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PERSPECTIVE
Wealth exposes fake friends faster than gossip.

Congress pledges to strengthen education, healthcare across Assam: Gaurav Gogoi

GUWAHATI

Assam Congress president Gaurav Gogoi on Sunday pledged sweeping enhancements to education and healthcare services across the state if his party forms the next government, as campaigning intensifies ahead of the upcoming Assembly elections.

Addressing supporters and residents in Dibrugarh district during the ongoing Samay Paribartanar Yatra, Gogoi emphasised that his party's governance would prioritise access to quality public services - particularly for women and communities in tea garden areas.

"Our aim is to create a better environment for education and healthcare in every village, including the tea garden areas," he said, outlining a vision that promises expanded facilities and direct delivery of welfare schemes without political conditions.

Gogoi also highlighted the Congress' focus on women's empowerment, saying the party intends to support small-scale enterprises and ensure that women receive welfare benefits without being required to attend party meetings - a remark that appeared to allude to recent political debates over scheme delivery.

"As Congress comes to power, services in education and healthcare will be significantly upgraded and made more accessible for all residents of Assam," he added.

The Assembly polls for the 126-member legislature are scheduled for later this month and in April, with major parties stepping up campaigns across the region.

WHO SAID WHAT



Cash for transfers scam. Cash for jobs scam. Cash for contracts scam. Sand mining scam. TASMAL scam. A looting competition is underway between DMK ministers.

~ Narendra Modi, PM

Manipur records 20% jump in gun licences after 2023 ethnic violence

IMPHAL

The number of active gun licences in Manipur has witnessed a sharp rise since ethnic violence erupted in May 2023, with official figures indicating a significant uptick in applications and approvals over the past two-and-a-half years. Data available with the state authorities show that active firearm licences stood at 26,836 in December 2016. This number rose to 35,117 by July 2023 and has now climbed to 42,344 as of February 2026.

Between July 2023 and February 2026 alone, the number of registered licence holders increased by 20.58 per cent. Officials attribute the surge largely to the fallout of the ethnic conflict that broke out on May 3, 2023, and continues to cast a long shadow over the state's security landscape.

The violence, which affected several districts across Manipur, has claimed more than 260 lives and displaced over 60,000 people, triggering deep insecurity among communities and prompting a spike in demand for licensed firearms.

According to officials, approximately 7,227 new gun licences were issued across various districts following the outbreak of violence. The trend reflects a broader pattern since the current government assumed office in March 2017.

Since the Bharatiya Janata Party

(BJP)-led government came to power in the state in 2017, around 15,000 firearm licences have been granted. While applications for gun licences were already on a gradual rise in the years preceding the unrest, the scale and pace of issuance accelerated sharply after May 2023.

Authorities said the spike was particularly visible during the peak of the clashes.

"Under normal circumstances, we receive not more than 50 applications a month. During the height of the violence, the number rose to at least 300 applications per day," a senior official involved in the licensing process said.

The surge put considerable administrative pressure on district authorities responsible for background verification, threat assessment and compliance checks under the Arms Act.

Before the violence, several residents from valley districts were reportedly applying for gun licences in hill districts such as Senapati, Kangpokpi and Tengnoupal.

Officials indicated that applicants from the valley sometimes anticipated potential rejection during police verification in their home districts and therefore sought to file applications in hill districts where they believed scrutiny might differ.

However, following the outbreak of violence and the tightening of admin-



istrative oversight, this pattern has largely changed. Applicants from valley areas have since been submitting applications within their respective districts, in line with stricter verification norms introduced after the unrest.

Authorities said the government has strengthened district-level scrutiny mechanisms to ensure that applications are processed in accordance with domicile and jurisdictional requirements.

Under the Arms Act, firearm licence holders are required to renew their permits every two years. Failure to do so renders the weapon illegal, exposing the holder to prosecution.

Officials said that with the rise in the number of licence holders, the government has stepped up efforts to monitor renewals and identify cases of misuse or non-compliance. Notices have been issued to licence holders to ensure timely

KOHIMA

Ajay Kumar Bhalla on Monday reiterated the Nagaland government's commitment to securing an early and honourable resolution of the long-pending Naga political issue, while also highlighting the recent agreement paving the way for the creation of the Frontier Nagaland Territorial Authority (FNNTA).

Delivering his maiden address since assuming office in August 2025 during the Eighth Session of the Fourteenth Nagaland Legislative Assembly at the NLA Hall in Kohima, the Governor outlined the state government's policy priorities, developmental initiatives and ongoing efforts to foster peace and inclusive growth. Extending greetings to members at the commencement of the session, Bhalla expressed confidence that the House would engage in meaningful and constructive deliberations while upholding democratic values. He noted that the present government is nearing the completion of three years in office and has endeavoured to honour the mandate and trust reposed in it by the people of the state.

Placing special emphasis on the Naga political issue, the Governor said the government remains steadfast in its pursuit of a peaceful and negotiated settlement through dialogue and co-operation.

He informed the House that a Political Affairs Committee (PAC) has been constituted, compris-



ing ministers, elected representatives from all tribes, political parties and Members of Parliament from Nagaland. The committee, he said, has also formed a sub-committee to streamline and intensify efforts aimed at facilitating dialogue.

Bhalla further disclosed that the Chief Minister, along with Cabinet colleagues, recently met Union Home Minister Amit Shah in New Delhi. During the meeting, they urged the Centre to appoint an interlocutor at the political or ministerial level to expedite the ongoing talks and move towards an early and honourable solution.

The Governor underscored that sustained engagement and cooperation between the state and the Centre remain crucial to resolving the decades-old issue and ensuring lasting peace and stability in Nagaland.

Highlighting what he described as a significant milestone, Bhalla said that on February 5, 2026, the Government of Nagaland signed a Memorandum of Agreement with the Government of India and the Eastern Nagaland Peoples' Organisation (ENPO) for the establishment of the Frontier Nagaland Territorial Authority within the state.

He termed the agreement a landmark step towards ensuring equitable and inclusive development in Eastern Nagaland, a region that has long articulated demands for greater administrative and developmental focus. The Governor assured the House that the state government would extend full cooperation in advancing progress across all sections of society and ensuring that the objectives of the agreement are realised in letter and spirit. He also conveyed gratitude to the

Centre for its support and guidance in finalising the pact. Bhalla informed members that the government is working towards constituting an Interim Council for the FNNTA in consultation with ENPO and the tribal hohos of Eastern Nagaland. He added that a special legislation for the formal establishment of the authority will be enacted in consultation with the Ministry of Home Affairs, as stipulated in the agreement.

In his address, the Governor also drew attention to the upcoming Census exercise. He stated that India's decennial Census, formally notified on June 16, 2025, will be conducted in two phases, with the first phase in Nagaland scheduled from July 1 to July 30, 2026. According to the Governor, the self-enumeration option will be available from June 16 to June 30, 2026, followed by the population enumeration phase in February 2027. Urging all legislators to extend full cooperation, Bhalla emphasised the importance of ensuring the smooth and successful conduct of the Census in the state, noting that accurate data is essential for effective planning, resource allocation and policy formulation.

As the Assembly session commenced, the Governor's address set the tone for discussions centred on peace, institutional development and administrative preparedness, signalling the government's intent to balance political dialogue with governance and developmental priorities.

Purabi Dairy Expands to Barak Valley with Commissioning of 20,000 LPD Silchar Plant



GUWAHATI

Organised cooperative dairying formally entered Assam's Barak Valley on Sunday with the inauguration of a renovated milk processing plant at Gungo in Silchar, marking a significant step in strengthening the state's dairy infrastructure.

The facility, which had remained defunct for several years under the Animal Husbandry and Veterinary Department (AHVD), has been refurbished and made operational by North East Dairy and Foods Limited (NEDFL), a joint venture between the Assam government and the National Dairy Development Board (NDDB). The revival of the plant was undertaken under the Assam Dairy Development Plan.

With an upgraded processing capacity of 20,000 litres per day (LPD), the plant is expected to provide a major boost to milk procurement, processing and marketing in the Barak Valley re-

gion. Renovation work, completed in under 10 months, was carried out by IDMC Limited, a wholly owned subsidiary of NDDB.

Following the commissioning of the facility, consumers in Silchar and adjoining areas will have access to hygienically packed fresh pouch milk under the Purabi brand. As part of its initial offerings, the company will introduce 'Purabi Plus' milk in 250 ml and 500 ml pouches, priced at Rs 18 and Rs 35 respectively.

Officials said the milk will contain 4.5 per cent fat and 8.5 per cent solids-not-fat (SNF), aligning with quality standards aimed at ensuring consistency and nutrition. In addition to pouch milk, the plant will produce a range of dairy products including sweet curd, plain curd, lassi, paneer, ghee, ice cream and flavoured milk.

The expansion into Barak Valley is expected to reduce dependence on loose milk and ultra-high temperature (UHT) milk products, which have traditionally dominated the local market. Authorities emphasised that proper refrigeration and cold chain management will be critical to maintaining the freshness and quality of pouch milk.

According to officials, the plant's operationalisation will create a structured dairy ecosystem in the region by establishing stable procurement channels for local farmers. The initiative aims to ensure assured market access and fair pricing for milk producers, thereby strengthening rural livelihoods. The move aligns with the Assam government's broader target of achieving 10 lakh litres of milk processing per day across the state. By integrating Barak Valley into the cooperative dairy network, authorities hope to enhance milk collection, processing efficiency and supply chain reliability.

UPPL Kicks Off 2026 Campaign in Kokrajhar, Pramod Boro Signals Solo Fight in BTC Seats

KOKRAJHAR

The United People's Party Liberal (UPPL) on Monday formally launched its campaign for the 2026 Assam Assembly elections with a massive show of strength in Dotma, as party president Pramod Boro declared the outfit ready to contest independently in all Assembly constituencies under the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) area.

The pre-poll mobilisation, described by party leaders as one of the largest grassroots demonstrations since the recent BTC elections, took place in the No. 2 Dotma Tribal Assembly constituency in Kokrajhar district. Thousands of party workers, supporters and leaders participated in a padayatra and public meeting, projecting UPPL's vision for a peaceful and harmonious Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR).

The padayatra began at Harimu Fouthar in Dotma and passed through Thulungapuri before culminating in North Dotma, drawing enthusiastic participation along the route. The rally marked a renewed push by the party to consolidate its base in the BTC region after losing power in the council elections.

Despite the setback, UPPL leaders maintained that the morale within the party remains high. The Dotma mobilisation, they said, signals the party's determination to reclaim political ground in the 2026 Assembly polls.

Addressing the media on the sidelines of the rally, Boro - a former BTC Chief - asserted that the party is fully prepared to contest the forthcoming elections on its own in all 15 Assembly constituencies under the BTC jurisdiction.

"Overall, the UPPL is ready for the Assembly elections," he said, adding that a decision on whether the party will continue within the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) would be discussed after March 3.

Assam in touch with Ministry of External Affairs over residents in West Asia; no data yet available



GUWAHATI

The Assam government is in constant communication with the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) to obtain details about residents from the state who may be living or stranded in conflict-hit parts of West Asia, a senior official said on Sunday.

The official, requesting anonymity, stated that the state government currently does not have consolidated data on the number of people from Assam residing in the region.

"We are constantly in contact with the MEA and are trying to gather information on people from Assam in West Asia. As of now, we are still in the process of compiling the data. We will share more information as and when we have it," the officer said.

People from Assam are employed in various sectors across West Asia, including aviation, hospitality and business establishments. However, no official

figures are immediately available on the number of individuals from the state working or staying in the region.

The developments come amid escalating tensions in the Middle East following reports that the United States and Israel launched a major attack on Iran on Saturday. Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei was reportedly killed early Sunday, further intensifying uncertainty across the region.

In light of widespread flight cancellations and travel disruptions, the MEA on Sunday issued an advisory for foreign nationals currently in India whose travel plans have been affected by the situation in West Asia.

"All foreign nationals in India, who have had to change their travel plans due to the ongoing developments in the West Asia region and need assistance with extension of their visa or to regularise their stay, are requested to contact the nearest Foreigners Regional Registration Office," the ministry said in its statement.

The advisory urged those impacted to approach their nearest FRRO for visa extensions or to regularise their stay in India.

Officials in Dispur said they are closely monitoring the situation and will coordinate with central authorities should evacuation or other assistance be required for residents from Assam.

Further updates are expected once the MEA compiles state-wise data on Indian nationals in the affected areas.

North East Integration Rally
Ministry of Culture, Government of India

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TOMORROW'S MONEY, TODAY'S INFRA

For decades, infrastructure in India has followed a familiar cycle. The government builds an asset—a highway, a transmission line or a port terminal. The asset stabilises, begins generating steady revenue and then quietly recedes into the background of the public balance sheet. Its economic value remains locked in long-term cash flows even as new infrastructure needs continue to emerge.

The launch of the National Monetisation Pipeline 2.0 signals a shift in this cycle. Instead of allowing mature assets to passively yield incremental revenue, the government is choosing to unlock their value upfront and redeploy it into the next generation of infrastructure. This is not a departure from public ownership; it is a refinement of public capital management.

At a time when global capital is cautious and fiscal prudence is imperative, NMP 2.0 represents a calibrated approach. Beyond the headline numbers and sectoral targets, it delivers four pivotal gains: capital recycling, logistics cost reduction, GDP multiplier and infrastructure reliability.

At its core, NMP 2.0 recognises that infrastructure assets, once operational, can generate steady cash flows over long periods. Under traditional financing models, these future cash flows contribute little to immediate needs. Asset monetisation converts a portion of these into upfront capital without transferring ownership, thereby unlocking liquidity that can be redeployed into new infrastructure creation. This mechanism has several fiscal implications.

Improving government liquidity: Instead of waiting years for incremental revenue accrual through user fees or budgetary allocations, the government can accelerate its infrastructure agenda with the upfront proceeds from monetisation. This is particularly valuable when growth momentum needs reinforcement and public investment remains a dominant driver of economic activity.

Reducing borrowing pressure: Traditionally, large-scale infrastructure development has depended on public borrowing. Excessive reliance on debt can elevate debt-servicing costs and constrain other priorities including health, education and welfare. In the NMP model, the government reduces dependence on additional borrowings. This not only lowers interest expense over time but also helps maintain a healthier debt-to-GDP trajectory.

Strengthening public balance sheet: Capital locked in mature assets often has lower marginal productivity relative to new, high-multiplier investments. By recycling this capital, India enhances the productivity of its public balance sheet—enabling the same asset base to generate multiple growth cycles. This is not asset dilution; it is capital optimisation. Optimising public capital in this way improves the overall quality of public expenditure and enhances government capacity to deliver long-term development outcomes.

Importantly, monetisation also creates a structured pipeline of investable assets that can attract long-term institutional capital—pension funds, insurance companies and sovereign investors. This deepens India's infrastructure capital markets, diversifies sources of financing and reduces systemic risk associated with concentrated banking exposure.

For India, fiscal sustainability is arguably the most significant gain from NMP 2.0. It reinforces macroeconomic credibility, preserves budgetary flexibility and allows public investment to expand without compromising financial stability.

Most published accounts within NMP 2.0 miss out on the structural impact of monetisation on logistics efficiency—a factor that can materially lower the cost of doing business in India. Reducing logistics costs has been a long-standing objective and a stated priority of the government. High logistics costs have historically acted as a drag on competitiveness, contributing to higher inventory costs, longer lead times and limited time-to-market advantages.

By introducing performance-linked private participation into operational infrastructure assets, NMP 2.0 creates incentives for better utilisation, improved maintenance standards and operational efficiency. Private operators compensated through transparent concession arrangements have commercial incentives to reduce bottlenecks, enhance throughput and shorten transit times. For example, quicker turnaround at ports or higher average speeds on monetised highways directly reduce freight lead times and operating expenses.

For industry, these gains are immediate and tangible: lower logistics costs result in improved margins, reduced working capital cycles, and enhanced global competitiveness. For smaller businesses, which often face the highest logistics friction, improved connectivity expands market reach. For exporters, reliable logistics is a source of competitive differentiation. And for integrated supply chains—electronics, automotive, pharmaceuticals and agriculture—logistics efficiency is not a temporary stimulus; it is a structural reform that permanently strengthens cost competitiveness.

It is widely acknowledged in economic literature that infrastructure investment carries one of the highest multipliers in the economy. Construction activity generates employment across skill levels, stimulates demand in core sectors such as steel, cement and machinery, and catalyses private investment across manufacturing and services. By unlocking resources for new projects, NMP 2.0 ensures that infrastructure creation continues at scale. This sustained activity supports growth across industrial corridors, logistics hubs and urban centres. The effects are not merely additive; they are multiplicative. Improved connectivity enhances productivity, lowers transaction costs and raises India's potential output over time. Published articles have often cited estimates suggesting that NMP 2.0 could contribute tens of lakh crore rupees to GDP over the next decade. While the precise numbers may vary across models, the underlying economic logic is consistent: infrastructure expansion, financed in a fiscally prudent manner, underpins higher growth. In an environment where global supply chains are diversifying, infrastructure quality will increasingly influence investment location decisions. Countries that offer reliable, cost-competitive infrastructure will attract long-term capital. NMP 2.0, by sustaining infrastructure momentum, enhances India's position in this global competition for investment.

Infrastructure expansion must be accompanied by reliability. Predictable travel times, efficient cargo handling, and consistent utility services are essential for industrial planning and long-term investment decisions. Monetisation frameworks typically embed performance standards and maintenance obligations that go beyond one-time construction.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

"I don't know why we are here, but I'm pretty sure that it is not in order to enjoy ourselves." - Ludwig Wittgenstein

SUPREME COURT, ECI AND WEST BENGAL GOVT TRYING TO RESTORE TRUST



DR. GYAN PATHAK

There has been overall trust deficit for quite some time in the matter of elections in India, and it has been worsening with passage of every day of the eve of the next round of state elections due in April-May. It is despite the fact that Supreme Court of India has recognized the "trust deficit" in case of the conduct of SIR in West Bengal, though the diagnosis is just partial, because it said that there was a trust deficit between the government of West Bengal and the Election Commission of India (ECI). Actual position is that the trust deficit also included the common people, that has been indirectly admitted by the ECI when it decided to deploy large number of central security forces in West Bengal from March 1 as "a confidence-building measure".

It all means trust of the people has been shaken, which one can clearly see on the faces of electorate in all the five states/UT going to polls. It is a matter of grave concerns that we need to understand. The entire country's constitutional bodies—the ECI, the Union Government, the State Governments, and even the Supreme Court of India—have clearly fallen into the "trust deficit" vis-à-vis the common people, leave aside the political parties and their conduct. However, going into the trust deficit issue, let us have a brief account of what happened until now.

As of February 24, that is only four days ahead of scheduled publication of the final revised electoral roll under Special Intensive Revision (SIR) on February 28, despite every effort by the Supreme Court, there is only 250 officers, and 50 lakh claims are to be heard in West Bengal. Supreme Court has ordered today the ECI to publish the West Bengal voters list on February 28.

Earlier, the Supreme Court of India had ordered to deploy judicial officers to complete the verification of objections and claims process, be-

The Bench led by Chief Justice of India has ordered ECI to go to the Chief Justice of Calcutta High Court, for deployment of judicial officers, both former and working, to complete the process. About 250 judicial officers have been engaged in the state and have started their work from February 23. Today, today it was brought to notice of the bench that there are only 250 officers, and 50 lakh claims to be heard. The Supreme Court then ordered Calcutta Chief Justice to additionally deploy civil judges for SIR process, as well as if necessary, can request his counterparts in Odisha and Jharkhand to provide serving or retired judicial officers.

It is therefore anybody's guess that the final voter list to be published on February 28 would be full of errors, given the lack of time, human resource to complete the task. The only saving grace is that the ECI has been allowed by the court that it can continue the process beyond February 28 for supplementary voter lists. But that are the technicalities only. It can't erase the trust deficit, for numerous reasons. Here are few of them, for example.

ECI has been accused of hand in glove with the PM Narendra Modi led government in conducting SIR, which the opposition says the second phase of "manipulation of voter list" through addition of illegal voters from outside states and deletion of voters including minorities and opposition support base. They alleged that in the first phase of voter list manipulation, Modi government with the help of Election Commission, added thousands of voters from outside states—especially in Haryana and Maharashtra elections, and thereafter also in Delhi. Leaders of Opposition Rahul Gandhi had publicly demonstrated the voter list manipulation as examples from Karnataka and Haryana.

Given the scenario there has been total trust deficit among common people and the opposition po-

first phase of SIR conducted in Bihar. SIR framework was contested, but Supreme Court of India failed to deliver judgement in time, and allowed election. Supreme Court has reserved the judgement, and hearing other petitions on SIR process, that facilitated the very contested SIR framework. When you allow a contested framework to go on without deciding on its validity, and votes are cast under the contested framework, and results were out, it can't be undone. The purpose of justice is thus not served in the eyes of the common people, and the Supreme Court itself is now under "trust deficit" of the people, though it may be technically or legally right.

Why Supreme Court order deployment of judicial officers? People believe that the Bench has concluded that both the government of West Bengal and the ECI have erred on various counts and the very SIR was needed to be conducted under Judicial supervision. Superficially it may look a correct approach, but there are some disturbing questions.

If the election process is constitutionally performed under the ECI as neutral umpire, whose neutrality is even under doubt of the Supreme Court that ordered large number of judges from lower judiciary to be deployed, whose decisions are to be deemed as the decision of the Bench, why the Bench can't enforce the ECI to become neutral? Why Supreme Court allow the same officials who are suspected not to be neutral umpire to continue as usual? Is supervising the work of a tainted umpire will make the umpires neutral? ECI has been resorting to blame game, and also functioning in a way that was found by the Supreme Court erroneous on several counts. People see the helplessness of the Supreme Court before the wish of the Modi government and the ECI, in continuing with the contested framework, under the indecision of the Supreme Court itself. Supreme Court is just

that even the Supreme Court can't uncast, meaning thereby the damage to the democracy can't be reversed.

Supreme Court itself added further trust deficit, when one petition was humiliated for raising the issue of violation of Model Code of Conduct in the Bihar election that was held under the contested framework. The petitioner had alleged distribution of freebies to voters during the MCC in operation under a welfare programme launched by PM Narendra Modi and implemented by its ally JD(U) CM Nitish Kumar. Supreme Court may be right in legal technicality, but trust does not depend on it. Trust deficit increased because Supreme Court seen protecting the

DIGITAL WAR OF WORDS

Losar is a festival that brings everyone together on one platform, celebrating with enthusiasm and joy, while spreading love, harmony and unity among all. It reminds us of our rich traditions, strengthens our bonds and fills our hearts with hope and positivity for the year ahead. Losar Tashi Delek!

~ Pema Khandu, CM, Arunachal Pradesh



ruling NDA, despite clear violation of MCC. In fact Supreme Court did not go into the merit of the allegation.

Trust Deficit further aggravated when same bench led by CJI criticized Tamil Nadu's opposition ruled government for announcing freebies in respect of electricity even though MCC is not in operation. People see the Supreme Courts conduct as double standard, when BJP-NDA government gives freebies and someone complains, the complainant is humiliated, which is indirect protection of BJP-NDA led government, and when opposition led state government gives freebies much before the election is announced and there is no MCC in operation, that state government is humiliated.

Supreme Court must take the entire issue of SIR and freebies in such a manner that it should inspire trust in the people towards judiciary as the custodian of justice.

Supreme Court must take action and decision at right time, and in right manner. It has to exert much more than it has been doing until now in the matter of free and fair election and the democratic process, which only can restore the trust of the people on constitutional bodies like ECI, governments, and even the Judiciary.



cause of the "trust deficit" between the state government and the ECI.

litical parties towards the ECI. This trust deficit even escalated in the

seen as facilitator of the SIR, without giving decision, and votes were cast

Rival yatras gather momentum across Assam as BJP pitches governance, Congress calls for 'Somoy Poriborton'

GUWAHATI/JORHAT

With the Assembly elections approaching, the political temperature in Assam rose sharply on Sunday as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee (APCC) intensified their outreach through parallel statewide yatras aimed at consolidating voter support.

The BJP continued the second day of its "Jana Aashirwad Yatra," beginning from Jagiroad and proceeding through Morigaon, Raha and Nagaon, while the Congress pressed ahead with its "Somoy Poriborton Yatra," positioning it as a campaign for political transformation.

Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, speaking to reporters during the BJP yatra, expressed satisfaction over what he described as an overwhelming public response.



"It is not possible for a man of my age to stand continuously for 14 hours. Yesterday night even I was wondering about its possibility. But I feel people forget tiredness when they see people's love and support," Sarma said.

Referring to the turnout in Jagiroad, he remarked that such visuals had rarely

been witnessed in the state. "I believe people have given the election results early. I am satisfied that people are acknowledging what we have done in the last five years, and I hope they will give us a very strong mandate this time," he added.

Responding to queries regarding the

presence of bulldozers during the yatra, Sarma said he was receiving varied feedback from the public - ranging from employment generation and land rights to appreciation for action against alleged illegal encroachments.

"This is a message that this time 1.5 bighas of land was evicted; next time 5 lakh bighas will be evicted. No illegal Bangladesh infiltrators will be able to live peacefully in Assam," he said.

At the time of filing this report, the BJP's yatra had reached Raha, with party leaders continuing to address roadside gatherings and public meetings.

On the other side, APCC president Gaurav Gogoi led the Congress campaign into Tingkhong in Dibrugarh district. During the visit, Gogoi offered prayers at Raidongia Bor Namghar and interacted with local residents as part of the "Somoy Poriborton Yatra."

On alliance negotiations, Gogoi confirmed that the Congress had extended a proposal to the Rajgor Dal and was awaiting a response. However, speculation that certain Congress strongholds might be ceded to alliance partners triggered unrest among sections of party workers.

Agitated workers from Khuwang and Sissiborgaon reportedly gheraoed Gogoi in Dibrugarh, voicing concerns that their constituencies could be handed over to allies. They asserted that the party should retain both seats.

Leader of Opposition Debabrata Saikia defended the Congress campaign and criticised the BJP-led government's performance. He alleged that several key promises remained unfulfilled, including Scheduled Tribe (ST) status for six communities, wage hikes for tea garden workers and the construction of a super express highway over the Brah-

maputra. "People want transformation and change as they have been given false promises," Saikia said.

Organisational push intensifies

Alongside public rallies, the Congress convened extended executive meetings of District Congress Committees (DCCs) across the state and held organisational discussions with booth- and mandal-level workers. As part of its poll preparedness drive, the party distributed financial assistance through the presidents of 31,486 booth committees across 35 districts and 2,732 mandals.

Sunday's rival yatras underscored the intensifying political contest in Assam, with both parties sharpening their narratives around governance, development, alliance arithmetic and emotive issues as they prepare for a high-stakes electoral battle.

Nagaland rolls out HPV vaccination drive against cervical cancer

DIMPUR

Nagaland formally launched the national human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccination programme aimed at preventing cervical cancer, with Chief Minister Neiphiu Rio carrying out the state-level virtual inauguration at the Naga Hospital Authority Kohima (NHAK). The nationwide rollout was virtually led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, marking a major public health intervention to reduce the burden of cervical cancer across the country.

Addressing the launch programme, Anoop Khinchi, Commissioner & Secretary, Health and Family Welfare, underscored the importance of HPV vaccination in safeguarding young girls against cervical cancer.

He stated that approximately 90.79 per cent of cervical cancer cases are caused by persistent infection of the genital tract by high-risk types of the human papillomavirus (HPV).

While the disease typically affects women in their prime years, he stressed that it is entirely preventable through timely vaccination. "Cervical cancer is 100 per cent preventable with vaccination," Khinchi said, urging families to take advantage of the government initiative. The campaign aims to vaccinate all eligible girls aged 14 years with a single dose of the Gardasil-4 vaccine. The vaccine will be administered free of cost at all government health facilities across the state. Officials said the vaccination drive will be conducted over a three-month period. During this time, the HPV vaccine will be available daily at routine immunisation sessions to ensure maximum coverage. Health authorities encouraged parents and guardians to cooperate with health workers and ensure that eligible beneficiaries receive the vaccine within the campaign timeline. The rollout in Nagaland is part of a broader national strategy to strengthen preventive healthcare and reduce cancer-related mortality among women. By targeting adolescents before exposure to the virus, the programme seeks to significantly lower future incidence rates of cervical cancer.

Rise in respiratory cases reported at GMCH amid dust pollution in Guwahati

GUWAHATI

A significant number of residents in Guwahati are currently reporting symptoms of cough and fever, with doctors attributing the spike largely to severe dust pollution compounded by a prolonged dry spell.

According to physicians at Gauhati Medical College and Hospital (GMCH), outpatient departments have seen a noticeable rise in patients suffering from respiratory ailments over the past few weeks.

Dr MP Das, head of the Medicine department at GMCH, said the number of patients presenting with cough and cold has increased substantially. While seasonal fluctuations in respiratory illnesses are common during this time of year, she noted that the situation has worsened in 2026 due to the absence of rainfall.

"This is normal in this season, but this year the diseases have aggravated because of the lack of rainfall. If it rains, the dust particles will settle on the ground and the spread of diseases will also come down," she said.

Doctors pointed out that suspended

dust particles in the air are triggering and aggravating respiratory tract infections. The persistent dry conditions have allowed particulate matter to remain airborne for longer periods, increasing exposure levels.

"Due to severe dust pollution, most people are suffering from respiratory tract infections. Anyone who comes in close contact with an infected person also gets infected," Dr Das said.

Hospital sources revealed that several doctors and healthcare workers at GMCH have also fallen ill, either due to prolonged exposure to polluted air or through close contact with infected patients.

Patients are presenting with a mix of symptoms, including persistent cough, sore throat and fever. Doctors said many of the cases are viral in nature and self-limiting, typically subsiding within a few days with adequate rest and symptomatic treatment.

However, bacterial infections are also being reported and may take longer to resolve. In such cases, appropriate medical consultation and treatment are essential.

CAG flags diversion of SDRF funds to illegal mining victims in Meghalaya

SHILLONG

The Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) has flagged the alleged diversion of ₹1.07 crore from the State Disaster Response Fund (SDRF) by Meghalaya's Revenue and Disaster Management Department to compensate victims of illegal coal mining, terming it a violation of prescribed guidelines.

The findings are part of the CAG's 2023 audit report, tabled in the Meghalaya Assembly on February 27, which scrutinised expenditure patterns under the SDRF.

According to the report, payments were made in July 2019 to victims of accidents linked to coal mining activities that had been declared illegal.

An amount of ₹16.50 lakh was disbursed to the families of 14 deceased persons and five

injured individuals at Mengkultim in Rongsa Awe village in South Garo Hills. In a separate case, ₹90 lakh was paid to 18 families of those killed at the Ksan coal mines in East Jaintia Hills, with each family receiving ₹5 lakh.

Coal mining in Meghalaya has been banned by the National Green Tribunal (NGT) since April 17, 2014.

"Extending relief to 37 individuals involved in illegal activities stands in stark contradiction to the SDRF guidelines," the CAG observed in its report.

The Revenue and Disaster Management Department defended the payouts, stating that the deaths and injuries were caused by flooding triggered by excessive rainfall. It further said that ex-post approval from the State Executive Committee (SEC) would be sought to regularise the ex-

penditure.

However, the audit authority rejected this explanation. "The State Executive Committee (SEC) is not mandated to regularise an expenditure incurred for supporting any activity declared illegal by NGT," the CAG stated.

Sources indicated that the auditor may also examine compensation announced earlier this year for families affected by another illegal mining incident at Mynsgat-Thangsko on February 5.

Beyond the mining-related payouts, the report pointed to broader lapses in the utilisation of SDRF funds. The CAG noted that ₹8.10 crore was spent on events not notified under SDRF norms, including heavy rain, strong winds, thunder squalls and hailstorms. As per guidelines, SDRF assistance is restricted to specific notified natural

calamities such as cyclones, floods, earthquakes and landslides.

The audit also found significant delays in the release of compensation, with payments in several cases made nine to twelve months after the incidents. In 15 instances, there were discrepancies between the sanction orders and the classification of disasters under which relief was granted.

While the department has reportedly assured corrective steps, including rectifying nomenclature issues in coordination with deputy commissioners, the CAG criticised the overall lack of due diligence.

"The audit findings indicate that the Department did not conduct a thorough examination to assess the admissibility and adherence to established guidelines prior to approving the relief funds," the report said.

No confirmed extinction of native leech species in Assam despite urbanisation, deforestation

GUWAHATI

Amid rapid urbanisation, deforestation and agricultural expansion across Assam, scientists have found no confirmed extinction or major loss of native leech species in the state, according to recent biodiversity assessments.

Assam forms part of the ecologically rich Indo-Burma biodiversity hotspot, a region known for high species diversity and endemism. While habitat pressures have intensified over the past decade, researchers say available data does not indicate the disappearance of any native Hirudinea species so far.

A comprehensive statewide survey conducted in 2020 documented both aquatic and terrestrial leeches across multiple districts. Nearly 2,000 specimens were collected during fieldwork, suggesting a stable presence in suitable habitats, though abundance varied depending on sea-

son and locality.

Researchers recorded five aquatic species alongside commonly encountered land leeches such as Haemadipsa sylvestris, which thrives in moist forest belts. The surveys covered wetlands, paddy fields, forest streams and semi-evergreen forests - ecosystems that continue to support leech populations.

Earlier molecular studies carried out in Northeast India around 2018 further expanded the known inventory of the region's leech fauna. Scientists identified genera including Hirudinaria, Haemadipsa and Whitmania, as well as the relatively less-documented Myxobdella amandalea in specific tracts. These findings added to biodiversity records rather than signalling any decline or local extinction.

Importantly, no major post-2020 biodiversity assessments have reported red-listing or species loss

among Assam's leech fauna. In broader conservation evaluations across Northeast India, leeches are rarely categorised as threatened. Instead, ecologists often regard them as bio-indicators of freshwater quality and forest ecosystem health.

However, experts caution against complacency.

Expanding urban settlements, wetland reclamation, forest fragmentation and the spread of invasive plant species are steadily altering natural ecosystems. Such changes may not immediately eliminate species but could gradually affect invertebrate communities, including leeches, by disrupting breeding habitats and moisture regimes.

"Absence of confirmed extinction does not mean absence of risk," a researcher associated with the survey noted, adding that habitat degradation could produce subtle population shifts that remain undetected

without systematic monitoring.

Ethnobotanical studies have also observed that changing landscapes may erode traditional rural knowledge systems once used to manage leech infestations in agricultural and forested areas.

Field observations indicate that leech encounters remain common in many rural and forest zones of Assam, affecting both humans and livestock - a sign of continued resilience in several pockets. Yet ecologists stress the need for updated, targeted surveys employing modern techniques such as DNA barcoding to detect cryptic species and assess genetic diversity.

For now, Assam's leeches - often overlooked but ecologically significant - continue to inhabit wetlands, forest streams and moist undergrowth, even as the landscapes around them undergo rapid transformation.

No final NDA seat-sharing decision yet, circulated figures inaccurate: Hagrama Mohilary

KOKRAJHAR

Hagrama Mohilary, chief of the Bodoland People's Front (BPF) and head of the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC), on Sunday dismissed speculation over purported "final" seat-sharing numbers within the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), stating that discussions among alliance partners were still ongoing.

Addressing reporters on the sidelines of a massive rally organised by the BPF at Janagaon Field in Titaguri, Kokrajhar, Mohilary clarified that no conclusive agreement had been reached regarding the distribution of seats for the 2026 Assam Legislative Assembly elections.

"There are multiple parties in the NDA alliance - the BJP, AGP, UPPL and others. The number of seats for each party has not been finalised yet," he said, terming the figures currently circulating in



the public domain as inaccurate. "The information being circulated is not correct. The decision on seat sharing has not been finalised."

Mohilary underscored that while the BPF is a constituent of the NDA, the alliance is led by the BJP, similar to how the Congress leads the UPA.

"The BJP leads the NDA, just as the Congress leads the UPA. We can only speak about BPF's seat-sharing preparations. We will discuss seats based on our party's capacity," he added.

On the possibility of leaders from the United People's Party Liberal (UPPL) switching sides, Mohilary said discussions were underway but refrained from naming individuals. "I cannot say today who will join. Talks are on with party

leaders and members. Before the Model Code of Conduct comes into force, we will welcome those who wish to join the BPF," he said.

The rally was projected as a show of strength ahead of the 2026 polls, drawing hundreds of party workers and supporters. Mohilary described the party's ongoing "Peace Mission Jatra" in Kokrajhar district as successful, claiming participation from various communities, including Rajbongshi, Nath-Yogi, Garo, Rabha, Bengali and Hindi-speaking groups.

Turning to development issues, the BTC chief said the BPF had been actively pursuing key infrastructure projects in the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) and hoped for significant announcements during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's scheduled visit to Assam on March 14.

"Our discussions are ongoing on development projects such as flyovers in Debagaoon, Titaguri and Gossaigaon, the Sankosh Bridge, the Bekee River bridge and the Indo-Bhutan National Highway. We are hoping for a positive response from PM Modi during his visit," Mo-

hilary said. He also flagged delays in the development of Rupsi Airport, stating that construction work had stalled midway due to runway-related issues and required an extension period for completion. Mohilary said the Assam Chief Minister would take the lead in resolving the matter.

Welcoming the recent memorandum of understanding signed between the Assam government and the Airports Authority of India (AAI) for setting up a new international airport in Manas, he described the move as encouraging for the region's connectivity and economic growth.

"We will urge the Assam Chief Minister and the Prime Minister to address the pressing need for improved roads and bridges in the BTR region," he added. Meanwhile, Assam BJP president Dilip Saikia stated that the party's candidate list for the 2026 Assembly elections would be announced in phases after Dol Utsav, indicating that preparations within the NDA are progressing even as seat-sharing talks continue.

Bharat Ko Jano & Border Area Programme
Madhya Dakshini Festival 2026
 5th March, 2026

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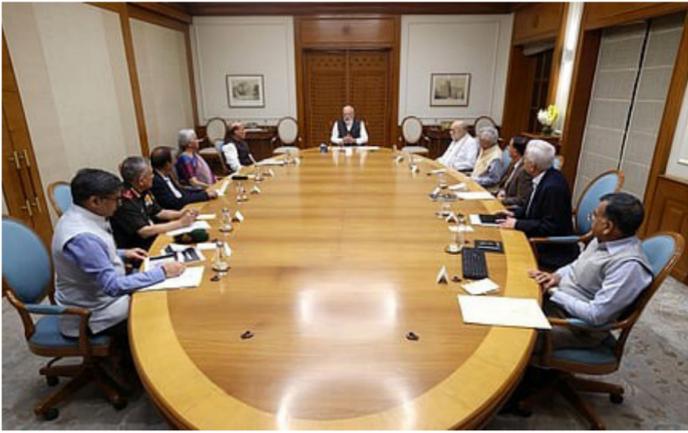
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PM Modi chairs late-night CCS meet on West Asia crisis, stranded Indians



NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi chaired a late-evening meeting of the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) on late Sunday evening to review the rapidly evolving situation arising from the escalating conflict between the United States, Israel and Iran.

The meeting was held shortly after Modi returned from his two-day visit to Tamil Nadu and Puducherry.

According to an official statement, the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) reviewed the evolving situation in West Asia.

"The Committee was briefed on the air strikes in Iran on February 28 and the subsequent escalation, including attacks in several Gulf countries. It expressed serious concern over the safety and security of the large Indian expatriate community in the region", the official statement added.

It further stated that the CCS also reviewed the difficulties faced by Indian travellers transiting the region

and students appearing for scheduled examinations, as well as the broader implications for regional security and economic and commercial activities.

The statement said that the CCS directed all concerned departments to take necessary and feasible measures to assist Indian nationals affected by the developments. It underscored the importance of an early cessation of hostilities and a return to dialogue and diplomacy.

Meanwhile, sources said that during the meeting, the Prime Minister carefully examined all available details and sought the views of CCS members on India's position as hostilities between the parties intensified.

The discussions took place amid mounting tensions in the Middle East, following coordinated strikes by the United States and Israel on Iran, which reportedly resulted in the death of Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.

Officials outlined preparedness measures

to ensure the safety and swift return of citizens, if required. Given India's longstanding and balanced relations with Iran, the committee deliberated extensively on possible developments in the coming days and the strategic options available to New Delhi.

The meeting underscored India's close monitoring of the crisis and its commitment to safeguarding national interests while navigating an increasingly volatile geopolitical landscape.

Sources said that discussions also covered the safe evacuation of Indian nationals from Middle Eastern countries directly or indirectly involved in the conflict. It may be noted that India safely evacuated 3,597 Indians from Iran in 2025 and 818 from Israel in the same year.

According to government data shared in Parliament, India evacuated 5,945 nationals from conflict-hit or crisis-affected countries in the Middle East over the past three years.

Nation paying heavy price for substance, style of Modi's foreign policy: Congress

NEW DELHI:

The Congress on Sunday said the government's response to the war unleashed on Iran has been a betrayal of India's values, principles and interests, as it claimed that the nation is paying a heavy price for both the substance and style of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's foreign policy.

Taking a swipe at Modi, Congress general secretary in-charge communications Jairam Ramesh said India's foreign policy under the "self-styled Vishwaguru" stands brutally exposed, notwithstanding all the grandstanding on it by the cheerleaders of the PM, led by himself.

"Modi visited Israel on February 25-26, 2026, at a time when the entire world was aware that a US-Israel military attack on Iran for regime change was imminent. The assault began just two days after Mr. Modi left Israel where his speech to the Knesset was a display of shameful moral cowardice," Ramesh said on X.

"The Modi government's response to the war unleashed on Iran that has involved targeted assassinations has been a betrayal of India's values, principles, concerns, and interests," he alleged.

Ramesh's remarks come after Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei was killed in a major attack by Israel and the United States. State media reported that the 86-year-old was killed in an air strike targeting his compound in downtown Tehran.

In his post on X, Ramesh lashed out at the Modi government's foreign policy.

"The US President continues his romance with Pakistan, applauding again and again the very man whose inflammatory remarks provided the backdrop to the terror attacks in Pahalgam on April 22, 2025. The US has also categorically come out in support of Pakistan's war on Afghanistan," he said.

The US President has, at last count, claimed a hundred times that he had intervened to halt Operation Sindoor on May 10, 2025 using the threat of



increased tariffs on India's exports to the US, Ramesh said.

"But the PM is completely silent on these assertions of President Trump. The first announcement of the halt to Operation Sindoor was made by the US Secretary of State Marco Rubio at 5:37 PM on May 10, 2025," he said.

Ramesh further pointed out that on February 2nd, 2026 President Trump declared that - at Prime Mijistr Modi's request - the India-US trade deal had been finalised and is coming into effect immediately. "That this was a desperate move by Mr. Modi who was attempting to divert the headlines from the issues raised by Rahul Gandhi in Parliament is clearly obvious," he claimed.

"Eighteen days later, the US Supreme Court announced that President Trump's tariff strategy that formed the foundations of the India-US trade deal was illegal and unconstitu-

tional. This decision was widely expected but Mr. Modi pressured President Trump to sign the trade deal for his own political calculations," Ramesh said.

"The trade deal itself is now widely acknowledged as being one-sided, with India making firm pledges to significantly liberalise imports (including of agricultural commodities especially) with no corresponding pledges by the US on increased imports from India," the Congress leader said in his post.

The US has also repeatedly stressed that India has agreed to stop buying oil from Russia but the Modi government has not clarified the commitment given in this regard, Ramesh said.

"Mr. Modi gave a clean chit to China publicly on June 19, 2020. This shocking statement came even as twenty of our brave jawans were martyred on the border in Ladakh. The clean chit greatly weakened our negotiating posi-

tion and we are now being compelled to normalize relations with China on Chinese terms and conditions," he said.

"The nation is paying a heavy price for both the substance and style of Mr. Modi's foreign policy," Ramesh said.

The Congress on Saturday condemned the attacks launched on Iran by the US and Israel, and called upon the Indian government to help bring the hostilities to an end and ensure the safety of all Indians in the Middle East.

The opposition party expressed concern over the escalating hostilities in the region and urged the government to ensure that all Indians living there are safe. The United States and Israel launched a major attack on Iran on Saturday, with Trump calling on the Iranian public to seize control of their destiny and rise up against the Islamic leadership that has ruled their country since 1979.

INTERNATIONAL

Khamenei's death raises questions about the future of the Islamic Republic and its leadership

DUBAI

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who assembled theocratic power in Iran over the decades as its supreme leader and sought to turn it into a regional powerhouse, bringing it into confrontation with Israel and the United States over its nuclear program while crushing democracy protesters at home, has died. He was 86.

Iranian state media reported the death early Sunday, after a major attack launched by Israel and the United States. U.S. President Donald Trump said hours earlier that Khamenei had been killed in the joint operation.

Khamenei dramatically remolded the Islamic Republic since he took the reins after the death of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in 1989. Khomeini was the fiery, charismatic ideologue who led the overthrow of the shah and installed rule by Shiite Muslim clerics tasked with spreading religious purity.

It fell to Khamenei, a stodgier figure with weaker religious credentials and a leader demeanor, to turn that revolutionary vision into a state establishment.

He ended up ruling far longer than Khomeini. He greatly expanded the Shiite clerical class and built the paramilitary Revolutionary Guard into the most important body underpinning his rule.

The Guard became a military and business behemoth, the country's most elite force and head of its ballistic missile arsenal, with hands across Iran's economic sectors.

But the strains became harder to contain. Political repression and the faltering economy fueled successively bigger waves of mass protests. Anger over the 2022 death of Mahsa Amini, detained for not wearing her mandatory headscarf properly, escalated into demonstrations against social restrictions. In early January, hundreds of thousands marched in cities across the country, many chanting, "Death to Khamenei."

In this photo released by the official website of the office of the Iranian supreme leader, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei speaks under a portrait of the late revolutionary founder Ayatollah Khomeini, in a ceremony meeting a group of officials, in Tehran, Iran, March 8, 2025.

Khamenei responded with the deadliest crackdown seen in nearly 50 years of clerical rule as security forces opened fire on crowds, killing thousands.

At the same time, the Mideast wars sparked by Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, attack on Israel set in motion the collapse of the regionwide "Axis of Resistance" built by Khamenei. Israel and Iran attacked each other directly for the first time in 2024. Israel struck Iran again in June 2025, as it and the United States targeted the country's nuclear program and killed top military officers and nuclear scientists. Iran retaliated by sending missiles and drones at Israel.

The 88-seat Assembly of Experts, a group of mostly hard-line clerics, will choose Khamenei's replacement. But no clear successor is in place.

As he launched the bombing Saturday, U.S. President Donald Trump called on Iranians to "take over your government. It will be yours to take. This will be probably your only chance for generations." What happens next may depend greatly on bodies like the Revolutionary Guard, which has repeatedly shown its willingness to use overwhelming force to keep power even as many of Iran's 90 million people grow disenchanted.

"Culturally, the government is bankrupt," said Mehdi Khalaji, an analyst at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, said in 2017. "The ideology of the Islamic Republic did not work at all."

Khamenei's daughter and son-in-law, a grandchild and a daughter-in-law also were killed in Saturday's attack, according to the semi-official Fars news agency, citing unidentified sources.

Iran's government declared 40 days of public mourning and a seven-day nationwide public holiday to commemorate Khamenei's death.

Ali Khamenei was born into a religious family in the northeastern holy city of Mashhad, a hotbed of revolutionary fervor during the struggle against the Western-allied shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi.

Like many other Iranian leaders, he studied under Khomeini at the seminary in the holy city of Qom, south of Tehran, in the early 1960s, before Khomeini's exile to Iraq and France.

Khamenei joined the anti-shah movement, facing time in both prison and in hiding. When Khomeini returned to Iran in triumph in February 1979 and proclaimed the Islamic Republic, Khamenei was appointed to the secretive Revolutionary Council. In 1981, he was elected Iran's third president; that same year, a bombing by opponents left him with one hand paralyzed.

With his thick, heavy-framed glasses, Khamenei lacked the steely gaze and fiery aura of Khomeini, the father of the Islamic Revolution. He fell far short of Khomeini's religious scholarship, holding the relatively low rank of "hojatolislam" in the Shiite clerical hierarchy.

After being named supreme leader after Khomeini's death, he bounced overnight to the level of grand ayatollah, at the top of the hierarchy, and for years had to deal with skepticism over his credentials.

Khamenei acknowledged the doubts with humility. "I am an individual with many faults and shortcomings and truly a minor seminarian," he said in his first speech in his new post.

Despite his lack of charisma, Khamenei stabilized Iran after the 1980s war with Iraq and governed for over three decades — far longer than Khomeini.

Hard-liners considered him second only to God in his authority. Khamenei

created an ever-growing bureaucracy of Shiite clerics and governmental agencies that blurred responsibilities and left him as the ultimate arbiter. As Iran questioned whether to keep the Revolutionary Guard after the war with Iraq, Khamenei came to its rescue and allowed the paramilitary force to gain a powerful grip on Iran's economy. He also used a system of appointees to undercut the civilian government elected by its people.

Under Khamenei's reign, Iran shifted fully from conventional warfare to support for proxies, building the so-called Axis of Resistance to advance its interests in the region. The Lebanese militant group Hezbollah, established with Iran's help in the 1980s, drove Israel from southern Lebanon in 2000 and battled it to a stalemate in the monthlong 2006 war.

Through Hezbollah, Iran perfected a strategy of making local militant groups its allies to project power — often through violence. Iran followed that model when backing Yemen's Houthis rebels, who in 2014 seized the country's capital, Sanaa, and held on for over a decade in a stalemate war in the Arab world's poorest nation — despite facing a Saudi-led coalition and later, U.S.-led airstrikes over their attacks in the Red Sea corridor.

Elsewhere, suspected Iranian-backed militants bombed a Jewish center in Buenos Aires in 1994, killing 85 people. Iran also was allegedly linked to the 1996 bombing of the Khobar Towers housing complex in Saudi Arabia, which killed 19 members of the U.S. military. Iran denied responsibility for both attacks.

Iran emerged as a prime beneficiary of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, which replaced its main regional threat, Saddam Hussein, with a friendly Shiite-led government. Iranian-backed militias waged a brutal insurgency against U.S. forces and embedded themselves within the country's political landscape.

Oil prices rise sharply after attacks in West Asia disrupt global energy supply



NEW YORK

Oil prices rose sharply Monday as U.S. and Israeli attacks on Iran and retaliatory strikes against Israel and U.S. military installations around the Gulf sent disruptions through the global energy supply chain.

Traders were betting the supply of oil from Iran and elsewhere in the Middle East would slow or grind to a halt. Attacks throughout the region, including on two vessels travelling through the Strait of Hormuz, the narrow mouth of the Persian Gulf, have restricted countries' ability to export oil to the rest of the world. Prolonged attacks would likely result in higher prices for crude oil and gasoline, according to energy experts.

West Texas Intermediate, the light, sweet crude oil produced in the United States, was selling for about \$72 a barrel early Monday, up around 7.3% from its trading price of about \$67 on Friday, according to data from CME group.

A barrel of Brent crude, the international standard, was trading at \$78.55 per barrel early

Monday, according to FactSet, up 7.8% from its trading price of \$72.87 on Friday, which had been a seven-month high at the time.

Higher global energy prices could lead to consumers paying more for gasoline at the pump and shelling out more for groceries and other goods, at a time when many are already feeling the impacts of elevated inflation.

Roughly 15 million barrels of crude oil per day, about 20% of the world's oil, are shipped through the Strait of Hormuz, making it the world's most critical oil chokepoint, according to Rystad Energy. Tankers travelling through the strait, which is bordered in the north by Iran, carry oil and gas from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq, Qatar, Bahrain, the UAE and Oman.

Iran had temporarily shut down parts of the strait in mid-February for what it said was a military drill, which led oil prices to jump about 6% higher in the days that followed.

Against that backdrop, eight countries that are part of the OPEC+ oil cartel announced they would boost production of crude Sunday. The Organization of

Petroleum Exporting Countries, in a meeting planned before the war began, said it would increase production by 206,000 barrels per day in April, which was more than analysts had been expecting. The countries boosting output include Saudi Arabia, Russia, Iraq, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Kazakhstan, Algeria and Oman.

"Roughly one-fifth of global oil supply passes through the Strait of Hormuz, a vital artery for world trade, meaning markets are more concerned with whether barrels can move than with spare capacity on paper," said Jorge León, Rystad's senior vice president and head of geopolitical analysis, in an email. "If flows through the Gulf are constrained, additional production will provide limited immediate relief, making access to export routes far more important than headline output targets."

Iran exports roughly 1.6 million barrels of oil a day, mostly to China, which may need to look elsewhere for supply if Iran's exports are disrupted, another factor that could increase energy prices.

After Khamenei: Power, Uncertainty and a New West Asian Faultline

The reported death of Ali Khamenei is not simply the end of an era inside Iran. It is the potential beginning of a new and unpredictable chapter in West Asia - one unfolding at a time when the region is already convulsed by overt hostilities between Iran and Israel, and by deepening strategic coordination between Tel Aviv and the United States.

For more than three decades, Khamenei functioned not only as Iran's Supreme Leader but as the system's ultimate arbiter - the institutional pivot around which clerical legitimacy, military authority and revolutionary doctrine revolved. His authority was not charismatic in the populist sense. It was structural. He represented continuity. In a political order designed to outlast individuals, he became the constant.

His absence - if confirmed - therefore represents something far more consequential than succession. It introduces structural uncertainty into a region where calibrated confrontation had long been the norm.

The End of Managed Ambiguity
The Iran-Israel rivalry has historically operated within a carefully managed grey zone. Precision strikes in Syria without formal signatures. Cyber operations without public attribution. Proxy confrontations through Hezbollah in Lebanon and aligned militias in Iraq. Each side demonstrated reach, but neither crossed the psychological threshold into declared, open war.

That architecture of ambiguity may now be eroding. Recent developments suggest that operational coordination between Washington and Tel Aviv has grown more visible. What was once a shadow contest risks evolving into overt hostility. And when ambiguity disappears, escalation cycles shorten. Retaliation becomes declarative rather than deniable.

Under Khamenei, Iran balanced defiance with calculation. It projected ideological rigidity while calibrating risk. Confrontation was intense but rarely uncontrolled. His leadership ensured that even proxy engagements were strategically bounded.

Without him, the question is not whether Iran's institutions will function - they will. The Islamic Republic is layered and constitutionally structured. The Assembly of Experts will follow procedure. Clerical hierarchies remain intact. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) retains organisational coherence.

But influence will no longer flow from a singular authority. It will be negotiated.

The Internal Balance: Clerics and the Security Establishment

Iran's political system rests on a delicate equilibrium between religious authority and security power. The clerical establishment anchors legitimacy. The IRGC anchors force projection and economic leverage. Khamenei managed that balance personally.

In a post-Khamenei environment, two broad possibilities emerge.

One path could see a consolidation of hardline authority. If the security establishment expands its relative weight, Iran's external posture may sharpen. Strategic risk-taking could increase, particularly if new leadership calculates that assertiveness is necessary to signal continuity and deter adversaries during transition.

The alternative path involves cautious recalibration. Iran faces economic strain, sanctions fatigue and generational discontent. A leadership attentive to domestic pressures might seek controlled diplomatic openings without abandoning ideological rhetoric. That would not mean reconciliation - but it could mean tactical restraint.

Neither scenario guarantees stability. Both introduce unpredictability.

Transitions in revolutionary systems are rarely linear. They are moments when doctrine meets reality, and when factions test the limits of influence. In a region already under stress, such testing carries external consequences.

Israel's Pre-emption Doctrine Under Strain

For Israel, the stakes are immediate. Its security doctrine has long rested on pre-emption: disrupt existential threats before they mature. From Iraq's Osirak reactor in 1981 to operations against Iranian assets in Syria, the logic has been consistent - strike early, maintain deterrence. Yet overt escalation changes the deterrence equation.

Hezbollah's missile capacities, dispersed militia networks across Syria and Iraq, and Iran's expanding drone capabilities create multi-theatre vulnerability. A visible confrontation invites visible retaliation. The theatre is no longer singular; it is regional.

When multiple actors possess asymmetric reach, the architecture of deterrence becomes fragile. Escalation can widen faster than strategic planners anticipate. The margin for miscalculation narrows.

If Iran's transition produces internal contestation, Israel may calculate that deterrence must be reinforced decisively. But decisive action during a rival's political flux can also entrench hardliners and accelerate retaliation cycles.

In this equation, timing becomes as consequential as capability. Wash-



ington's Strategic Calculus
For the United States, West Asia remains both a strategic theatre and a test of credibility.

Demonstrating resolve against Iran reinforces Washington's commitments to regional partners. It also signals reliability in a broader environment of great-power competition. Yet sustained military engagement competes with priorities in the Indo-Pacific and domestic political realities.

The United States must therefore balance strength with sustainability. Overextension risks strategic fatigue. Underreaction risks perceived erosion of deterrence. A transition in Tehran complicates this balance further. Washington must assess whether to stabilise the moment or exploit it.

In volatile theatres, misreading intent is as dangerous as misjudging capability.

The Hormuz Variable: Why India Cannot Look Away

For India, this unfolding moment is not distant geopolitics. It is immediate strategic exposure.

A significant portion of India's crude oil imports either originates in or transits through the Gulf. The Strait of Hormuz - a narrow maritime chokepoint between Iran and Oman - carries roughly one-fifth of global petroleum trade. Even temporary disruption can send shockwaves through freight rates, insurance premiums and currency markets.

Energy shocks in India rarely remain confined to fuel pumps. They ripple into food prices, public transport costs, fertiliser subsidies and fiscal balances. Inflation becomes political. Development budgets tighten.

New Delhi has diversified suppliers over the years, increasing purchases from Russia and other sources. Yet maritime security in the Gulf remains critical. Insurance premiums rise at the mere perception of instability. Tanker routes shift. Supply chains absorb higher costs.

Preparedness must therefore move beyond rhetorical reassurance.

Strategic petroleum reserves must be assessed pragmatically. Diversification must accelerate not as aspiration but as urgency. Diplomatic engagement across Gulf capitals must intensify quietly and consistently.

The Northeast and the Invisible Linkages

For India's Northeast, often seen as geographically removed from West Asian turbulence, the connection is less visible but deeply real.

Higher global fuel prices translate directly into elevated logistics costs in states such as Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur. Terrain already increases transport expenditure. Infrastructure projects depend on petroleum-linked materials. Road construction, industrial expansion and connectivity corridors all feel the pressure of energy inflation.

In a region where connectivity defines growth, external volatility becomes a local economic variable.

Remittances are another dimension. Millions of Indians work across West Asia, including substantial numbers from the Northeast. Escalation tests labour continuity and evacuation readiness. Past crises - from conflicts in Iraq to unrest in Libya - demonstrated how swiftly New Delhi must pivot from diplomacy to logistics.

Preparedness cannot be improvised in the midst of escalation. Contingency planning must precede crisis.

Strategic Autonomy Under Pressure
India's foreign policy over the past decade has carefully balanced deepening partnership with the United States, expanding defence and technological cooperation with Israel, and maintaining civilisational and economic engagement with Iran.

This equilibrium reflects deliberate strategic autonomy. A post-Khamenei landscape tests that balance. Alignment pressures may intensify. Public narratives may polarise. Yet overreaction could narrow options.

India's interests lie not in ideological positioning but in stability. Diplomatic steadiness - not rhetorical flourish - will determine policy success.

Engagement with Tehran must remain open, even if constrained. Security cooperation with Israel will continue. Coordination with Washington will persist. But preserving flexibility is paramount.

Autonomy is not neutrality. It is calibrated engagement guided by national interest.

The Regional Ripple Effect
West Asia stands at an inflection point.

If Iran's transition consolidates ideological rigidity, volatility may deepen into prolonged instability. Proxy theatres could reignite with intensity. Maritime tensions could escalate. Energy markets would respond instantly.

If recalibration prevails, narrow diplomatic corridors might reopen. De-escalation mechanisms could emerge. Economic pressures within Iran may incentivise pragmatism.

Yet transitions rarely unfold neatly. Internal negotiations can spill outward. Rival actors may test boundaries. Symbolic gestures may replace quiet coordination.

The region's recent history suggests that escalation, once triggered, is difficult to contain.

Beyond Geography: The Domestic

Consequence
In an interconnected world, geopolitical rupture does not remain regional. It migrates into domestic economic equations.

India's fiscal planning, currency stability and growth projections are intertwined with global energy flows. Freight costs influence agricultural markets. Insurance premiums shape export competitiveness. Exchange rate volatility affects import bills.

The passing of a leader in Tehran thus carries implications in New Delhi, Mumbai and Guwahati.

The lesson is structural: global instability is no longer a distant headline. It is a domestic variable.

The Moment of Choice
The aftermath of Khamenei's death will define Iran's internal balance of power. It will also reveal whether regional actors choose retaliation or restraint.

Israel must weigh pre-emption against provocation. The United States must measure resolve against sustainability. Iran's new leadership

must reconcile doctrine with economic reality.

For India, the imperative is clarity.

Diplomatic outreach must intensify. Energy contingency planning must accelerate. Strategic reserves must be evaluated for adequacy, not symbolism. Evacuation frameworks for overseas workers must be rehearsed, not merely archived.

Geography offers no insulation from systemic shocks. Foresight does.

The region's next phase will not be shaped solely by ideology or rhetoric. It will be shaped by how institutions absorb transition, how rivals interpret vulnerability, and how major powers calibrate response.

Khamenei's era was defined by managed confrontation - intense but bounded. The coming era may test whether that management was institutional or personal.

If it was personal, West Asia faces turbulence.

If it was institutional, stability may yet endure.

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