KRC TIMES
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VOLUME:1, ISSUE 727 | SILCHAR MONDAY, MARCH 16, 2026. EAST AND NE INDIA EDITION | e-mail: krctimes@gmail.com ,www.krctimes.com

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Bordoloi threatens to quit Congress, alleges humiliation by Gogoi and Masood

GUWAHATI

Congress Lok Sabha MP Pradyut Bordoloi has written to the party's central leadership alleging humiliation during internal deliberations on ticket distribution for the upcoming Assam Assembly elections and warned that he may quit the party over the issue.

In a strongly worded letter addressed to AICC general secretary in charge of Assam Jitendra Singh, the Nagaon MP said he felt deeply hurt by the manner in which his concerns were handled and accused Assam Pradesh Congress Committee president Gaurav Gogoi and senior Congress leader Imran Masood of humiliating him during discussions related to the Lahorighat Assembly constituency.

Bordoloi said he had repeatedly raised objections over the possible renomination of sitting Congress MLA Asif Mohammad Nazar from Lahorighat but alleged that his concerns were ignored by the party leadership.

"I am writing this letter with a lot of pain and anguish," Bordoloi said, adding that while politics often involves setbacks and disappointments, what he found "unpalatable and unfathomable" was the lack of camaraderie and understanding among senior party colleagues.

The MP said the issue stemmed from a violent attack on him in April 2025. According to Bordoloi, Nagaon police had arrested and chargesheeted Emdadul Islam, whom he described as a "history-sheeter" and a close associate of Nazar, in connection with the alleged attack.

Bordoloi claimed that on April 27, 2025, around 20 assailants armed with iron rods and other weapons attacked the vehicle in which he was travelling with MLA Sibamoni Bora at Doomdoomia in Dhing.

He alleged that after the accused secured bail, he was accorded a "hero's welcome" and publicly received by Nazar, who later took him to the residence of Gogoi.

The MP further claimed that the accused was felicitated at a public programme attended by Gogoi earlier this year. Bordoloi said he immediately contacted the APCC chief to protest and shared details about the alleged criminal background of the individual.

However, Bordoloi said he was shocked to see the same individual seated on the stage behind Gogoi during a party event in Morigaon that he also attended.The Nagaon MP said he subsequently placed documentary evidence before the party's screening committee chaired by Priyanka Gandhi opposing Nazar's candidature for the 2026 Assam Assembly elections.

Bordoloi further alleged that during a meeting of the Congress Central Election Committee in New Delhi on March 13, Masood dismissed his claims as "false and fabricated" before the party's top leadership.

According to him, the meeting was attended by senior leaders including Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge, Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi and AICC general secretary K. C. Venugopal.Describing the episode as deeply humiliating, Bordoloi said the silence of the APCC president during the discussion compounded his distress.

"My humiliation before the entire leadership of the Congress party was deafeningly complete," he wrote, adding that he felt his concerns and evidence had neither been defended nor acknowledged.

In the concluding part of the letter, Bordoloi said he was once again submitting evidence regarding the alleged criminal nexus and urged Singh to intervene.

"As I go down fighting to protect my own dignity before the reactionary leadership of the state," he wrote, signalling that his political future in the party may depend on the leadership's response.

Meanwhile, Nazar was recently among four Congress members apprehended by Dispur police in Guwahati over the alleged transportation of printed leaflets containing accusations and objectionable material against Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma.

PERSPECTIVE

The smartest people are all self-taught, even if they went to school.

Assam's healthcare now comparable with top states, says Amit Shah

GUWAHATI

Amit Shah said Assam's healthcare facilities are now on par with those of leading states such as Gujarat, Maharashtra and Karnataka under the BJP government, as he inaugurated and laid the foundation stones for health infrastructure projects worth Rs 2,092 crore in the state.

Speaking at the inauguration of the Pragjyotishpur Medical College and Hospital in Guwahati's Kalapahar area, Shah said the BJP-led government had worked with a clear vision to strengthen healthcare services and medical education.

"The state government worked with only one aim and has been successful in equating Assam's health services with states like Gujarat, Maharashtra and Karnataka," he said.

The Union Home Minister said expanding medical education infrastructure was essential so that Indian doctors could serve patients both within the country and abroad.

"It is very important to have full-fledged facilities for medical studies so that students can treat patients in India as well as globally," he said.

Shah added that the expansion of hospitals and medical institutions in the region would reduce the need for patients from Assam and other Northeastern states to travel to distant cities for treatment.

"I believe patients from the state and across the Northeast will not have to go to far-off places for treatment," he said.

During the programme, Shah inaugurated the Rs 675 crore Pragjyotishpur Medical College and Hospital along with its Saraswatidevi Shivkishan Daamani Academic Block.

WHO SAID WHAT

Today, the Tiprasa community is worried about their future, not about leaders. The administration's target is me — if I am eliminated, the indigenous people will be weakened," he said, adding that "the youth are with me and the Tipra Motha movement stands united."

Pradyot Kishore Manikya Debbarma

No rebellion or resignations in Congress, party united for Assam's interest: Gaurav Gogoi

GUWAHATI

Assam Pradesh Congress Committee (APCC) president Gaurav Gogoi on Sunday dismissed speculation of internal dissent within the party following the release of its second list of candidates for the upcoming Assembly elections, asserting that the organisation remains united.

Speaking to reporters after arriving in Tezpur on Sunday night, Gogoi said the party leadership has not received any resignation letters from senior leaders and maintained that internal discussions are a normal part of the political process.

"No resignation letter from any senior Congress leader has been received by us. In the larger interest of Assam, everyone must remain united. There is no rebellion within the Congress. In fact, enthusiasm among the people has only increased after the announcement of the candidate list," Gogoi said.

He added that discussions were still underway within the party regarding the finalisation of the remaining candidates for the forthcoming elections.

Gogoi's remarks came amid reports of discontent within the state unit of the Indian National Congress after the party announced its second list of nominees.

Speculation of unrest within the party ranks intensified after senior Congress leader Praneshwar Basumatary resigned from the party soon after the list was made public.

During his visit to Tezpur, Gogoi met party workers and supporters who gathered in large numbers to greet him. More than a hundred Congress workers assembled at a local hotel to interact with the senior leader and discuss organisational matters related to the upcoming polls.

Party sources said the meeting focused on strengthening grassroots mobilisation and improving coordination among party workers ahead of the elections.

Gogoi also interacted with local leaders and emphasised the need for unity within the organisation as the party prepares for the electoral contest.

Despite reports of dissent following the candidate announcement, the APCC chief reiterated that the party remains focused on consolidating support across Assam and preparing for the elections.

He expressed confidence that the Congress would move forward collectively as discussions continue within the party regarding the finalisation of its candidate list.

AAP releases first list of 14 candidates for Assam Assembly polls

GUWAHATI

The Aam Aadmi Party released its first list of 14 candidates for the upcoming Assembly elections in Assam, marking its formal entry into the state's poll contest.According to a party announcement, the candidates have been fielded across constituencies in Upper Assam, Central Assam and parts of Lower Assam.

The list was issued through a notification signed by Rajesh Sharma, the party's state in-charge for Assam.

As per the list, Achyut Das will contest from the Naoboicha Assembly constituency, while Pulin Gogoi has been nominated from the Dergaon Assembly constituency.

Jarboam Kutum has been fielded from the Gohpur Assembly constituency and Anurupa Dekaraja from the Central Guwahati Assembly constituency.

The party has also nominated Ashis Hazarika from the Khumtai Assembly constituency and Tapan Gogoi from the Sibsagar Assembly constituency.

Tikendra Thapa will contest from the Rongangadi Assembly constituency.

In Lower Assam, Zahidu Islam Khan has been fielded from the Chenga Assembly constituency, while Ranjeet Boro will contest from the Naduar Assembly constituency.

Pallav Saikia has been nominated from the Titabar Assembly constituency.

From the East Goalpara Assembly constituency seat, the party has fielded Jinna Amir Hussain, while Barun Bikas Das will contest from the Raha Assembly constituency.

Renuka Timungpi has been nominated from the hill district seat of Bokajan Assembly constituency, and Ananta Gogoi from the Biswanath Assembly constituency.

EC orders agencies to step up vigil against black money, drugs ahead of assembly polls

NEW DELHI

The Election Commission of India has directed multiple enforcement and security agencies to maintain a special vigil and take proactive measures to curb the use of black money, drugs and other illegal inducements during the upcoming Assembly elections in five regions.

The poll panel issued the instructions shortly after announcing the election schedule for Assam, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal and the Union Territory of Puducherry at a press conference on March 15.

In separate communications, the Commission asked key investigative and intelligence agencies to intensify monitoring during the election period to ensure that the polls are conducted on a "level-playing field" without the influence of illicit cash or narcotics.

Agencies contacted by the Commission include the Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT) for the Income Tax Department, the Enforcement Directorate (ED), the Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU), the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) and the Directorate of Revenue Intelligence (DRI).

Security forces such as the Border Security Force, Sashastra Seema Bal and the Railway Protection Force have also been asked to step up surveillance.

The Commission directed the CBDT to deploy Income Tax investigation teams across poll-bound regions to track the movement of unaccounted cash. These teams will monitor airports, major railway stations, hotels, farmhouses and suspected hawala networks.

Air Intelligence Units stationed at airports have also been asked to keep watch on the movement of large sums of money through private jets and commercial flights.

"If any cash exceeding Rs 10 lakh is reported to the Income Tax Department, they shall take steps to take necessary action," the Commission said.

The FIU has been instructed to share suspicious transaction reports with the poll body and provide information related to candidates' financial activity, including assets declared during the nomination process.All enforcement agencies have also been asked to upload real-time data on interceptions and seizures on the Commission's online Election Seizure Management System (ESMS).The EC further directed the NCB and DRI to closely monitor the movement of narcotics and counterfeit currency that could be used as inducements during the elections. The ED has been tasked with keeping a watch on possible money laundering activities.

"If any instance of money laundering related to politically exposed persons connected with political activities directly or indirectly comes to light, coordinated action may be taken," the Commission said.

Over 2.6 lakh trees felled for highway projects in Manipur in five years: RTI

IMPHAL

More than 2.6 lakh trees have been cut for highway construction and widening works in Manipur over the past five years, according to information obtained under the Right to Information (RTI) Act.

The data was accessed by activist Rahul Roy from the National Highways & Infrastructure Development Corporation Limited (NHIDCL), seeking details on tree felling, compensatory afforestation and funds deposited for plantation linked to road projects across the Northeast.

RTI replies from various Project Monitoring Units (PMUs) of NHIDCL in Manipur revealed that a total of 2,61,084 trees were felled across several districts for highway expansion and related infrastructure works.

Under the PMU-Noney jurisdiction alone, 2,18,665 trees were reported to have been cut in the last five years for road construction projects.

In the Tamenglong sector, projects along the Tamenglong-Mahur corridor accounted for significant tree loss, including 14,911 trees in Package-01, 15,516 in Package-02 and 11,992 in Package-03, besides several thousand more in other project packages and the Tamenglong-Khongsang stretch.

The Churachandpur PMU reported tree felling associated with projects along the Churachandpur-Tuivai stretch of NH-102B and the Imphal-Moreh highway, with individual project packages reporting between 1,000 and 2,700 trees felled.

In Senapati district, highway works such as the Maram-Peren, Imphal-Kohima and Ukhrul-Talloi-Tadubi stretches also involved large-scale tree clearance, with several project packages reporting thousands of trees cut.

The PMU-Ukhrul reported substantial tree felling for projects including the Yainagngpokpi-Finch Corner road and the Choithar-Marrem Khullen and Marrem Khullen-Jessami stretches, where individual packages recorded between 35,000 and nearly 48,000 trees felled.

Roy claimed that RTI replies from NHIDCL project units across the region suggest that more than six lakh trees have been cut in the Northeast over the past five years for highway development works.

Referring to floods experienced in Manipur last year, he alleged that indiscriminate and poorly planned tree felling could increase environmental risks in the region.

"All this is happening because of lack of planning. The government is not taking the matter seriously," Roy said, adding that large-scale tree cutting could heighten the risks of floods, landslides and ecological degradation in hill areas.

NHIDCL officials, however, said compensatory afforestation funds were deposited with the State Forest Department as mandated under environmental regulations.

According to the RTI replies, funds deposited under PMU-Tamenglong for compensatory afforestation ranged between Rs 1.41 crore and Rs 4.85 crore, while Rs 19.08 crore was deposited under the PMU-Noney jurisdiction.

In the Churachandpur sector, compensatory afforestation payments ranged from Rs 0.28 crore to Rs 3.70 crore for projects including the Imphal-Moreh corridor. Similar payments were reported under the Senapati and Ukhrul PMUs.

NHIDCL stated that the required approvals were obtained from the concerned forest authorities and that the funds were deposited in the Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management and Planning Authority (CAMPA) account for plantation and other afforestation measures.

Director of Environment and Climate Change T. Brahakumar Singh said development projects involving tree felling must follow prescribed environmental procedures.

He said project proponents such as NHIDCL and the Public Works Department (PWD) are required to seek clearances through the "Parivesh" online portal.

"For forest clearance, the proposal goes to the Forest Department, while environmental clearance is examined by our department," Singh said.

He added that proposals are assessed by the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Authority and evaluated by the State Level Expert Appraisal Committee before a final decision on granting clearance.

Environmental safeguards, including protection of existing trees, pollution control and mitigation measures, are also examined during the appraisal process, he said.

"If trees are present, we advise project proponents to preserve them wherever possible and follow environmental safeguards. Only after complying with these recommendations is clearance granted," Singh added.

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PROTECTING YOUNG MINDS

The Karnataka Government's decision to ban social media access for children under the age of 16 is a bold and timely step. At a time when digital technology is expanding at an unprecedented pace, societies worldwide are struggling to balance technological progress with the psychological well-being of younger generations. The Karnataka Government's proposal acknowledges a growing concern-that unrestricted access to social media platforms is having a profoundly negative impact on children's mental, emotional, and physical development. Children, by their very nature, often lack the maturity required to distinguish right from wrong in the vast and uncontrolled digital environment. Their minds are curious, impressionable, and constantly seeking new experiences. While curiosity is the foundation of learning, it can become dangerous when exposed to unfiltered and often harmful content online. The internet today is flooded with material that includes violence, adult themes, abusive language and other obnoxious content that children are neither emotionally nor intellectually prepared to process.This unregulated exposure can distort a child's perception of reality. Young minds often imitate what they see without understanding the consequences. Unlike adults, children do not possess the emotional filters or moral judgment required to critically evaluate online material. Social media algorithms are designed to maximise engagement through endless scrolling, notifications and personalised feeds. These features make platforms highly addictive even for adults; for children, the attraction is far stronger. Another worrying consequence of social media addiction among children is the drastic reduction in physical activity. In earlier generations, childhood was associated with outdoor games, social interaction and exploration of the physical world. Today, many children spend long hours glued to mobile phones, tablets or computers. Instead of playgrounds, their lives revolve around virtual platforms filled with short videos, games and endless reels.This shift has created a generation increasingly detached from real-life experiences. Children are gradually moving into a virtual world that distances them from the realities of life. The consequences are visible: rising obesity, frustration, anxiety and a growing tendency to consume irrelevant or meaningless content for hours. Medical experts and educators have repeatedly warned that prolonged screen exposure can also affect sleep cycles, eyesight and cognitive development. The psychological effects are equally troubling. Social media creates unrealistic comparisons about appearance, lifestyle and popularity. Children who are still developing their self-identity may feel inadequate or insecure when exposed to curated images of perfection online. Such comparisons can damage self-confidence and contribute to mental health issues, including stress, loneliness and depression. Developed nations continue to emphasise the importance of reading books and engaging in structured learning experiences. Books encourage concentration, imagination and critical thinking-qualities that are difficult to cultivate through short, fast-paced digital content. The habit of reading also develops patience and depth of understanding, something that constant scrolling usually lacks.Another emerging concern is the growing influence of artificial intelligence and algorithm-driven platforms that shape online content according to user behaviour. Even adults are increasingly finding their attention manipulated by these technologies. If mature individuals struggle to maintain control over their digital habits, it is unrealistic to expect children to do so independently. Safeguarding young minds from this double-edged technological sword is therefore essential.In this context, Karnataka's initiative can be seen as a protective measure rather than a restrictive one. The move recognises that childhood must remain a phase of healthy development, guided learning and real-world experiences. Of course, the challenge lies in implementation. Critics may dismiss the move as symbolic, but every meaningful reform begins with a policy signal that sparks wider discussion. Ultimately, the success of such a measure will depend heavily on the role of parents and families. Schools already restrict the use of mobile phones within their premises, but children spend most of their time outside of classrooms. Parents must therefore become active partners in guiding digital habits, encouraging reading, outdoor activities and meaningful social interaction. The Karnataka Government has taken the first step in acknowledging a serious social problem. Whether the policy succeeds or evolves into a broader national debate remains to be seen. What is clear is that protecting children from the unchecked influence of social media is a responsibility toward the future of society itself.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

Your brain processes images 60,000 times faster than text.

ONGOING IRAN WAR IMPACT ON INDIA

DR. D.K. GIRI

The Iran war is an ongoing conflict with serious consequences for the global security and economy. Unlike the Ukrainian war, which is somewhat confined to Europe, the war in Iran will affect the whole world. It will disrupt the energy supply as Iran has considerable oil reserve and Tehran controls the sea route, the Strait of Hormuz which passes 20 per cent of world's oil. Due to historical links between India and Iran, mainly on trade, and Iran potentially providing the connection for India to Central Asia, the impact of the war on India is going to be substantial.

The US and Israel launched series of strikes on Iran, targeting military and nuclear-related sites. The US hit the military capabilities of Iran – the navy and the missile and drone production infrastructure while Israel hit everything that IDF could reach. The indiscriminate bombarding, particularly on the school building killing about 176 small children stirred the conscience of the world, including the allies of the United States. Iran retaliated with missile and drone attacks on US bases in the region and by firing randomly at Israel.

What was perhaps strategically conceived and presented to the world as a pre-emptive, prompt and a short-term strike is still going on without immediate sight of an end. It is like the war in Ukraine which Russian President Putin called 'Special Military Operation' that was to end in days and weeks. Horrifyingly, the war is still continuing after four years. US President Donald Trump who initially hinted that the war will end in four to six weeks, now claims there is "practically nothing left to target in Iran". But Iran's supreme leader's advisor warns of a "war of attrition that will destroy the world economy". He also claims that the end of the war will be decided by Iran.

On a strategic note, Iran had supposedly anticipated this attack by the US and Israel. Iranian leadership had made strategic provisions for the event of decapitation of top leadership. That is what happened within hours of the strike, the Supreme Leader along with the top officials of Iran was eliminated. Observers attribute this quick assassination of top leadership to a mole in the Supreme Leader's inner circle. Be that as it may, Iranian leadership had set up decentralised command system which meant that several military units could independently retaliate the invading forces in case the Central Command becomes inactive after such assassination. So, the war can continue from multiple sources. This is exactly what seems to be happening at the moment.

On 28 February 2026, US-Israel began bombing Iran. In retaliation, Iran sent missiles to the Gulf states which had American bases. A few days ago, the UN Security Council passed a resolution (2817) condemning Iran's 'egregious attacks on Gulf states' with 13 votes in favour and 2 abstentions (China and Russia). The Resolution demanded Iran stop attacks on Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, UAE and Jordan and refrain from interfering with maritime trade.

The expansion of the war into the other states in the Gulf region will heavily affect India. The supply of energy will be interrupted as well as India's exports to the world. India was using countries like UAE to export elsewhere to the world. That will be hit. India imports substantial oil from the Gulf region. If the war continued for a few weeks, India could use its strategic reserves of oil. But if it lasted longer like it did in Iraq and Afghanistan, India's economy will be badly hit.

Some oil exporters are exploring other routes through Africa, as the Strait of Hormuz remains vulnerable. That will shoot up the transport costs. From available reports, hundreds of ships are stranded in and around the Strait of Hormuz. If ships passing through Hormuz are sunk, passage through the Strait may remain closed for a long time.

So, the rise on energy price will have a cascading effect on all other prices. Reportedly, prices are already rising and shortages are appearing, resulting in black marketing. Agriculture, textiles, tiles, glass, plastics, hotels, restaurants, airlines and energy-intensive products are already impacted. More the war protracts the worse will be the impact. The 'balance of payment' will be upset. Iran may not support India on the Chahbahar Port which was gateway for India to the Central Asia.

Furthermore, since Iran has attacked airports and critical infrastructure in the Gulf region, the oil-producing countries have curtailed production and their crude is stuck. It is assumed that even after the war ends, they may not be able to immediately ramp-up production. So, energy deficits in many countries will persist for some time.

As the air and sea routes are disrupted, trade and travel through and around the Gulf – a critical geographical space that connects the West with the East – have virtually stopped. Difficulties in travel will impact hotels, tourism and the entertainment industry. According to Government of India, there are about 1 crore Indians working in the Gulf region. Remittances from them into NRI accounts are substantial. These will decline, weakening the capital flows. Many NRIs are wanting to return to India due to the conflict and decline in production in West Asia. This will hurt the employment situation in India.

How is India coping with the impact of the war? First, India is seeking to diversify its energy sources and is exploring alternative suppliers. The government has reportedly held discussions with major oil producers like Russia, Saudi Arabia and UAE to ensure stable energy supplies. The US seems to have reconciled to the disruption of oil supply and therefore has agreed to waive tariffs if India decides to purchase oil from Russia which is already in the sea.

Admittedly, India will experience price rise and some temporary inflation although GOI is assuring its citizens not to panic. To mitigate the price shocks, the Government is considering temporary relief measures such as LPG subsidies and fuel tax adjustments.

Some observers argue that India's economy and security will be negatively impacted as New Delhi chose to stay in the US-Israel camp. This was evident from Prime Minister Modi's visit to Israel 48 hours before the war started. But India's economy would have been hit as it is now irrespective of which side it was on. The fallout of the war has to be faced in any case.

As I said in this column last week, New Delhi has made a conscious choice of aligning with the democratic world while maintaining friendly relations with other powers. This is a right choice as so-called neutrality in a war has its costs. India was already paying some of it because of its non-committal approach to the war in Ukraine. Prime Minister Modi made quick corrections in case of Iran which has been a bigger friend than even Ukraine

DIGITAL WAR OF WORDS

"Assembly elections in Assam have been announced, and I am fully hopeful that the people of Assam will bring a Congress-led government with full majority... and will create a new Assam," Gogoi said while speaking to the media. He added that such a government would ensure development and allow citizens to live peacefully "in accordance with our fundamental rights". Targeting Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, Gogoi accused the current administration of corruption and said voters would reject it at the ballot box. "The people of Assam will uproot and throw away the corrupt government of Himanta Biswa Sarma

Gaurav Gogoi

Assam aims to set up medical college in every district by 2030: Himanta Biswa Sarma

GUWAHATI

Himanta Biswa Sarma on Sunday said the Assam government aims to establish a medical college in every district by 2030 as part of efforts to strengthen healthcare infrastructure and expand medical education in the state.

Speaking at the inauguration and foundation stone-laying ceremony of several health infrastructure projects, Sarma said Assam currently has 15 medical colleges, while 10 more hospitals are under construction at an estimated cost of Rs 6,000 crore.

"Our aim is to build medical colleges in each district and I believe by 2030 this will become a reality," he said.

The chief minister said once the ongoing projects are completed, the number of MBBS seats in the state will rise to around 5,000 from the current 2,000.

He also announced that a new medical college in Bongaigaon will begin functioning next year.

Sarma said Assam currently has 12 cancer hospitals, while two more are ready and three additional facilities are planned.

"I believe there are no other states with such a large number of government-based cancer hospitals," he said.

The chief minister said the state government has been working to develop a network of cancer hospitals in partnership with Tata Trusts.

He recalled that industrialist Ratan Tata had visited the state before the COVID-19 pandemic in the presence of Amit Shah, when discussions were held on establishing cancer hospitals across the Northeast.

Following this, Assam signed an MoU with Tata Trusts under a 50:50 funding model to set up a network of 17 cancer hospitals equipped with chemo-

therapy, radiotherapy and surgical facilities.Sarma also said the tender process for installing a proton beam therapy machine at Guwahati Medical College and Hospital is nearing completion. The advanced radiation therapy equipment is expected to cost between Rs 400 crore and Rs 500 crore.

He said the facility would help transform Assam into a major destination for cancer treatment.

According to Sarma, the expansion of healthcare infrastructure has contributed to a decline in maternal and infant mortality rates in the state, while services such as free dialysis and free treatment for children have improved patient access to healthcare.

He also noted that the number of nurses and allied health professionals has increased in recent years due to the expansion of nursing education and paramedical training institutes.

Referring to the return of Indian medical students from abroad during the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Sarma said the episode highlighted the shortage of medical seats in the country.

He said Prime Minister Narendra Modi subsequently announced a plan to create one lakh MBBS seats nationwide.

Sarma added that the academic building of the newly inaugurated Pragjyotishpur Medical College and Hospital has been financed by the Damani family after an MoU signed in 2022.

The medical college has 505 beds and 46 ICU beds and has already been recognised by the National Medical Commission.

With the inauguration of the new institution, the number of medical colleges in Guwahati has increased to three, including Guwahati Medical College and Hospital and ESIC Medical College and Hospital, Guwahati.

Silchar secretariat part of Assam's decentralisation push: CM Himanta Biswa Sarma

SILCHAR

Himanta Biswa Sarma on Saturday said the newly inaugurated secretariat complex in Silchar is part of the Assam government's broader strategy to decentralise governance and bring administrative services closer to people.

After inaugurating the new secretariat at Srikona in Silchar, Sarma said governance in the state had long been concentrated in Guwahati, and the government was working to change that approach.

"One of our priorities over the past five years has been to dismantle this mindset and ensure governance and development reach every corner of the state," he said.

The chief minister said the Silchar secretariat is aimed at strengthening the administrative presence in the Barak Valley and making government services more accessible to residents of the area.

"These are not merely buildings but strong statements of intent," he said, adding that the government has also delegated several executive powers to district administrations and created multiple co-districts to improve governance at the grassroots level.

Sarma said the reforms are intended to reduce the need for citizens to travel long distances to district headquarters or the state capital to access government services."Our guiding principle is simple - governance must reach the people, and not the other way around," he said.

Highlighting other decentralisation initiatives, the chief minister noted that the state Assembly had earlier held a session in Kokrajhar, while a new secretariat has already been set up in Dibrugarh, with plans to develop a legislative complex there.

State cabinet minister Kaushik Rai described the inauguration as a historic moment for the Barak Valley and said it would significantly improve administrative efficiency in the region.

BJP will win all five seats in Karbi Anglong, says KAAC chief Tuliram Ronghang

GUWAHATI

Tuliram Ronghang on Saturday expressed confidence that the Bharatiya Janata Party will win all five Assembly seats in Karbi Anglong in the upcoming elections in Assam.

Ronghang, the Chief Executive Member (CEM) of the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council, said the party is confident of sweeping the seats in the hill district.

"Himanta Biswa Sarma will gift us the five seats. I am 100 per cent sure all five seats will be won by the BJP," Ronghang told reporters.Responding to questions on the possibility of new candidates being fielded in the constituencies, he said the public would accept the party's decision."Whoever the high command gives the ticket to, the public will support it," he added.

Ronghang said the party has been preparing its campaign in the region for over a year, particularly by reaching out to people in rural areas.

"For the past one year, we have been visiting villages and ensuring that the schemes introduced by the chief minister reach the people," he said.

Highlighting the situation in Karbi Anglong, Ronghang said communities in the district are living together peacefully.

"There is permanent peace in Karbi Anglong. All tribes and communities are together and the people have seen that," he said.

He also expressed confidence that the ruling National Democratic Alliance would win more than 100 seats in the 126-member Assam Legislative Assembly.

Earlier, Sarma had said the BJP would release its list of candidates for the Assembly elections by mid-March.

The chief minister also indicated that the BJP would contest four seats in the Bodoland Territorial Region, while its ally, the Bodoland People's Front, would contest 11 seats as part of the alliance arrangement.

Manipur on alert after heavy rain and hailstorms lash several districts

IMPHAL

Authorities in Manipur have been placed on high alert after heavy rain and hailstorms battered several districts across the state over the weekend, prompting the government to activate relief and response measures.

Chief Minister Yumnam Khemchand Singh on Sunday directed officials to remain vigilant and ensure immediate assistance to affected residents as sudden severe weather disrupted normal life in many areas.

In a message posted on social media platform X, the Chief Minister said the intense spell of rain and hailstorms had caused difficulties for families across both hill and valley districts.

"In view of the prevailing situation, I have issued strict instructions to all concerned officials to remain on high

alert and take immediate, coordinated measures to mitigate the impact on the affected people," Singh said.

He added that relief and response teams had been instructed to act swiftly so that essential support reaches affected households without delay.

According to the Chief Minister, authorities have been asked to ensure that people impacted by the weather receive basic necessities and timely assistance.

Officials from relevant departments are closely monitoring the situation and coordinating relief efforts on the ground, he said.

"In this challenging time, I want to assure every citizen that the government stands firmly with you," Singh stated, reiterating that the administration remains committed to providing "relief, safety, and support for every affected family".

Heavy rain accompanied by hailstorms struck several parts of Manipur on Saturday and Sunday, affecting districts in both the hill regions and the valley areas. Authorities are currently assessing the extent of the damage while continuing response operations.

Assam signs peace pact with Kuki, Hmar groups; welfare councils to be formed

GUWAHATI

The Assam government on Sunday signed Memoranda of Settlement (MoS) with armed groups belonging to the Kuki and Hmar communities, paving the way for the formation of welfare and development councils in areas inhabited by the two communities, officials said.

The agreements were signed at Dispur in the presence of state Education Minister Ranoj Pegu.

Under the settlement, the government will establish the Kuki Welfare and Development Council (KWDC) and the Hmar Welfare Development Council (HWDC) in areas dominated by the respective communities in the state.

According to an official statement, the proposed councils will include a chairman, deputy chairman, chief executive member, executive members, general members and government-nominated members. The headquarters of both bodies will be located in Guwahati.The councils will receive budgetary allocations and will prepare development proposals based on local requirements, which will be submitted to the state's Transformation and Development Department for approval.The MoS was signed with Kuki groups including the United Kukigam Defence Army, Kuki Revolutionary Army, and the Kuki Liberation Organization / Kuki Liberation Army, as well as the Hmar group Hmar Peoples' Convention (Democratic).

The settlement also includes an indicative list of development schemes aimed at accelerating growth in Kuki- and Hmar-inhabited areas while protecting and promoting their social, cultural, linguistic and ethnic identity.

Officials said the state government will undertake rehabilitation measures for cadres of the armed groups in accordance with existing procedures. Financial assistance will also be provided to families of those who lost their lives during the armed struggle.The four groups had laid down arms in 2012 in the presence of the then Union Home Minister and the then chief minister of Assam, following which Suspension of Operations (SoO) agreements were signed with the state government to address their demands through dialogue.

After the SoO agreements, several rounds of tripartite talks were held, leading to the signing of the MoS as part of efforts to bring lasting peace and stability to the state.

Officials said that in recent years the Government of India and the Assam government have signed similar agreements with several insurgent groups, including Bodo, Karbi and Adivasi outfits, as well as the Dima National Liberation Army and the United Liberation Front of Asom.

More than 9,000 cadres have been rehabilitated under these peace initiatives after surrendering 1,012 arms, 25,488 rounds of ammunition and 34 grenades, officials said.

With the signing of the agreements with Kuki and Hmar groups, the government said ethnic militancy in Assam has effectively come to an end.

The MoS was signed on behalf of the state government by Additional Chief Secretary Ajay Tewari of the Home and Political Department.

Senior UPPL leader Chandan Brahma quits party ahead of Assam Assembly polls

GUWAHATI

Senior leader Chandan Brahma has resigned from the United People's Party Liberal (UPPL), in a development that could affect the party's preparations ahead of the upcoming Assembly elections in Assam.

Brahma submitted his resignation to UPPL president Pramod Boro on March 15.

The leader had joined the UPPL in April 2024 after leaving the Bodoland People's Front (BPF), bringing along a large number of supporters. His entry into the party at the time was marked by a public programme held in Kajalgaon and was viewed as a significant political shift in the region.

Brahma's resignation comes close on the heels of another prominent exit from the party. Senior UPPL leader Kampa Borgoyary had also stepped down earlier, raising concerns about possible internal challenges within the party.Political observers say the departure of two senior leaders could affect the UPPL's electoral strategy in the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR), where political competition is intensifying ahead of the polls.

The reasons behind Brahma's resignation have not been officially confirmed. However, the timing of the move has drawn attention as political parties across Assam intensify preparations for the Assembly elections.

The UPPL has not yet issued an official statement on the development.

Assam Assembly polls: Congress faces tough fight against BJP despite some openings

GUWAHATI

The Indian National Congress in Assam faces an uphill battle against the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party in the upcoming Assembly elections, despite certain political openings that the opposition party hopes to leverage.

The Assembly polls are scheduled to be held in a single phase on April 9 and are expected to witness a direct contest between the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance and the Congress-led opposition bloc.

Though the Congress has been out of power in Assam since 2016, state unit president Gaurav Gogoi has taken an aggressive stance against Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma and the BJP leadership ahead of the high-stakes polls.

Political observers say the Congress will have to contend with the BJP's strong organisational network, Sarma's leadership and the ruling party's development initiatives and welfare schemes, which have bolstered its prospects.

Analysts believe anti-incumbency against the ruling party could work in the Congress' favour, although the party faces organisational challenges.

The Congress is also attempting to con-

solidate opposition votes by forging alliances with regional and Left parties, including the Assam Jatiya Parishad, Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the All Party Hill Leaders Conference.

The party is expected to retain support among minority voters, particularly Bengali-speaking Muslims, many of whom have been critical of certain policies of the ruling dispensation.

Gogoi's victory in the Jorhat Lok Sabha constituency in the 2024 general elections, despite an aggressive campaign by the BJP, has also boosted the party's morale. The Congress has projected him as its chief ministerial face and fielded him from the Jorhat Assembly constituency in the upcoming polls.

Allegations of corruption levelled by the Congress against the chief minister and some members of his cabinet are also expected to be part of the party's campaign narrative.

However, the Congress has suffered multiple setbacks in the state over the past decade, particularly since Sarma and several other leaders left the party to join the BJP.

The party faced a fresh jolt recently when former Assam Congress president Bhupen Borah and three other MLAs joined the BJP, while two legislators switched to the Raijor Dal.

The opposition party's organisational weakness at the grassroots level is another challenge, with tea garden workers-once considered a core Congress support base-shifting towards the BJP in recent elections.

Allegations made by the chief minister against Gogoi and his wife, Elizabeth Colburn, over alleged foreign links could also influence voters in certain rural areas.

Opportunities

The Congress hopes to capitalise on anti-incumbency and focus on corruption allegations against the ruling party during the campaign.

The party is also expected to highlight concerns raised by minority groups regarding government policies, including eviction drives in certain areas.

Another potential issue is the demand for Scheduled Tribe status for six communities - Tai Ahom, Chutia, Moran, Motok, Koch-Rajbongshi and Tea Tribes (Adivasis) - which has remained unresolved.

The Congress may also attempt to attract disgruntled leaders and workers from the ruling alliance to strengthen its position before the polls.

Political analysts say the BJP's ability to portray the Congress as dependent on minority votes could affect the opposition's appeal among sections of the Assamese-speaking population.

Continued defections of leaders and workers also remain a concern for the party, while the ruling NDA's strong organisational machinery and governance record present additional challenges.

With the election approaching, the contest is expected to intensify as both alliances seek to consolidate their support base across the state.

Quest!
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NATIONAL

Govt bars piped cooking gas users from holding LPG connections, PNG rollout to be fast-tracked

NEW DELHI

The government has barred households with piped cooking gas (called PNG) connections from retaining or obtaining subsidised domestic LPG connections, even as the sector regulator pushed city gas distributors to accelerate PNG rollout to ease pressure on cooking gas supplies amid global energy supply disruptions.

In a notification issued on March 14, the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas amended the Liquefied Petroleum Gas (Regulation of Supply and Distribution) Order, 2000, under the Essential Commodities Act, making it mandatory for consumers with PNG connections to surrender their domestic LPG connections.

The amended order also prohibits government oil companies and their distributors from providing domestic LPG connections or refilling cylinders for consumers who already have a PNG supply.

"No person having a piped natural gas (PNG) connection and also having a domestic LPG connection shall retain a domestic LPG connection, or take refills of domestic LPG cylinders from any Government oil company, or through their distributors. Such persons will be required to immediately surrender their domestic LPG connection," the order said.

Those having PNG connections have also been barred from obtaining a domestic LPG connection.

For government oil companies, the order prohibited them from "providing a domestic LPG connection, and/or supplying domestic LPG cylinder refills to a consumer who already owns a PNG connection".

The move is aimed at prioritising LPG supplies for households that do not have access to piped gas.

India imports about 88 per cent of its crude oil, 50 per cent of its natural gas and 60 per cent of its LPG needs. Before the US-Israel strikes on Iran on February 28 and Tehran's retaliation, more than half of India's crude imports, about 30 per cent of gas and 85-90 per cent of LPG imports came from West Asian countries, such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

The conflict has led to a blockade of the Strait of Hormuz, the main transit route for Gulf energy supplies. While India has partly offset crude supply disruptions by sourcing oil from countries, including Russia, gas supplies have been curtailed to industrial users and LPG availability to commercial establishments, such as hotels and restaurants, has been reduced.

In a related advisory, the Petroleum and Natural Gas Regulatory Board (PNGRB) has asked city gas distribution (CGD) companies to expedite conversion of households to domestic PNG (DPNG) and prioritise consumers in areas where pipeline infrastructure has already been laid.

The regulator said India's total natural gas consumption is around 189 million metric standard cubic metres per day (mmscmd), of which about 97.5 mmscmd is produced domestically.

Out of the average 13.94 mmscmd of administered price mechanism (APM) gas allocated to the CGD sector, about 3.63 mmscmd is used in the domestic PNG segment, while the rest is consumed in the compressed natural gas (CNG) segment for vehicles.

As of January 31, 2026, CGD entities have reported about 1.65 crore PNG connections, of which 1.03 crore consumers are actively using the fuel.

The regulator said CGD companies should prioritise providing PNG connections to consumers who have registered for the service or whose residential areas already have pipeline infrastructure, as this would help reduce pressure on LPG supply chains and support diversification of cooking fuel.

Companies have also been asked to accelerate the rollout of PNG infrastructure, deploy additional manpower and equipment, and shorten the time between application and commencement of gas supply to households.

PNGRB said closer coordination with state governments, municipal bodies and local authorities would be critical to secure permissions, speed up approvals and ensure faster last-mile connectivity for PNG networks.

The regulator added that expanding PNG coverage would support India's energy transition by increasing access to cleaner fuels and mitigating supply disruptions caused by global geopolitical developments.

ECI announces dates for Assembly elections in Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Kerala, Assam, Puducherry

NEW DELHI

The Election Commission of India has announced the schedule for the crucial Assembly elections in four states --West Bengal, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Assam--and the Union Territory of Puducherry.

Assam, Kerala and Puducherry will go to the polls in single phase on April 9. The counting of votes will take place on May 4.

All 234 constituencies of Tamil Nadu will go to the polls on April 23, while the counting will take place on May 4.

In West Bengal the elections will be conducted in two phases. Of the total 294 Assembly constituencies, 152 will go to the polls on April 23 while the remaining 142 will vote on April 29. The counting will be held on May 4.

Addressing a press conference on Sunday, Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar said a total of 17.4 crore voters are eligible to vote in elections to the five assemblies with 824 constituencies. The voting will be held at 2.19 lakh polling stations across four states and one UT with 25 lakh election officials on duty.

The average number of electors per polling station is 750-900 across Assam, Kerala, Puducherry, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal, the CEC said.

Kumar also highlighted the importance of the recently concluded Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls. The CEC congratulated the BLOs and other election officials for their work.

Election Commissioners Sukhbir Singh Sandhu and Vivek Joshi were also present during the briefing.

Responding to questions on the number of phases in West Bengal being reduced to two from eight in 2021, the CEC said the commission has had "detailed deliberation and in its considered opinion it was found necessary to reduce the number of phases to an extent where it is convenient for everybody." Asked about the announcement of freebies by different governments ahead of elections, the CEC said the governments can take any policy decision in their wisdom before polls are announced, but any inducement is not allowed during the model code of conduct. In West Bengal, Trinamool Congress chief Mamata Banerjee is aiming for a fourth consecutive term, while the BJP is pushing hard to wrest power. The elections follow the political turmoil and protests against alleged arbitrary deletion of voters through the SIR exercise. Mamata has been raising serious allegations against the ECI and CEC Gyanesh Kumar over the SIR. The CM, along with her party and other petioners has also challenged the matter in the Supreme Court.

In Tamil Nadu, the alliance led by DMK and consisting of Congress, Left parties and other regional parties, under the leadership of CM MK Stalin, is seeking a second term. They face opposition from the AIADMK-BJP alliance. Actor-politician Vijay has also entered the fray with his newly launched party, TVK, adding a fresh dynamic to the contest.

Kerala is gearing up for a traditional Left versus Congress battle. CPM veteran Pinarayi Vijayan is aiming for a third consecutive term, while the Congress hopes to leverage its strong performance in the local body elections and the 2024 Lok Sabha polls. However, the Congress is facing challenges, including internal conflicts over canditature. In Assam, the BJP government led by Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma is eyeing a second term in power. The Congress, led by Deputy Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha and senior leader Gaurav Gogoi, is hoping for a comeback even as the party saw some prominant leaders exiting its fold, including former state president Bhupen Borah. Puducherry will witness a contest between the All India NR Congress-led NDA alliance and the DMK. Chief Minister N Rangasamy is eyeing a fourth term while seat-sharing talks are progressing with the AIADMK.

Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Puducherry went to the polls in a single phase in their last assembly polls. Assam, in the last assembly elections, had voted in three phases. In West Bengal, the polls were conducted in eight phases in 2021.

INTERNATIONAL

Iran warns against wider war after Trump asks allies to escort ships via Hormuz

TEHRAN

Iran warned more countries against getting involved in its war with the United States and Israel on Sunday, after US President Donald Trump urged world powers to escort oil tankers through the Strait of Hormuz chokepoint in the Gulf.

Energy prices have soared across the world since Iran responded to the US-Israeli campaign by threatening shipping sailing through the strait, which connects major Gulf oil and gas exporters to the global market.

Trump responded on Saturday by urging "China, France, Japan, South Korea, the UK and others" to send ships to escort tankers, while the US military will continue to pound drone, boat and missile launch sites in Iranian territory on the north shore of the strait.

But the countries he listed have so far given only a guarded reception to the idea, and Iran's foreign minister Abbas Araghchi, in a call with French counterpart Jean-Noel Barrot, warned them to "refrain from any action that could lead to escalation and expansion of the conflict."

The UK ministry of defence was non-committal. "As we've said previously, we are currently discussing with our allies and partners a range of options to ensure the security of shipping in the region," it said.

Britain's minister for energy security, Ed Miliband, told the BBC the "plan now has to be to de-escalate the conflict... We are talking to our allies. There are different ways in which we can make maritime shipping possible."

South Korea said it was "closely monitoring President Trump's remarks on social media" while Takayuki Kobayashi, policy chief of Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's ruling party, said the bar for sending Japanese navy ships to the region under existing laws was "extremely high".

Global oil prices have surged by 40 percent as Iran has choked off the vital sea passage and attacked energy and shipping industry targets in its Gulf neighbours. The strikes were in retaliation for the US and Israeli air campaign that killed its supreme leader and triggered the regional Middle East war.

Women hold posters of the Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Mojtaba Khamenei during a campaign in support of the government at the Enqelab-e-Eslami, or Islamic Revolution, square in downtown Tehran, Iran, Saturday, March 14, 2026.

Two weeks into war with Iran, Trump has been knocked back on his political heels

As global markets reel, Trump has doubled down, telling NBC News in a weekend interview that he thought Tehran was keen to come to the table but that the US would fight on to enforce better terms. He said might, again, bomb targets on Iran's oil hub, Kharg Island, "just for fun."

"Iran wants to make a deal, and I don't want to make it because the terms aren't good enough yet," Trump told NBC News.

Iran's new supreme leader, Ayatollah Mojtaba Khamenei, has -- in a written statement -- vowed to keep Hormuz closed. But Trump dismissed this and suggested his foe might not even be in control, saying: "I don't know if he's even alive. So far, nobody has been able to show him." Iran said on Saturday that "there is no problem with the new supreme leader", even though he has yet to appear in public.

The Israeli military, meanwhile, announced a wave of strikes against targets in western Iran, after Iran's Revolutionary Guards branded Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu a criminal and vowed that they would pursue and kill him.

The US has urged its citizens to leave Iraq, where pro-Iranian groups have launched attacks on the US embassy and bases hosting western military units.

Despite the hardline talk from all sides, citizens of Tehran were able to go about their work week in the most normal atmosphere since the start of the war on February 28. Traffic was busier than last week and some cafes and restaurants had reopened.

One resident whizzed down the street on an electric hoverboard, and more than a third of stalls in the Tajrish bazaar, a popular shopping hub in the north of the capital, had reopened, five days before Nowruz, the Persian New Year.

Some shoppers queued at ATMs to withdraw cash. Online operations at Bank Melli, one of the country's largest, had been paralysed in recent days.

Women hold posters of the Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Mojtaba Khamenei during a campaign in support of the government at the Enqelab-e-Eslami, or Islamic Revolution, square in downtown Tehran, Iran, Saturday, March 14, 2026.

Bahrain and Saudi Arabia said separately on Sunday they had intercepted renewed barrages of projectiles after an AFP journalist heard warning sirens in Manama.

Late Saturday, authorities in Dubai also said air defences had made further interceptions after Iran's military warned UAE civilians to avoid port areas.

On Friday, US forces struck military targets on Iran's Kharg Island, from which nearly all of Iran's oil exports flow.

More than 1,200 people have been killed by US and Israeli strikes, according to Iranian health ministry figures that could not be independently verified. The UN refugee agency says up to 3.2 million people have been displaced in Iran, most of them fleeing the capital and other cities to seek safety.

The Pentagon says more than 15,000 targets in Iran have been hit by US and Israeli forces.

US media reported that the Pentagon has dispatched the amphibious assault ship USS Tripoli and around 2,500 Marines to the region.

Zelenskyy says Ukraine is waiting on US and Russia to set the next round of talks

KYIV

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said in comments released Sunday that he was ready for the next round of trilateral peace talks to end Russia's more than 4-year-old invasion of Ukraine, but that it was up to Washington and Moscow to agree on where and when to meet.

Zelenskyy said the US had proposed hosting the next meeting between American, Ukrainian and Russian negotiating teams, which include US envoys Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner, but Moscow had refused to send a delegation.

"We are waiting for a response from the Americans. Either they will change the country where we meet, or the Russians must confirm the US," Zelenskyy said in a media briefing on Saturday. "We are not blocking any of these initiatives. We want a trilateral meeting to take place."

The US has postponed its sponsored talks between the two sides due to the war in the Middle East. The Iran war, which erupted on Feb. 28 following US-Israeli strikes on Iran and spread across the region, has drawn the international spotlight away from Ukraine's plight as it strives to hold back Russia's bigger army. Speaking to journalists, Zelenskyy also warned of a "very high" risk that the Iran war could drain the air defense stockpiles Ukraine depends on to counter Russian missile strikes.

Zelenskyy said he lacked a clear picture of available stockpiles and had discussed with French President Emmanuel Macron in Paris on Friday whether SAMP/T systems could serve as an alternative to US-made Patriot batteries for intercepting ballistic missiles. He said Ukraine would be "first in line" to test any viable alternative.

The Ukrainian leader also appeared to push back against US President Donald Trump's recent assertion that Washington has no need for Ukrainian drone technology.

"No, we don't need their help on drone defense," Trump had said in a Fox News Radio interview that aired on Friday.

Zelenskyy said Washington had reached out to Ukraine "several times" to request assistance for a particular country or for support for Americans, without giving specifics.

He said the requests had come from various US military institutions to Ukraine's Ministry of Defense and other military leaders. "All our institutions received these requests, and we responded to them," Zelenskyy said.

He said he had offered Washington a defense cooperation deal last year worth $35 billion–$50 billion that would have given the US administration access to technology from roughly 200 Ukrainian drone, AI and electronic warfare firms, with half of all production earmarked for partners, primarily the US. According to the Ukrainian leader, American military officials had expressed strong interest in the proposal, and Trump himself had indicated he was receptive. "We received a message from them, and directly from the president as well, that they are interested," Zelenskyy told reporters. "We did not sign the document with President Trump. I do not have an answer as to why. Perhaps it will happen later, but I am not sure."

With regard to reopening the Druzhba pipeline, which until late January transported Russian oil to Hungary and Slovakia, Zelenskyy said he was against allowing Russian oil to transit through Ukraine while the EU imposes sanctions on its sale elsewhere.

"Why can we, in one case, tell the United States that we oppose lifting sanctions, while on the other hand forcing Ukraine to resume oil transit through Druzhba — and at a political price that effectively pays for anti-European policies?" Zelenskyy said. The U.S. has temporarily eased some sanctions on Russian oil shipments, reflecting global concerns over sharply higher crude prices due to supply shortages stemming from the Iran war.

Zelenskyy said if conditions imposed on Ukraine because of the dispute threatened weapons supplies, Kyiv would have no choice but to resume oil transit, but said he told EU partners this would amount to "blackmail."

Oil deliveries through the Druzhba have been halted since Jan. 27, leading to an escalating feud between Hungary and Ukraine. The Ukrainian government says that a Russian drone strike damaged the pipeline's infrastructure, but Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has accused Zelenskyy of deliberately holding up oil supplies.

In response, Orbán vetoed a new round of EU sanctions against Russia, and is blocking a major 90-billion euro ($106 billion) EU loan for Ukraine until flows are resumed.

From the Hills to the Nation: The Rising Voice of Northeast India's Youth

For generations, young people from India's Northeast have grown accustomed to a question that seems simple on the surface but carries a deeper meaning: "Where are you really from?"

For many in the region, the question is not merely about geography. It is a reminder of the distance-cultural, social and psychological-that often separates the Northeast from the national imagination. The answer typically requires explanation: a lesson in geography, identity, and belonging.

Yet a quiet transformation is underway. A new generation from the Northeast is gradually reshaping this narrative. No longer content with being treated as peripheral citizens, young people from the region are redefining how India sees them-and how they see themselves. Through music, literature, cinema, science, and social progress, they are asserting that the Northeast is not a distant corner of the country but a vital force shaping its future.

A Different Social Ethos

One of the most striking characteristics of societies across much of the Northeast is their relative distance from the rigid social hierarchies that have historically defined many other parts of India. While inequality and social challenges certainly exist, the deeply entrenched caste structures prevalent elsewhere hold little sway in many hill communities.

This difference has helped nurture a distinctive social culture among the region's youth. Practices that remain contentious debates in other parts of the country-such as dowry or child marriage-are not only rejected but often ridiculed in everyday discourse among young people. The dismissal is not just ideological; it is cultural. Many young Northeasterners openly question traditions that undermine gender equality or personal freedom.

Women, in particular, have played a central role in reshaping social expectations. Across the region, female participation in education, employment, and leadership continues to rise steadily. In states like Mizoram, Nagaland and Meghalaya, literacy rates have climbed impressively, crossing 90 percent in many cases. Education has become a powerful tool in reshaping social attitudes and encouraging progressive thinking.

Young people are also confronting issues that earlier generations often endured silently, including domestic violence and entrenched gender biases. Through student groups, digital platforms, and grassroots activism, they are encouraging open conversations about rights, equality and dignity.

Culture as Identity and Economy

The cultural richness of the Northeast has long been celebrated locally, but it is only in recent years that it has begun attracting widespread attention across India and beyond. For the youth of the region, culture is not merely heritage-it is also a pathway to recognition and economic opportunity.

Festivals across the Northeast have become major cultural showcases. Nagaland's Hornbill Festival, Arunachal Pradesh's Ziro Festival of Music, Manipur's Chavang Kut, Assam's Bihu celebrations and Meghalaya's Cherry Blossom Festival collectively draw thousands of visitors each year.

These events serve multiple purposes. They preserve indigenous traditions, provide platforms for local artists, and generate significant tourism revenue. The Hornbill Festival

alone attracts more than one lakh visitors annually, injecting hundreds of crores into Nagaland's local economy.

But perhaps more importantly, such festivals are reshaping how the rest of India views the region. Instead of being portrayed solely through narratives of insurgency or isolation, the Northeast is increasingly seen as a vibrant cultural hub.

Young organisers, performers and entrepreneurs are driving this change. Social media campaigns, digital storytelling and independent event management have helped transform regional festivals into global cultural attractions.

The Sound of a Generation

Music has become one of the most visible avenues through which Northeastern youth are gaining national recognition. Often referred to as India's "rock capital," the region has long nurtured thriving independent music scenes.

Shillong, in particular, has earned a reputation as a musical powerhouse. Bands and artists from the city have performed alongside international acts and built loyal fan bases across India. The influence of Western rock, blues and indie genres blends seamlessly with indigenous rhythms, creating sounds that are both global and distinctly local.

Artists from across the Northeast are now leaving their mark on national and international stages. Musicians such as Meba Ofilia from Meghalaya have achieved global recognition, while emerging performers continue to experiment with rap, folk fusion, and alternative rock.

The presence of international artists performing at festivals in the region has further elevated its reputation as a creative hub. For young musicians growing up in the hills, music is no longer just a passion-it is a viable career path.

What makes this movement particularly significant is its grassroots nature. Many of these artists began performing in small cafes, college events or community gatherings before gaining wider recognition. Their success stories have inspired a new generation of performers who view music as a means of storytelling and cultural expression.

Cinema Telling New Stories

Beyond music, the Northeast has also emerged as a powerful voice in Indian cinema. Filmmakers from the region are increasingly using film to explore stories that mainstream cinema has often overlooked.

Independent filmmakers have brought the landscapes, cultures and social realities of the Northeast to international audiences. Their films frequently explore themes of identity, community, migration and resilience.

Assamese filmmaker Rima Das captured global attention with Village Rockstars, a coming-of-age story about a rural girl dreaming of becoming a musician. The film's authenticity and emotional depth earned national awards and international acclaim.

Similarly, directors such as Pradip Kurbah from Meghalaya have portrayed urban life in Shillong with remarkable sensitivity, earning recognition at national film festivals.

These filmmakers are challenging stereotypes by presenting nuanced portraits of life in the Northeast-stories that go beyond conflict and reveal the complexity of everyday experiences.

For young filmmakers across the region, these pioneers serve as inspiration. With the rise of digital filmmaking and streaming platforms, more storytellers are emerging from small towns and villages, determined to document their communities and histories.

Literature as Memory and Resistance

Long before the digital age amplified regional voices, writers from the Northeast were preserving their histories through literature. For many communities, storytelling has been a vital tool for recording cultural memory.

Naga writer Temsüla Ao's works, for instance, explore the emotional scars left by conflict and displacement. Easterine Kire's novels draw upon Naga folklore and spiritual traditions, presenting them to readers around the world.

From Assam, literary giants such as Indira Goswami and Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya used fiction to examine social injustice, identity and political turmoil.

Today, a younger generation of writers is continuing this literary legacy. Authors such as Janice Pariat and Anjum Hasan explore themes of memory, urban alienation and mental health-subjects that resonate strongly with contemporary youth.

Their works have broadened the literary map of India, proving that stories from the Northeast are not peripheral narratives but essential parts of the country's cultural fabric.

Fashion Rooted in Tradition

Another sector witnessing a surge of creativity is fashion. Designers from the Northeast are reinterpreting traditional textiles in ways that appeal to global audiences.Indigenous fabrics such as the Mizo puan or Naga shawls are being transformed into modern garments and accessories without losing their cultural identity. Young designers are collaborating with local weavers to preserve traditional craftsmanship while creating contemporary designs.

Brands emerging from the region are also embracing sustainability and ethical production. Many rely on small weaving communities and home-based artisans, ensuring that economic benefits flow directly to local households.

The result is a fashion movement that celebrates heritage while adapting to modern tastes. Through online platforms and international showcases, Northeastern designers are gradually gaining recognition in India's competitive fashion industry.

Academic and Scientific Aspirations

While cultural achievements often capture public attention, Northeastern youth are also making significant strides in academia and research.

Students from the region increasingly populate India's leading educational institutions-from engineering colleges and medical schools to research centres and universities.

Their ambitions extend beyond personal success. Many are working on projects related to climate change, biodiversity conservation and sustainable development-issues that directly affect their home states.

Researchers studying Himalayan ecosystems, renewable energy solutions, and indigenous knowledge systems often draw inspiration from the region's unique landscapes and cultures.

Despite facing stereotypes or homesickness while studying far from home, many students remain deeply connected to their roots. Their goal is not only to succeed individually but also to contribute knowledge and solutions that benefit their communities.

Rewriting the National Narrative

Despite these achievements, the Northeast often remains underrepresented in national conversations. News coverage tends to focus on crises rather than everyday progress, leaving many positive developments unnoticed.

This imbalance has prompted young Northeasterners to take control of their own narratives. Through digital platforms, independent media and artistic expression, they are telling their stories in their own voices.

The transformation is gradual but unmistakable. Increasingly, the region is being recognised not just for its geography but for its contributions to India's cultural and intellectual life.

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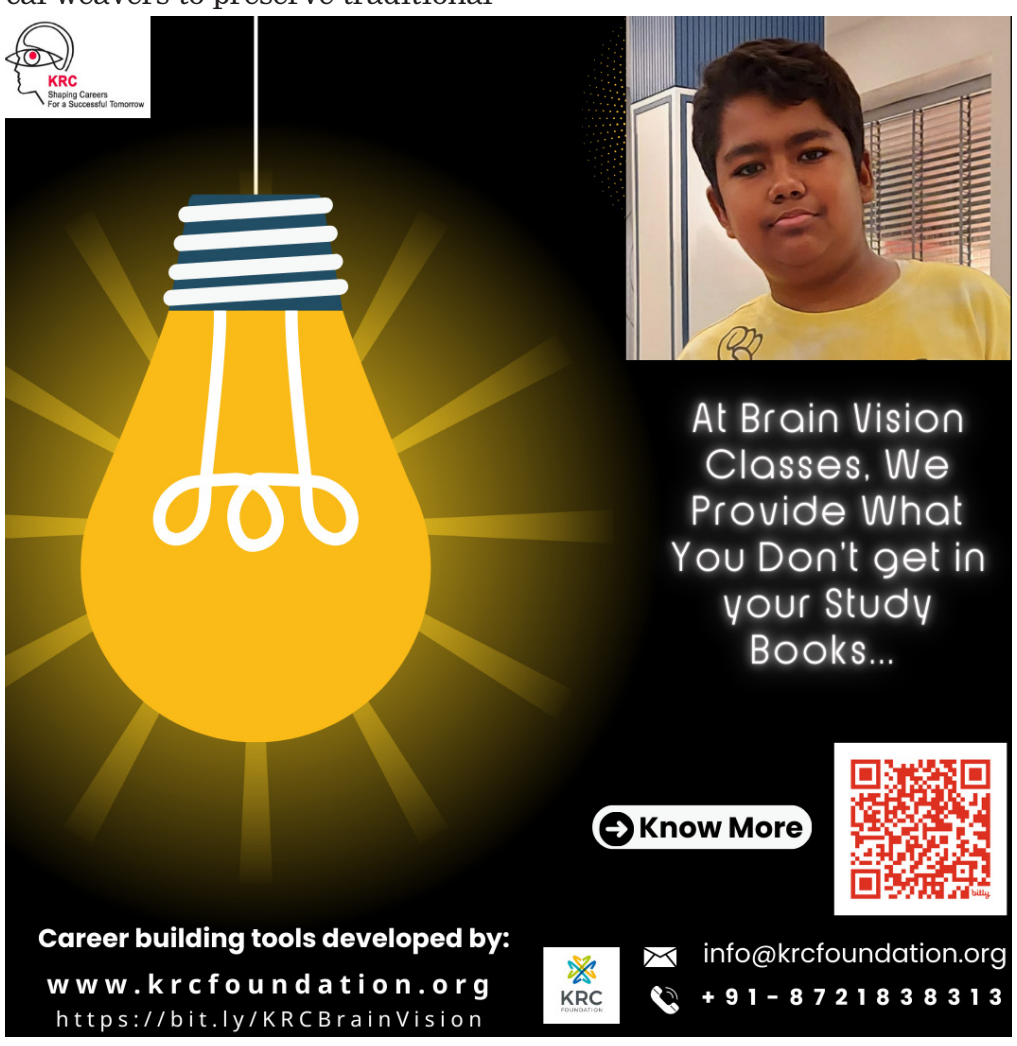

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Published by KRC Foundation.H.No. 15, Old Kalibari Road, Malugram, Silchar, Assam 788002. Editor-in-chief: Biswadeep Gupta. Tel: 8721838313, e-mail: krctimes@gmail.com www.krctimes.com