAs to commit to a future government, citing pressure from their community. The Kuki legislators are seeking a clear assurance from the Centre on their demand for a Union Territory with a legislature.

The BJP currently has 37 MLAs in the Assembly. It won 32 seats in the 2022 elections and later added five

through defections from the Janata Dal (United). Other parties include the NPP (six MLAs), NPF (five), Congress (five), Kuki People's Alliance (two), JD(U) (one) and three Independents. One seat is vacant following the death of a sitting MLA.

If a new government is not formed in the coming weeks, the Centre will need to move a statutory resolution in both Houses of Parliament during the first part of the ongoing Budget Session to extend President's rule, sources said.

Since central rule was imposed, Governor Ajay Kumar Bhalla has taken steps aimed at restoring normalcy, including directing the surrender of arms looted from security forces. The ethnic violence between the Meitei and Kuki communities began in May 2023, following a 'Tribal Solidarity March' in the hill districts against the Meitei community's demand for Scheduled Tribe status. At least 260 people were killed in the unrest.

8 Illegal Infiltrators Pushed Back from Cachar

OUR CORRESPONDENT

SILCHAR: Security agencies in Assam carried out swift action in Cachar district, leading to the pushback of eight illegal infiltrators, officials said on Monday.

Authorities stated that no illegal infiltrator would be spared and strict measures are being taken to safeguard the state's borders and internal security.

The action was taken under the leadership of Chief Minister Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma, with the government reaffirming its firm stand on national security and law enforcement.



Union Budget 2026-27: Meghalaya to get Rs 9,637 crore in tax devolution

SHILLONG

Meghalaya will receive Rs 9,637 crore as tax devolution from the Centre in the financial year 2026-27, a move officials said would strengthen the state's ability to step up capital expenditure and infrastructure creation.

The allocation follows the presentation of the Union Budget 2026-27 by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman in the Lok Sabha on February 1. Officials said the higher devolution would provide the state with greater untied funds, allowing it to align spending more closely with its developmental priorities. Central transfers to Meghalaya have risen steadily over the past decade. According to official data, between 2014 and 2024, the Centre released Rs 69,335 crore to the state as tax devolution and Rs 40,452 crore as grants-in-aid, indicating a sustained expansion in fiscal support. Capital investment has also been augmented through the Special Assistance to States for Capital Investment (SASCI) scheme, under which states receive 50-year interest-free loans, with the Centre bearing the entire interest burden. Under the scheme, Meghalaya has received Rs 6,523 crore between 2020-21 and 2025-26 (till January 2026), officials said. Infrastructure development has gathered pace alongside the enhanced funding. As of June 30, 2025, more than 1,156 km of National Highways have been constructed in the state.

In addition, highway projects covering 170 km have been approved under the Bharatmala Pariyojana, involving an estimated investment of Rs 2,703 crore. Officials added that increased budgetary support has also aided the expansion of flagship welfare schemes. As of January 2026, over 8.98 lakh Jan Dhan accounts had been opened in Meghalaya, while loans exceeding Rs 3,300 crore had been disbursed under the Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana.

NECTA Welcomes Centre's Push on Data Centres, AI and Semiconductor Growth

BISWADEEP GUPTA

SILCHAR: The North East Computer Traders Association (NECTA) has welcomed the Union Government's strong focus on Data Centre and Cloud infrastructure, calling it a forward-looking move aligned with the vision of Viksit Bharat @2047.

Reacting to the announcements, NECTA General Secretary Pranjal Baruah said the Data Centre-Cloud 2047 roadmap would help position India as a global digital and data hub. He said the initiative would also open up new opportunities for Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities, including those in the North East, to attract investments in cloud services, disaster recovery systems and managed IT infrastructure.

The Association also welcomed the government's push towards AI 2.0, aimed at large-scale and industry-ready adoption of artificial intelligence. NECTA said the move is expected to speed up the use of AI across key sectors such as governance, healthcare, education, agriculture and cybersecurity. This, the Association noted, would benefit startups, MSMEs and system inte-

grators.

NECTA appreciated the allocation of 740,000 crore for the Semiconductor and Electronics sector, describing it as a major boost to the Make in India initiative. The Association said the investment would strengthen domestic manufacturing, reduce dependence on imports and create high-skill employment opportunities.

Publicity Secretary of NECTA, Ripon Barua, welcomed the proposal for Content Creators' Labs. He said the initiative recognises the growing role of digital content, media technology and creator-led innovation in the new-age economy.

The Association further welcomed the rationalisation of IT services, stating that it would simplify compliance, improve ease of doing business and support the growth of IT firms and digital service providers, especially in emerging regions like the North East.

The statement was issued by the North East Computer Traders Association (NECTA) and signed by General Secretary Pranjal Baruah.

Illegal Bangladeshi Muslims in Assam 'no more than 1,000', says AIUDF MLA Aminul Islam

GUWAHATI

All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF) MLA Aminul Islam on Monday rejected claims of a large-scale presence of illegal Bangladeshi Muslims in Assam, asserting that a comprehensive house-to-house survey would reveal no more than around 1,000 such individuals across the state.

Addressing the ongoing political debate over illegal immigration, Islam said the citizenship status of Muslim residents in Assam has undergone repeated verification through multiple official processes over the years, including the National Register of Citizens (NRC) exercise.

He argued that Muslim communities were subjected to the most intense scrutiny during the NRC process, with documents examined repeatedly by authorities. "No other community has faced the level of verification that Muslims in Assam have undergone," the AIUDF legislator said.

Referring to the second draft



of the NRC, Islam noted that nearly 19 lakh people were excluded from the list. Of these, he claimed, about 12 lakh were non-Muslims, while around 6 to

7 lakh were Muslims. He stressed that exclusion from the NRC does not automatically mean an individual is a Bangladeshi national or a foreigner.

Under existing legal provisions, those left out of the NRC are entitled to approach Foreigners Tribunals after receiving rejection slips, Islam said. He maintained that once excluded individuals present their documents before the tribunals, nearly 90 per cent of the excluded Muslim applicants are likely to be declared Indian citizens.

Based on this assessment, Islam said the actual number of Bangladeshi Muslims living illegally in Assam would be "extremely small". "Even after all levels of scrutiny, the number may be around 1,000," he claimed, adding that the issue is often exaggerated for political reasons despite repeated verification of citizenship records.

Islam's remarks come amid sustained political contestation in Assam over illegal immigration, the NRC outcomes and the identification of foreigners-issues that continue to shape the state's electoral and policy discourse.

BJP retains edge as Hindu voters consolidate behind ruling alliance, Muslims favour Congress

GUWAHATI

If Assembly elections were held today, the BJP-led alliance would retain a clear lead in Assam, with the Congress continuing as the principal challenger, according to the India Today-CVoter Mood of the Nation (MoTN) survey conducted in January 2026. As the state moves closer to the next Assembly polls, the survey points to a largely bipolar contest, with voter preferences consolidating around the two national parties and limited electoral space for smaller and regional players. According to the MoTN findings, the BJP-led alliance (BJP+) would secure 50.2 per cent of the vote if elections were held now. The Congress follows with 44 per cent, while all other parties combined account for 5.8 per cent of voter preference.

The figures indicate that the BJP-led alliance would emerge as the single largest political forma-



tion in Assam, while the Congress retains a strong position as the main opposition force.

The survey shows a sharp polarisation along community lines. Among Hindu respondents, the BJP-led alliance enjoys a commanding lead, with 67.1 per cent indicating support for BJP+. The Congress trails far behind in this segment, while smaller parties together

attract 8.2 per cent of Hindu voter preference.

In contrast, the Congress records its strongest backing among Muslim voters. As per the survey, 78.5 per cent of Muslim respondents expressed a preference for the Congress, while the BJP-led alliance garners 18.5 per cent support. Smaller parties together account for 3 per cent of the Muslim vote.

Among voters classified under the 'Others' category, which includes smaller religious and social groups, the BJP-led alliance again leads with 57.7 per cent support. The Congress trails in this segment, while smaller parties together secure 2.9 per cent of voter preference.

Overall, the MoTN survey underlines the shrinking footprint of smaller and regional parties in Assam's electoral landscape. Across communities, parties outside the BJP-led alliance and the Congress together command just 5.8 per cent of voter preference, signalling a consolidation of electoral choices around the two main national parties.

While the BJP-led alliance maintains an overall advantage in vote share, the Congress continues to dominate Muslim-majority segments, keeping it competitive in constituencies with higher Muslim populations.

Naga seed sowing festival Lui-Ngai-Ni to be held in Ukhrul on February 14-15

IMPHAL

The Naga seed sowing festival Lui-Ngai-Ni will be celebrated at the Ukhrul district headquarters in Manipur on February 14 and 15 under the aegis of the United Naga Council (UNC), with the Tangkhul Naga Long (TNL) hosting the two-day event.

Observed annually to mark the beginning of the agricultural season, Lui-Ngai-Ni brings together Naga communities to seek blessings for a bountiful harvest and the well-being of the people. The celebrations will feature traditional rituals, ceremonial blowing of trumpets, cultural dances, folk songs, speeches and other forms of cultural presentations.

The theme for this year's festival is "Cultural Renaissance", reflecting the revival and reinterpretation of Naga cultural heritage in a contemporary context.

Losii Dikho, MLA from Mao Assembly Constituency, will attend the inaugural function as chief guest, while Dinglung Gangmei, Chairman of the Hill Areas Committee (HAC) and MLA from Nungba Assembly Constituency, will be the main celebrant. Awangbow Newmai, MLA from Tamei, will serve as the principal celebrant. Manipur Chief Secretary Dr Puneet Kumar Goel and Tamenglong MLA Janghmlung Panmei will convey their greetings during the inaugural programme.

At the valedictory function, greetings will be delivered by Chandel MLA Dr S S Oshiv and Phungvar MLA Leishiyoi Keishing. Khashim Vashum, MLA from Chingai Assembly Constituency, will be the host of the festival.

A programme note issued in connection with Lui-Ngai-Ni said culture forms the foundation of a people's identity, worldview and way of life. It highlighted that the Naga community, comprising around 66-67 ethnic tribes spread across India and Myanmar, represents unity in diversity.

Of these, 20 tribes and one associate unit are found in Manipur, including Anal, Aimol, Chothe, Chiru, Inpui, Kharam, Khoibu, Lamkang, Liangmai, Mao, Maram, Maring, Moyon, Monsang, Poumai, Rongmei, Tarao, Tangkhul, Thangal, Zeme and KNUM.

Explaining the theme, the note described "Cultural Renaissance" as the rediscovery and renewal of traditional values, art and knowledge adapted to contemporary times. It said the theme reflects the Naga people's efforts to reclaim and celebrate their history, moral values and rich cultural heritage while preserving core traditions amid changing times.

The note added that this year's celebration aims to revive, inculcate and sustain both the abstract and practical value systems of Naga culture, helping shape the collective destiny of the people.

Tripura Congress slams Union Budget 2026-27 as 'directionless', says Northeast aspirations ignored



AGARTALA

Quest!

In Russia, it is illegal to tell kids that gay people exist.

The Tripura Pradesh Congress on Monday sharply criticised the Union Budget 2026-27, terming it "directionless" and alleging that it lacks a clear vision for the country's future while failing to address the aspirations of the Northeast.

Addressing a press conference at the Pradesh Congress Bhavan, state Congress president Ashish Kumar Saha said the Budget does not provide a credible roadmap for national development and warned of adverse consequences for employment.

"This budget has no perspective; it is entirely directionless. It cannot guide the country towards a prosperous future. As a result, employment opportunities are likely to shrink and layoffs may increase. The worst impact will be borne by the working class," Saha said.

Echoing these concerns, party spokesperson Prabir Chakraborty alleged that the Budget could widen avenues for black money and questioned the implementation of earlier budgetary promises. He said the proposals offer little hope to millions of unemployed youths across the country.

Chakraborty also criticised the Centre for ignoring the demands of Tripura and the broader northeastern region. "Not a single demand raised by the state earlier has been fulfilled. This budget is particularly disappointing for states like Tripura," he said.

Citing figures from previous budgets, Chakraborty expressed concern over what he described as inadequate allocations and a lack of effective initiatives for the state's development. He added that key issues such as job creation, regional development and youth empowerment have been overlooked.

"This budget merely repeats old and routine measures instead of presenting new directions, leaving the country ill-equipped to address emerging economic and social challenges," Chakraborty said.

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Congress asks Centre to take Parliament into confidence over US, EU trade deals

NEW DELHI

The Congress on Tuesday demanded that the Modi government should take Parliament into confidence and the text of both the EU and US trade deals must be laid on the table of both Houses and debated.

Congress general secretary in-charge communications Jairam Ramesh said that from the information US President Donald Trump has provided, it is abundantly clear that Prime Minister Narendra Modi has "completely surrendered."

He said that almost exactly a year ago, Prime Minister Modi landed at the White House to greet President Trump on his re-election.

"His trademark hugloma-cy was on full display. India-US relations never appeared brighter. Negotiations for a trade deal started immediately thereafter. But ever since President Trump made the first announcement of the halt to Operation Sindoor on the evening of May 10, 2025 things began to go downhill," Ramesh said on X.

Subsequently, President Trump embraced Pakistan and Field Marshall Asim Munir enthusiastically, "exposing the hollowness of Mr. Modi's hugloma-cy", he said.

Ramesh pointed out that President Trump announced the trade deal very late last night Indian time.

"From the information President Trump has provided, it is abundantly clear that Prime Minister Modi has - like he did on May 10, 2025 - completely surrendered. He has most definitely appeased President Trump. India stands diminished by this unfortu-

nate sequence of events," he claimed.

Pointing out that Parliament is in session, Ramesh said the text of both the EU and US trade deals must be laid on the table of both Houses and debated, "especially since the US Secretary of Agriculture Brooke Rollins has issued a statement claiming that India has liberalised agricultural imports from the US."

Reacting to President Trump's announcement that the US and India have agreed to a trade deal, Ramesh had said Monday night that it appears the prime minister has "capitulated finally" and that this "cannot be the father of all deals."

He had said "clearly Mogambo Khush Hai", a play on a popular dialogue from the 1987 Hindi movie "Mr India."

In this photo from February 13, 2025, Prime Minister Narendra Modi speaks during a joint press statement with US President Donald Trump after their meeting at the White House, in Washington.

Markets surge over 4.5%, rupee firms as India-US trade deal triggers risk-on rally

In a post on X, the Congress hit out at the government and said India has the right to know details of the trade deal.

"Just like the ceasefire, the announcement of the trade deal was also made by US President Trump. It has been stated that the trade deal is being done 'on Modi's request'," the party said.

"Trump says that India will move to reduce tariff and non tariff barriers against the United States to 'zero'. It seems India has agreed to completely open our market

for America. This will impact Indian industry, traders and farmers," it said.

There is talk of opening the agriculture sector for America in the statement as well, the Congress said and asked what exactly is the deal.

How has the security and interests of our farmers been ensured, the party further asked.

It has also been said that the Modi government will not buy oil from Russia, but will buy from America and Venezuela instead, the Congress pointed out and asked whether the Modi government agreed to this condition.

"In addition, there is talk of buying more goods from America. If that's the case, then what happened to 'Make in India'?" the party said.

"The Modi government must take the Parliament and the entire country into confidence and share all the details," he added.

Trump on Monday said India and the US agreed to a trade deal under which Washington will bring down the reciprocal tariff on Indian goods to 18 percent from the current 25 percent, Trump said on Monday after a phone conversation with PM Modi.

On his part, PM Modi said he was delighted that "made in India products will now have a reduced tariff of 18 percent."

This came after India and the European Union, on January 27, sealed a landmark free trade agreement - billed as the "mother of all deals" - to create a market of two billion people, with PM Modi and the top EU leadership unveiling a transformative five-year agenda to largely leverage trade and defence in protecting the rules-based world order.

NEW DELHI

Indian equities opened with a sharp gap-up on Tuesday after the announcement of a trade agreement between India and the United States that slashes reciprocal tariffs and removes penalties linked to India's Russian crude purchases, triggering a broad-based rally across equities, currency and bonds.

The Sensex opened at 85,323, up almost 4.5% from Monday's close of 81,666, while the Nifty started at 26,308 against 25,088 earlier. As the initial exuberance cooled slightly, markets continued to hold on to most of their gains. By noon, the Sensex was up 2,439.18 points, while the Nifty had gained 749.05 points.

Market breadth was decisively positive. Of the 3,010 stocks traded on the NSE, 2,587 advanced while only 349 declined.

Among Nifty constituents, Adani Enterprises and Adani Ports led gains, rising over 10% and 7.5% respectively. Only three Nifty stocks - Nestle, ONGC and Coal India - traded in the red.

US President Donald Trump indicated on Truth Social, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi confirmed on X, that the US would reduce reciprocal tariffs on Indian goods to 18% from as high as 50%, while also removing the additional duty imposed over India's purchase of Russian crude oil.

Though formal documentation is awaited, markets inferred that India has committed to purchasing nearly \$500 billion worth of US agricultural, energy, technology and other commodities over time.

Dhiraj Relli, MD & CEO, HDFC Securities, said: "We welcome the announcement of a landmark trade agreement between India and the United States. At 18%, India's tariff rate is now lower than that of several major Asian trading partners, supporting growth in labour-intensive and export-oriented sectors such as textiles, gems and jewellery, and engineering goods."

Markets surge over 4.5%, rupee firms as India-US trade deal triggers risk-on rally



"The removal of additional duties linked to Russian crude purchases offers greater stability to both the rupee and domestic markets and significantly enhances India's competitive position."

Analysts estimate the effective tariff rate for India now stands at around 14.1% (18% reciprocal tariffs under IIEPA plus Section 232 provisions), placing India at par - or slightly better - than export competitors such as Bangladesh, Vietnam and Thailand.

The rupee reacted immediately, opening sharply stronger at around 90.50 per dollar.

Jigar Trivedi, Senior Research Analyst at IndusInd Securities, said: "The deal effectively dismantles a punitive tariff regime that had seen duties on Indian exports climb to 50%, the highest in Asia. By removing penalties linked to Russian energy and slashing tariffs to 18%, the agreement is expected to encourage a return of foreign capital."

"This removes a chunk of policy and tariff uncertainty that had been weighing on Indian assets, opening the door for a near-term bounce in the rupee and equities via sentiment and foreign flows."

"The rupee was the worst-performing Asian currency in 2025.

This agreement could break the self-reinforcing cycle of hedging that had kept the currency under pressure." Currency strategists now see USD/INR gradually moving towards the 88.5-89 range in the coming weeks if foreign portfolio flows resume. Brokerage estimates suggest the trade deal, along with recently concluded FTAs with the UK and EU, materially reduces India's external sector risks. Analysts project a 0.1-0.2% of GDP improvement in the current account deficit outlook for FY27 from the earlier projection of 0.9% of GDP, while the projected \$5 billion BoP deficit may ease if FPI flows reverse.

One brokerage note said: "Since the tariff reduction is effective immediately, we expect a 40 basis point fillip to India's nominal GDP growth in FY27, ceteris paribus. Over the medium term, the EU and US trade agreements together can add nearly 60 basis points to nominal growth."

Export-heavy sectors like Gems and Jewellery, Textiles and apparel and Machinery and equipment are expected to benefit immediately.

Banks and financial institutions with exposure to these segments may see improved outlook due to

reduced trade uncertainties.

A market strategist at a domestic brokerage Elara Securities said: "Banks with exposure to export-linked MSMEs and working capital finance in these sectors stand to gain as order visibility improves and trade risks recede."

Automobiles, however, may not see immediate relief as tariffs under Section 232 remain in place.

The improved macro outlook is also expected to support the bond market.

A debt market dealer at a primary dealership said: "The immediate reaction will be positive for bonds as external risks decline and currency stability improves. But structurally, we still see the 10-year yield drifting towards 6.9-7% over the medium term on growth expectations."

While the deal is seen as overwhelmingly positive, India's reported commitment to buy large volumes of US energy, agricultural and technology products may raise concerns.

A trade policy expert said: "Much will depend on how the \$500 billion import commitment is structured over time. If it replaces cheaper sources like Russian crude, some of the gains may be offset. The details will be crucial."

Services exports will be another key monitorable as Global Capability Centres (GCCs) evolve as a preferred execution model amid tighter US visa scrutiny.

US services imports from India stood at \$40.6 billion in CY24.

An analyst tracking IT services said: "If tariff tensions ease and trade relations stabilise, it could also indirectly support the services ecosystem, particularly GCC expansions and consulting exports."

With tariff uncertainty lifting, foreign flow prospects improving and India having underperformed emerging markets so far this year, analysts believe Indian equities could emerge as one of the best-performing asset classes in the coming weeks.

INTERNATIONAL

'2nd Invasion Plan': An internal document shows Vietnam preparing for a possible war with the US

HANOI

A year after Vietnam elevated its relations with Washington to the highest diplomatic level, an internal document shows its military was taking steps to prepare for a possible American "war of aggression" and considered the United States a "belligerent" power, according to a report released Tuesday.

More than just exposing Hanoi's duality in approach toward the US, the document confirms a deep-seated fear of external forces fomenting an uprising against the Communist leadership in a so-called "color revolution," like the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine, or the 1986 Yellow Revolution in the Philippines.

Other internal documents that the 88 Project, a human rights organization focused on human rights abuses in Vietnam, cited in its analysis point to similar concerns over US motives in Vietnam.

"There's a consensus here across the government and across different ministries," said Ben Swanton, co-director of The 88 Project and the report's author. "This isn't just some kind of a fringe element or paranoid element within the party or within the government."

The original Vietnamese document titled "The 2nd US Invasion Plan" was completed by the Ministry of Defense in August 2024. It suggests that in seeking "its objective of strengthening deterrence against China, the US and its allies are ready to apply unconventional forms of warfare and military intervention and even conduct large-scale invasions against countries and territories that 'deviate from its orbit'."

While noting that "currently there is little risk of a war against Vietnam," the Vietnamese planners write that "due to the US' belligerent nature we need to be vigilant to

prevent the US and its allies from 'creating a pretext' to launch an invasion of our country."

The Vietnamese military analysts outline what they see as a progression over three American administrations - from Barack Obama, through Donald Trump's first term, and into Joe Biden's presidency - with Washington increasingly pursuing military and other relationships with Asian nations to "form a front against China."

Vietnam balances diplomatic outreach with internal fears

In his term, Biden in 2023 signed a "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership" with Vietnam, elevating relations between the nations to their highest diplomatic level on par with Russia and China as "trusted partners with a friendship grounded in mutual respect."

In the 2024 military document, however, Vietnamese planners said that while the US views Vietnam as "a partner and an important link," it also wants to "spread and impose its values regarding freedom, democracy, human rights, ethnicity and religion" to gradually change the country's socialist government.

"The 2nd US Invasion Plan provides one of the most clear-eyed insights yet into Vietnam's foreign policy," Swanton wrote in his analysis. "It shows that far from viewing the US as a strategic partner, Hanoi sees Washington as an existential threat and has no intention of joining its anti-China alliance."

Vietnam's Foreign Ministry did not answer emails seeking comment on The 88 Project report or the document it highlighted.

The US State Department refused to comment directly on the "2nd US Invasion Plan," but stressed the new partnership agreement, saying it "promotes prosperity and security for the United States and Vietnam."

"A strong, prosperous, independent and resilient Vietnam benefits our two countries and helps ensure that the Indo-Pacific remains stable, secure, free and open," the State Department said.

Nguyen Khac Giang, of Singapore's ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute research center, said the plans highlighted tensions within Vietnam's political leadership, where the Communist Party's conservative, military-aligned faction has long been preoccupied with external threats to the regime.

"The military has never been too comfortable moving ahead with the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with the United States," Giang said.

Tensions within the government spilled into the public realm in June 2024, when US-linked Fulbright University was accused of fomenting a "color revolution" by an army TV report. The Foreign Ministry defended the university, which US and Vietnamese officials had highlighted when the two countries upgraded ties.

Zachary Abuza, a professor at the National War College in Washington, said the Vietnamese military still has "a very long memory" of the war with the US that ended in 1975. While Western diplomats have tended to see Hanoi as most concerned by possible Chinese aggression, the document reinforces other policy papers suggesting leaders' biggest fear is that of a "color revolution," he said.

Further undermining trust between the US and Vietnam were cuts made to the US Agency for International Development by President Donald Trump's administration, which disrupted projects such as efforts to clean up tons of soil contaminated with deadly dioxin from the military's Agent Orange

defoliant and unexploded American munitions and land mines.

"This pervasive insecurity about color revolutions is very frustrating, because I don't see why the Communist Party is so insecure," said Abuza, whose book "The Vietnam People's Army: From People's Warfare to Military Modernization" was published last year.

"They have so much to be proud of - they have lifted so many people out of poverty, the economy is humming along, they are the darling of foreign investors."

While China and Vietnam have been at odds over territorial claims in the South China Sea, the documents portray China more as a regional rival than a threat like the US.

"China doesn't pose an existential threat to the Communist Party (of Vietnam)," Abuza said. "Indeed, the Chinese know they can only push the Vietnamese so far, because they're fearful that the Communist Party can't respond forcefully to China (and will) look weak and it will cause a mass uprising."

China is Vietnam's largest two-way trade partner, while the US is its largest export market, meaning Hanoi needs to perform a balancing act in keeping up diplomatic and economic ties, while also hedging its bets. "Even some of the more progressive leaders look at the United States, saying, 'Yes, they like us, they're working with us, they are good partners for now, but given the opportunity if there were a color revolution, the Americans would support it,'" Abuza said.

Under Vietnamese leader To Lam, who became Communist Party general secretary at around the same time the document was written, the country has moved to strengthen ties with the US, especially under Trump, Giang said.

Iran president Pezeshkian seeks 'fair and equitable negotiations' with the US



DUBAI

Iran's president said Tuesday that he instructed the country's foreign minister to "pursue fair and equitable negotiations" with the United States, the first clear sign from Tehran it wants to try to negotiate as tensions remain high with Washington after the Mideast country's bloody crackdown on nationwide protests last month.

The announcement marked a major turn for reformist President Masoud Pezeshkian, who broadly had warned Iranians for weeks the turmoil in his country had gone beyond his control. It also signals that the president received support from Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei for talks that the 86-year-old cleric previously had dismissed.

Turkey had been working behind the scenes to make the talks happen there later this week as US Mideast envoy Steve Witkoff will be traveling to the region. But whether Iran and the US can reach

an agreement remains to be seen, particularly as President Donald Trump now has included Iran's nuclear program in a list of demands from Tehran in any talks. Trump ordered the bombing of three Iranian nuclear sites during the 12-day war Israel launched against Iran in June.

Writing on X, Pezeshkian said in English and Farsi that the decision came after "requests from friendly governments in the region to respond to the proposal by the President of the United States for negotiations."

"I have instructed my Minister of Foreign Affairs, provided that a suitable environment exists - one free from threats and unreasonable expectations - to pursue fair and equitable negotiations, guided by the principles of dignity, prudence, and expediency," he said.

The US has yet to acknowledge the talks will take place.

A semiofficial news agency in Iran on Monday reported - then later delet-

ed without explanation - that Pezeshkian had issued such an order to Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi, who held multiple rounds of talks with Witkoff before the 12-day war.

Witkoff is expected to meet Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and other Israeli security officials on Tuesday, according to a White House official who was not authorized to comment publicly about the talks and spoke on condition of anonymity. He will travel to Abu Dhabi, the capital of the UAE, later in the week for Russia-Ukraine talks, the official said.

"We have talks going on with Iran, we'll see how it all works out," Trump told reporters in the Oval Office on Monday. Asked what his threshold was for military action against Iran, he declined to elaborate.

"I'd like to see a deal negotiated," Trump said. "Right now, we're talking to them, we're talking to Iran, and if we could work something out, that'd be great. And if we can't, probably bad things would happen."

Endangered Species of Northeast India



The Northeast of India feels alive in a way few places do. Forests seem to breathe. Rivers cut softly through hills. Mist hangs low in the mornings, touching leaves and rooftops. Spread across Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura, this region holds a rare world of life.

Here, nature works slowly and quietly. Plants grow in shapes found nowhere else. Animals adapt to rain, height, and dense forests. Some species are very old. Some are barely seen. Many now stand on the edge of disappearance. Fast development, loss of forests, hunting, and climate change have pushed several of them into danger. The Northeast remains a biodiversity jewel, but it is also a warning sign.

Arunachal Pradesh
Arunachal Pradesh is wide, rugged, and deeply forested. Large areas still remain untouched by roads or cities. In these remote hills lives the Mishmi Takin, a powerful animal built for steep mountain life. The Red Panda survives here too, quiet and shy, hidden among bamboo and high trees. The Bengal Florican, one of the rarest birds on Earth, struggles as grasslands slowly vanish.

The state is equally rich in plant life. Orchids grow in endless varieties. Rhododendrons light up the hills during spring. Once these forests are gone, the life within them may never return. Protection here is urgent.

Assam
Assam sits at the center of wild-life conservation in the Northeast. The Indian One-horned Rhinoceros still depends on its grasslands and wetlands. The Pygmy Hog, the smallest wild pig in the world, survives in only a few safe pockets. The Golden Langur, with its bright golden coat, remains one of the region's most striking animals.

Assam's forests also shelter rare trees like Hollong

Plants like the Red

and Assam Catkin Yew. But floods, poaching, and human pressure continue to threaten this balance. Conservation in Assam is no longer optional. It is essential.

Manipur
Manipur holds life that exists nowhere else. The Sangai, known as the dancing deer, lives only in Loktak Lake. It walks carefully on floating vegetation, a skill shaped over centuries. The Hoolock Gibbon, India's only ape, swings through forest canopies. The Clouded Leopard moves silently through thick cover, rarely seen.

Plants like the Siroi Lily and Manipur Lily add beauty and identity to the land. Their future depends on how carefully humans treat wetlands and forests.

Meghalaya
Meghalaya is famous for rain, caves, and green slopes. But beyond tourism lies deep ecological value. Forests here support the Hoolock Gibbon, Asian Elephant, and Leopard. These animals need space to move, something shrinking forests cannot always offer.

The living root bridges show how humans and nature can work together. Ferns, orchids, and rare plants grow freely across the hills. Meghalaya proves that tradition and conservation can walk side by side.

Mizoram
Mizoram's hills are wrapped in bamboo forests and steep valleys. The Serow, a goat-like animal, survives on rocky slopes. Phayre's Leaf Monkey and Mrs. Hume's Pheasant also depend on these forests. Hunting and habitat loss place them at risk.

Plants like the Red

Vanda orchid and many bamboo species shape Mizoram's ecology and culture. Saving forests here means protecting both wildlife and human livelihoods.

Nagaland
Nagaland is known for festivals, songs, and strong traditions. Its

forests hide rare life forms. The Blyth's Tragopan stays hidden in dense growth. The Naga Wren-Babbler exists only in this region. The Hoolock Gibbon survives in forest patches.

Flowers like the Dzükou Lily, pitcher plants, and rhododendrons bloom across highlands. Conservation here depends strongly on community care, as people and forests have lived together for generations.

Sikkim
Sikkim may be small, but its natural wealth is immense. The Red Panda, Snow Leopard, and Himalayan Monal rely on its mountains and forests. These species are sensitive to climate change and human activity.

Orchids, rhododendrons, and the rare Blue Poppy cover its slopes. Careful tourism and strict laws have helped, but long-term protection remains vital.

Tripura
Tripura's forests shelter animals like the Clouded Leopard, Phayre's Langur, and Indian Bison. Rapid development and deforestation threaten their homes.

The state is also rich in Agarwood and medicinal plants. Protecting these resources supports biodiversity as well as traditional knowledge.

A Shared Responsibility
The endangered plants and animals of Northeast India are not just local treasures. They belong to the world. Each species lost breaks a chain shaped over millions of years.

Conservation is not only about rules and parks. It is about respect, awareness, and balance. The future of these forests depends on how gently humans choose to live with them.

Saving the Northeast's biodiversity means saving its stories, cultures, and life itself.

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“Loktak Lake Is the Living Soul of Manipur,” Says LDA Chairman M. Asnikumar Singh



OUR CORRESPONDENT
LOKTAK

Loktak Lake is not just a water body. It is memory, life, and pride of Manipur. This strong message came from M. Asnikumar Singh, Chairman of the Loktak Development Authority (LDA), as he spoke at length on the value of the lake and its place in the state's history and daily life.

Calling Loktak Lake the treasurer of Manipur civilisation, Singh said the lake has shaped the social and cultural journey of the people for generations. He explained that many settlements grew along its banks and still depend on it for fishing, farming, and small trade. The lake, he said, feeds families, supports livelihoods, and keeps age old traditions alive. “To protect Loktak is to protect Manipur itself,” he said.

Singh spoke about how the lake is deeply linked to the identity of the state. Festivals, folklore, food habits, and local customs all carry the mark of Loktak. He added that the lake has always acted as a natural lifeline, giving water, food, and shelter to both people and wildlife.

During the interaction, the LDA chairman also made special arrangements for members of the NEIR team to take a guided tour of the lake. He said such visits help people see Loktak beyond pictures and reports. “When you see it up close, you understand both its beauty and its pain,” he said, stressing the need for awareness, study, and responsible tourism.

Loktak Lake is the largest freshwater lake in the Northeast and is known across the world for its floating phumdis, thick mats of vegetation that drift with the water. Within the lake lies Keibul

Lamjao National Park, the only floating national park on earth. It is the last natural home of the rare Sangai deer, often called the dancing deer of Manipur. Singh said this makes Loktak globally important, not just locally valuable.

He also spoke about the lake's role in nature. Loktak helps control floods, supports a wide range of fish species, and provides shelter to thousands of migratory birds each year. It also helps regulate the local climate. “If Loktak survives, many lives survive with it,” Singh remarked, adding that development must never come at the cost of destruction.

The programme saw the presence of several dignitaries. KRC Foundation's managing trustee and CEO Biswadeep Gupta attended the event along with other guests and officials.

They shared their views on conservation, community involvement, and the need for long term planning to save the lake. Singh also praised the KRC Foundation for taking the initiative to organise the North East Integration Rally. The Chairman had hosted a reception to the visiting team at Sendra in Loktak and received them with a warm welcome. He said such efforts play a key role in spreading awareness and bringing people together for a common cause. He added that protecting Loktak Lake needs support from the government, civil society, and local communities alike.

The event ended with a clear call to treat Loktak Lake not just as a resource to use, but as a heritage to protect. In his closing words, Singh said Loktak is not only the past of Manipur. It is also its future, and saving it is a shared responsibility.



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DEC'24-JAN'25
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10-12 JAN
E-Sports
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Barak Festival
 Band Night | 10 JAN
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Painting Carnival
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