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Curfew, mobile internet suspended in Meghalaya's West Garo Hills

SHILLONG
Authorities have imposed curfew and suspended mobile internet services in parts of West Garo Hills district of Meghalaya following incidents of vandalism linked to the nomination process for elections to the Garo Hills Autonomous District Council (GHADC). According to the district administration, the curfew came into effect on March 10 and will remain in force for 48 hours. Mobile internet services have been suspended for 72 hours as a precautionary measure to prevent the spread of rumours and maintain public order. The restrictions were imposed after several shops were vandalised in the Chibinang area on Monday evening amid tensions surrounding the GHADC nomination process. District Magistrate Vibhor Aggarwal said the decision was taken following intelligence inputs indicating the possibility of disturbances that could threaten public peace and endanger life and property. Under the curfew order, residents have been prohibited from moving outside their homes within the affected areas of the district unless permitted by authorities. Officials said the measures were necessary given the prevailing law and order situation and were aimed at preventing further incidents of violence. Senior administrative and police officials, including magistrates, have been deployed in the affected localities and are closely monitoring the situation. Security forces, including personnel from the Central Reserve Police Force, have been stationed in strength to maintain strict vigil. The unrest follows controversy surrounding a recent notification issued by the GHADC regarding the conduct of the council elections.

WHO SAID WHAT

"In the long run, oil supplies will be dramatically more secure without the threat of Iranian ships, drones, missiles, nuclear menace, or anything." - President Donald J. Trump

BAFTA Win for 'Boong' Brings Global Attention to Manipur, Says Director Lakshmipriya Devi

MUMBAI
The international recognition for the Manipuri-language film Boong at the BAFTA Awards has helped draw global attention to Manipur, its director Lakshmipriya Devi said on Monday, describing the achievement as an important moment of visibility for the northeastern state. Speaking in an interview with Press Trust of India, the filmmaker said the award has created an initial level of awareness about Manipur and its stories among global audiences. "With film festivals like BAFTA, at least the first step of awareness has been created. It tells people that there is a place called Manipur and that films like this exist outside mainstream Bollywood. Beyond that, it is up to audiences to take that knowledge forward," she said. The coming-of-age drama made history as the first Indian film to win a trophy at the prestigious awards ceremony organised annually in London by the British Academy of Film and Television Arts. The film won in the Best

Children's and Family Film category last month. Set against the backdrop of tensions in Manipur, Boong follows the journey of a determined schoolboy searching for his missing father in a conflict-affected landscape. The story, according to Devi, is deeply personal and was inspired by family memories. One of the key inspirations came from her grandfather's longing for his own father, who had lived in exile in Myanmar. "I used to write about my grandfather's stories in a journal just to get it out of my system. Eventually, because I had worked in films as an assistant director, the story became a script," she said. Initially uncertain about turning the idea into a book due to a lack of confidence in her English writing, Devi eventually realised that the story could be told better through cinema. "It was such a deeply personal story that I felt I couldn't hand it over to someone else to direct," she said. Despite the historic recognition, the



director said she is still processing the achievement and prefers to remain out of the spotlight. Recalling the moment she received the BAFTA trophy, Devi said she was overwhelmed. "I was in a daze. The only thing I could think of was how heavy the trophy was and how much the excess baggage would cost," she joked. She added that, being a low-budget filmmaker, the win has not yet changed her day-to-day life. "I'm still the same. In fact, I want to go back more under the radar after this and not let this get to me," she said. Devi, who grew up in Imphal, said working on the film became emotional-

ly challenging during post-production due to the political unrest and social tensions in the state. The filmmaker revealed that editing the film was particularly difficult after violence broke out in parts of Manipur. "I couldn't edit the film for a very long time. I would break down whenever I saw the footage because many of the places where we shot the second half were later reduced to rubble," she said. It took several months before she could return to the footage and complete the editing process. Produced by Farhan Akhtar and Ritesh Sidhwani under the banner of Excel Entertainment, the film features Guguin Kipgen and Bala Hijam in key roles. Devi, who is also the niece of noted Manipuri writer M. K. Binodini Devi, has spent over two decades working in the Hindi film industry. Before making her directorial debut, she worked as an assistant director on several notable films, including Luck by Chance, Lakshya, Talaash, and PK, directed by Rajkumar Hirani. While the film is set against the backdrop of tensions in Manipur, Devi said

she did not set out to make a political statement. "This is not a political film. It is simply the story of a boy who lives in a place where such realities exist. If someone interprets it as political, that is their perspective," she said. She also highlighted how the production brought together people from different ethnic communities in Manipur and maintained a sense of solidarity even after conflict began in the region. Despite the international recognition, the filmmaker said she has no immediate plans to capitalise on the success. Currently based in Mumbai, she hopes to celebrate the achievement with the film's cast and crew before travelling to Manipur to watch the film with local audiences. Her immediate priorities, she said, are far more modest - getting some rest, reading books by authors she admires such as George Orwell and Arundhati Roy, and gradually returning to work. Boong was initially released in theatres in September last year with a limited run. Following its BAFTA win, the film was re-released on March 6, drawing renewed interest from audiences.

Kuki-Zo-Hmar MLAs join Manipur Assembly budget session virtually; CM calls move 'positive step'

MANIPUR SETS ASIDE RS 734 CRORE FOR REHABILITATION OF DISPLACED FAMILIES IN 2026-27 BUDGET

IMPHAL
Six legislators belonging to the Kuki-Zo-Hmar community participated in the ongoing budget session of the Manipur Legislative Assembly through video conferencing on Monday, in what Chief Minister Y. Khemchand Singh described as a "positive step" towards restoring normal political engagement in the violence-hit state. The MLAs joined the proceedings remotely and appeared on television screens installed inside the Assembly hall, marking a rare instance of virtual participation amid the continuing ethnic divide that has shaped Manipur's political landscape since 2023. Welcoming the development, the chief minister said the participation of the legislators indicated gradual progress towards normalisation after nearly two years of ethnic unrest. "Attendance of the Assembly session by the Kuki-Zo-Hmar MLAs is a positive step towards the normalisation of the current situation in the state. This is a good beginning, and everyone should encourage it," Singh said during the session. Ethnic clashes between the Meitei and Kuki-Zo-Hmar communities that erupted in



May 2023 had effectively divided Manipur's valley and hill districts. Since then, members of the two communities have largely avoided travelling through areas dominated by the other, making physical participation in the Assembly difficult for several hill-based legislators. Following the outbreak of violence, 10 Kuki-Zo-Hmar MLAs had demanded a separate administrative arrangement for the hill districts and distanced themselves from the government then headed by former chief minister N. Biren Singh. Of the nine sitting Kuki-Zo-Hmar legislators in the Assembly at present, six joined the first day of the budget session virtually. Those who participated included Nemcha Kipgen, L. M. Khaute, Letzang Haokip, Ngursangur Sanate, Kinmeo Haokip Hansing and Haok-

holet Kipgen. Assembly Speaker Thokchom Satyabrata Singh welcomed their presence and described it as the first day of their participation in the ongoing budget session. He also pointed out that three of the legislators - Nemcha Kipgen, L. M. Khaute and Ngursangur Sanate - had earlier joined the chief minister's trust vote through video conferencing on February 5. Another legislator, Letzang Haokip, sought leave of absence from the session due to health reasons, which the Speaker said had been approved. Currently, the Kuki-Zo-Hmar community is represented by nine MLAs in the Assembly - six from the Bharatiya Janata Party, two from the Kuki Peoples' Alliance and one independent member. One of the original 10 legislators from the community, Vungzagin Valte, died in February at a private hospital in Gurugram. Valte had suffered severe injuries in a mob attack in Imphal during the early phase of the violence in 2023. Officials said the state government arranged video conferencing facilities to enable the MLAs to participate from different locations. The arrangements were set up at offices of the National Informatics Centre in Kangpokpi and Churachandpur, as well as at

Manipur Bhawans in Guwahati and New Delhi. Political engagement between the government and Kuki-Zo-Hmar representatives has gradually resumed following the formation of a new administration earlier this year. President's Rule in Manipur had been imposed in the state after Biren Singh stepped down as chief minister in February 2025. The central rule was revoked on February 4 this year, when a new government led by Khemchand Singh assumed office. After the new government was formed, Kuki-Zo-Hmar legislators began participating once again in official programmes. Nemcha Kipgen was later sworn in as deputy chief minister and given charge of the rural and panchayati raj development department along with the hill and tribal affairs portfolio. Rehabilitation of people displaced by ethnic violence has emerged as a major priority in Manipur's 2026-27 budget, with the state government earmarking Rs 734 crore to accelerate resettlement and recovery efforts across affected areas. Presenting the budget in the Manipur Legislative Assembly on March 9, Chief Minister Y. Khemchand Singh said the allocation is aimed at expediting the reha-

bilitation of thousands of families displaced during the unrest that has affected the state since 2023. Addressing the House, Singh described the rehabilitation of internally displaced persons (IDPs) as a top priority of the government. The programme focuses on providing permanent housing, restoring livelihoods and ensuring the sustainable reintegration of affected communities. The chief minister informed legislators that the Union government has extended assistance for the construction of permanent houses, compensation for the loss of personal belongings and movable assets, and repairs to partially damaged homes. He added that the Centre has provided a special financial package of Rs 2,198 crore to the state during the current financial year. The support is intended to help Manipur pre-pay high-interest loans, meet security-related expenditure, cover the deployment costs of Central Armed Police Forces and strengthen rehabilitation efforts for displaced families. According to Singh, the central assistance has helped the state manage its financial commitments without constraining development spending.

Imphal to host 3rd North East India Film Festival on March 21-22

IMPHAL
The third edition of the North East India Film Festival (NEIFF) will be held in Imphal on March 21 and 22, bringing together filmmakers from across the eight Northeastern states to showcase their work and celebrate regional cinema. The announcement was made during a press conference in the Manipur capital on Monday. Chairman of the organising committee, Y. Nilachandra Singh, said the festival aims to provide a platform for filmmakers from the entire Northeast, including Sikkim. "The third edition will cover all the eight states in the Northeast, including Sikkim. We have already organised two editions earlier in 2024 and 2025, and this year we are hosting the third edition," Singh said. He noted that the dates for the festival were finalised only recently after receiving the necessary clearance from the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. "This time it has been a bit different as we were late in organising the festival due to the need for clarification from the sponsors and the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. In the first week of March, the ministry gave clearance, which is why we have fixed the dates for March 21 and 22," he said. According to the organisers, eight awards will be presented during the festival. Each award will carry a citation, statuette and a cash prize. The awards include Best Feature Film, Best Non-Feature Film, Best Director of Feature Film, Best Cinematography, Best Editing, Best Sound, Best Screenplay of Feature Film and the Hon'ble Jury Award. The jury may also confer a Special Mention on a film or individual. Singh said the award values would not be lower than those offered in previous editions, adding that there is a possibility



of an increase in the cash prizes depending on support from the ministry. Organisers have also kept the submission process free to encourage wider participation. The last date for online application and submission of entries is March 19, 2026, until 5 pm. Festival convener Robert Leisgangthem said the decision to waive the entry fee was taken to allow more filmmakers from the region to participate in the event. Meanwhile, Additional Director of the Department of Information and Public Relations, Government of Manipur, T. Ramesh Singh, urged film enthusiasts and the public to attend the screenings. "Rare cinemas are often not screened in theatres but can be watched only in film festivals," he said, encouraging audiences to take part in the event. The festival aims to promote films with aesthetic and technical excellence while highlighting socially relevant themes and the diverse cultural narratives of the Northeastern region. It is also expected to provide a platform for filmmakers, directors, writers, editors, producers and cinematographers to present their creative work and strengthen the regional film industry. The event will feature a competitive section for both feature and non-feature films produced in the Northeast and certified by the Central Board of Film Certification between January 1 and December 31, 2025. Screenings will take place at Tanthapohis Cinema, Lamphel, Imphal.

Assam eases teacher transfer rules, allows newly appointed staff to apply anytime

GUWAHATI
The Assam government has introduced key changes to the mutual transfer policy for school teachers, removing earlier restrictions and allowing greater flexibility in relocation while maintaining academic stability in classrooms. According to a fresh directive issued by the state's Department of School Education, newly appointed teachers are now eligible to apply for mutual transfers. The government has also scrapped the earlier rule that prevented teachers from applying again within two years after securing a transfer. The reform has been formalised through Notification No. SE-11011(17)/10/2026 issued by the Department of School Education. Officials said the changes are intended to simplify the transfer process and make it more convenient for teachers without affecting the quality of education in schools across the state. Under the revised provisions, mutual transfers will continue to be permitted only between teachers holding the same status. The process will also remain strictly online through the designated teacher transfer portal. The notification states that such transfers do not adversely impact the Pupil-Teacher Ratio (PTR). By allowing exchanges only between teachers of similar status, the government believes the arrangement will ensure that students do not face any disruption in academic support. The government has clarified that the latest reform does not alter the broader legal framework governing teacher postings. All other provisions under the Assam Elementary and Secondary School Teachers (Regulation and Posting) Act, 2020, along with the associated rules and guidelines, will remain in force. Implementation of the updated provisions has been entrusted to the Mission Director of Samagra Shiksha and the Directors of Elementary Education and Secondary Education in Assam.

Centre invokes Essential Commodities Act to secure domestic LPG supply amid global uncertainties



GUWAHATI
The Central government has invoked provisions of the Essential Commodities Act, 1955 to ensure uninterrupted availability of cooking gas across the country amid concerns over potential disruptions in global energy supplies. Under the directive, oil refineries and petrochemical units nationwide have been instructed to maximise the production of liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) and channel key hydrocarbon streams primarily propane and butane towards the LPG supply pool. Officials said the move is aimed at safeguarding domestic supply as geopolitical tensions in the Middle East raise the possibility of disruptions to international energy shipments. India's LPG consumption stood at around 31.3 million tonnes in the 2024-25 financial year, while domestic production accounted for only 12.8 million tonnes. The remaining demand was met through imports. A large share of these imports - estimated at 85 to 90 per cent - comes from countries such as Saudi Arabia. Most shipments pass through the strategically vital Strait of Hormuz, a key maritime corridor that has recently faced heightened tensions following military strikes and retaliatory actions in the region. To prevent potential shortages, the government has directed both public

and private sector refiners to ensure that all propane and butane streams produced by their facilities are diverted exclusively for LPG production. Liquefied petroleum gas used for domestic cooking is primarily composed of a mixture of these two hydrocarbons. The order further stipulates that LPG generated under the directive must be supplied only to the country's three state-run oil marketing companies - Indian Oil Corporation, Bharat Petroleum Corporation Limited and Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Limited - for distribution to household consumers. Refineries have also been prohibited from using propane and butane in petrochemical production during the enforcement period. Authorities said the LPG produced under the new instructions must be reserved strictly for domestic cooking purposes. Any violation of the directive will invite penal action under the Essential Commodities Act. Enacted in 1955, the Essential Commodities Act empowers the Union government to regulate the production, supply, distribution, pricing and trade of goods deemed essential for public welfare. The legislation also allows authorities to impose stock limits, control movement of commodities and mandate compulsory procurement during periods of supply shortages or price volatility. While the law is administered by the Centre, its implementation is largely carried out by state governments, which are authorised to enforce stock limits and other regulatory measures to ensure adequate availability of essential commodities for consumers.



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INDIA'S ENERGY RESILIENCE AMID GLOBAL VOLATILITY

Some voices have chosen to characterise the current global energy situation as a crisis of India's making or India's vulnerability. The facts do not support that characterisation.

India is in a position of deliberate, well-prepared strategic strength, built over twelve years of consistent energy policy. The buffer is real, the supply routes are diversified, and the delivery record is unbroken.

India holds over 250 million barrels of crude oil and refined petroleum products combined – approximately 4,000 crore litres. This translates into 7 to 8 weeks of buffer coverage across the full supply chain. These stocks are not held in a single location or a single form. They are distributed across above-ground storage tanks, underground strategic caverns, pipeline systems, terminal tankage, offshore storage vessels in transit, and the three dedicated strategic petroleum reserve facilities at Mangalore, Padur, and Visakhapatnam. India is well stocked with crude oil, petrol, diesel, ATF, LPG, and LNG, with sufficient inventories to handle short-term disruptions, while continuing to source energy from multiple global suppliers. Claims circulating that global oil supplies have stopped or that India has reserves for only 25 days are incorrect and do not reflect the actual supply and stock position.

This is a buffer, not a timer. It sits on top of, not instead of, daily imports that continue to arrive through multiple routes. Even if Hormuz flows were entirely disrupted, India's diversified sourcing means the impact would be partial, not total. A predominant volume of India's crude does not transit Hormuz.

Over the last decade, India's strategic oil diplomacy has expanded its supplier base from 27 to 40 countries across six continents. The days when India's energy security rose and fell with conditions in a single maritime chokepoint are over. Supply from Russia, West Africa, the Americas, Central Asia, and non-Gulf Middle Eastern routes means that disruption on any single corridor results in a managed sourcing adjustment, not a supply emergency. The Strait of Hormuz is not the only route for India's crude imports. Only around 40% of India's crude imports pass through the Strait of Hormuz, while about 60% are routed through other supply routes that remain unaffected. This has ensured that there has been no shortage of energy for Indian consumers even during global turmoil or the pandemic.

Several countries, including Australia and Canada, have also offered additional gas supplies, and India continues to explore alternative sources to further strengthen energy security. India has also recently entered into new energy supply arrangements with partners such as the United States and the United Arab Emirates to ensure stable long-term supplies.

India's refining infrastructure – 258 MMTPA of capacity, the fourth largest in the world, exceeding total domestic consumption of 210 to 230 MMTPA – is configured to process a wide basket of crude grades. Indian refiners do not depend on a fixed slate from a fixed origin. This flexibility is itself a security asset, and it was built deliberately over the last decade as policy, not as an accident.

India is also the fifth-largest exporter of refined petroleum products globally. When Europe needed fuel after sanctioning Russian crude, it was India's refineries that bridged the gap. India has never depended on permission from any country to buy Russian oil. India is still importing Russian oil even in February 2026, and Russia is still India's largest crude oil supplier. For three years of the Russia-Ukraine war, India kept buying Russian oil despite US and EU objections. Imports increased significantly after 2022 due to discounted prices and refinery demand. Therefore, suggesting a short-term waiver "enables" these purchases overlooks that the trade has continued consistently. India is a net exporter of refined products to the world – a position that reinforces, not undermines, its energy security.

India's 20% ethanol blending programme displaces approximately 6 million tonnes of crude oil every year – equivalent to roughly 44 million barrels – that does not need to arrive through any strait, any pipeline, or any tanker route. Over the decade since 2014, the programme has cumulatively substituted over 181 lakh metric tonnes of crude imports, saving Rs 1.36 lakh crore in foreign exchange and channelling Rs 1.18 lakh crore to Indian farmers. India's domestic production contributes around 15-16% of the country's energy requirements and is currently operating at full capacity.

Under the LPG Controlled Order, the supply of LPG to industrial and commercial consumers has been restricted to prioritise household cylinder availability. The citizen's cylinder is the operational priority, and the government has put institutional weight behind that commitment.

Not one petrol pump has run dry in twelve years. Retail fuel prices have remained stable for 4 consecutive years despite extraordinary global volatility – a claim few of India's peer economies can make. When global crude prices surged following the Ukraine conflict, IOC, BPCL, and HPCL collectively absorbed losses of Rs 24,500 crore to keep petrol and diesel prices frozen for Indian consumers. That is the scale of the commitment India's public sector oil companies made to every household.

The table below places India's record in an international context.

While Pakistan saw petrol rise 55%, Germany 22%, and France 19% over the same period, India's petrol price moved by less than 1%. The direction of travel for India is unmistakable.

India's energy procurement decisions are governed by one principle: the national interest. We source crude from wherever supplies are available, competitively priced, and deliverable – and we will continue to do so. This has been our consistent position across administrations and across geopolitical cycles.

Every decision this government takes in the petroleum sector is tested against three criteria: affordability, availability, and sustainability. These are not aspirations. They are operational commitments with auditable outcomes. On LPG: even as Saudi CP benchmark prices rose 16% between November 2025 and February 2026, domestic LPG prices remained unchanged. IOC, BPCL, and HPCL absorbed losses of approximately Rs 40,000 crore last year to protect the domestic LPG consumer. For PMUY households, the effective price has been reduced by about 39% – from Rs 903 in August 2023 to Rs 553 in February 2026. The cost of clean cooking for a PMUY household now works out to approximately Rs 7.31 per day.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

We live in a world where there is more and more information and less and less meaning - Jean Baudrillard

WEST BENGAL HEADING FOR A LAYERED ELECTORAL BATTLE IN 2026 POLLS



DR. GYAN PATHAK

As West Bengal approaches the 2026 Assembly elections likely to be held in April-May, the contest has moved well beyond a conventional TMC-versus-BJP face-off. What is unfolding is a layered political struggle shaped by the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls, the deployment of central forces, erupting protests across districts, and sharply contrasting campaign strategies adopted by the principal players – the ruling All India Trinamool Congress (TMC) and the opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). It seems that the battle for Bengal's 294 Assembly seats is no longer merely about governance claims or ideological positioning. It has become a contest over electoral legitimacy, administrative control, and booth-level arithmetic.

The SIR has already redrawn the electoral map, and will continue to change the map. It is at the centre of the current political turbulence undertaken by the Election Commission of India. The exercise, aimed at updating and purifying voter rolls, which has resulted in substantial deletions and a large number of voters being placed "under adjudication." SIR has made the situation politically explosive.

For TMC, the revision has become a rallying cry. The party alleges that deletions disproportionately affect specific demographic clusters, particularly in urban pockets, border districts, and refugee-dominated belts. Street protests have erupted in Kolkata, North 24 Parganas, Murshidabad and Nadia, with local TMC leaders staging demonstrations outside electoral offices. Sit-ins and symbolic marches have framed SIR as an attempt at "silent disenfranchisement."

The BJP, in contrast, has strongly defended the revision, presenting it as an overdue clean-up necessary to prevent bogus voting and infiltration-linked irregularities. Its leadership has argued that transparent electoral rolls strengthen democracy and ensure fair competition.

SIR has thus become a campaign issue in itself – influencing narratives, mobilising cadres, and shaping turnout psychology in almost all constituencies.

Adding to the charged environment is the deployment of central armed police forces across sensitive districts. Officially, such deployment is preventive – aimed

at ensuring peaceful conduct of elections in a state historically marked by high-intensity political rivalry.

However, in the current atmosphere, the presence of central forces has acquired symbolic meaning. TMC leaders have criticised what they perceive as an over-centralisation of election management, while BJP leaders have welcomed the deployment, arguing that neutral forces are essential to guarantee free voting.

In districts such as Cooch Behar, North 24 Parganas, Murshidabad and parts of Howrah, visible patrols and flag marches have altered the local campaign mood. In closely contested seats, perceptions of security, intimidation or reassurance can affect turnout behaviour – particularly among marginalised voters.

Thus, administrative arrangements have entered the political narrative, shaping not only optics but potentially the booth-level outcome.

No seat illustrates the convergence of SIR tensions and political symbolism more than Bhabanipur. As Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's constituency, it represents both authority and vulnerability.

Urban voter deletions under SIR have sharpened contestation here. TMC has intensified door-to-door verification campaigns to reassure supporters, while BJP has invested in concentrated organisational presence, framing the seat as a referendum on governance and electoral transparency.

Nandigram remains a high-voltage battleground. Though the core contest is political, SIR and force deployment have layered additional complexity. Campaign rhetoric frequently invokes the need for peaceful polling, reflecting lingering memories of past confrontations.

In North 24 Parganas and Nadia, the Matua-dominated constituencies form a decisive cluster. These seats were critical to BJP's 2021 expansion. Now, SIR has intersected with long-standing anxieties around documentation and citizenship among refugee communities.

TMC's strategy here has been twofold: intensify welfare outreach and organise legal-administrative assistance camps to help voters navigate roll corrections. BJP, meanwhile, continues to foreground national identity narratives and promises of secure citizenship.

Because margins in these

constituencies are often narrow, even minor turnout shifts could flip outcomes across 30-40 seats collectively.

In minority-majority districts like Murshidabad and Malda, SIR has amplified political messaging. TMC has framed the revision as selectively disruptive, mobilising community leaders to encourage verification and participation. BJP has countered with appeals to non-minority voters and emphasised law-and-order themes.

Central force deployment here has been particularly visible. While officially neutral, its presence is interpreted differently by different political constituencies – reinforcing the sense that these districts are strategic nerve centres.

Seats such as Jorasanko, Chowringhee and Howrah South are acutely sensitive to turnout variation. Urban electorates often respond to perceived procedural disruptions with disengagement. Both TMC and BJP are aware that mobilising urban voters requires reassurance and visible campaign energy.

TMC has leaned heavily on its municipal networks and welfare beneficiaries. BJP has focused on anti-incumbency messaging, corruption allegations, and central leadership appeal.

If urban turnout drops, it could unpredictably advantage either side depending on which cadre network proves more effective.

Across rural SC/ST-dominated constituencies, TMC's 60-day outreach programme aims to consolidate its welfare-linked support base. BJP's counter-strategy stresses employment, local grievances, and the promise of political change.

These seats are less affected by abstract constitutional debates and more by tangible delivery. However, any perception that electoral rolls have been disrupted could influence mobilisation efforts here as well.

In North Bengal, BJP retains structural strength. The combination of organisational consolidation and central force presence may embolden its cadres. TMC's objective is damage limitation – preventing a regional sweep that could skew statewide arithmetic.

Out of 294 seats, analysts broadly classify approximately 60-80 as genuine toss-ups. These include: Urban Kolkata battlegrounds; Matua-belt constituencies; Select border seats; and a cluster of semi-urban districts in Howrah and Hooghly

How these seats break will determine whether TMC retains a comfortable majority (projected around 200 seats) or faces a sharper-than-expected challenge from BJP (projected around 70 or more seats).

TMC's strategy is: To frame SIR as a rights-based issue and mobilise protest energy; Reinforce

DIGITAL WAR OF WORDS

We must encourage students from schools & colleges to explore uncharted territories.

Their youthful energy has the potential to drive innovation & achieve wonders!

~ Piyush Goel, Union Minister of Commerce & Industry



welfare networks and booth-level verification drives; Emphasise regional identity and federal autonomy; an Consolidate minority and rural SC/ST voters.

BJP's strategy is: To defend SIR as electoral purification; Leverage central leadership visibility and the Paribartan narrative; Consolidate gains in North Bengal and the Matua belt; and expand urban anti-incumbency sentiment.

TMC remains structurally ahead, but the margin of comfort depends on how the battleground seats respond to SIR-related anxieties and mobilisation drives. BJP's growth trajectory is real, particularly in targeted corridors, yet translating momentum into a majority remains an uphill task.

Ultimately, Bengal's verdict will emerge not only from ideological alignments but from the lived experience of voters navigating revised rolls, security presence, and intense political messaging. The decisive story will unfold constituency by constituency – in the narrow margins where protest, procedure and persuasion intersect.

'Is this the strength of Himanta Biswa Sarma?': Gaurav Gogoi slams police seizure of Congress chargesheet

GUWAHATI

Gaurav Gogoi has criticised the seizure of Congress pamphlets containing allegations against Himanta Biswa Sarma, accusing the state government of attempting to suppress political dissent.

The Assam Pradesh Congress Committee (APCC) alleged that police intercepted a vehicle carrying printed copies of a Congress chargesheet against the Chief Minister and his wife late Sunday night in Guwahati.

Four Congress workers travelling in the vehicle were detained and later arrested.

'Government frightened by pamphlets'

Speaking at a press conference in New Delhi, Gogoi said the seizure of the pamphlets showed the



ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was "frightened by a few sheets of paper".

"The Chief Minister tries to portray himself as a very brave and powerful leader. But some pamphlets published by the Assam Congress have been seized by Himanta Biswa Sarma's police," Gogoi said.

"The chargesheet highlighting the failures of the ruling party has been seized. Is this the strength and courage of Himanta Biswa Sarma?"

He further described the BJP government in Assam as an "authoritarian regime", claiming that voters would respond politically in the 2026 Assam Assembly elections.

Congress leaders seek clarification

Following the incident, Meera Borthakur and Debabrata Bora visited Dispur Police Station seeking

clarification on the police action.

Borthakur said the chargesheet had been officially released during a press conference held during the recent visit of Priyanka Gandhi Vadra to Assam. The printed copies were being transported for public distribution when police allegedly stopped the vehicle.

She questioned why the police intervened when the Election Commission of India had not raised any objection.

Allegations in the chargesheet According to Borthakur, the document raises questions about alleged transfers of tribal land to the Adami Group and claims related to the alleged accumulation of wealth by the Chief Minister's wife.

"If the allegations are false, the government should respond point by point instead of seizing the doc-

uments," she said, adding that the information has already spread online.

The four detained Congress workers - Pranjit Pator, Akshay Kumar Bordoloi, Zainal Abedin and Rakibul Haque - were produced in court on Monday after being arrested. Two of them are members of the National Students' Union of India (NSUI).

The APCC said it has filed bail applications, arguing that the workers should be granted bail and placed under judicial custody instead of police custody. The workers were represented in court by advocate Amon Wadud.

Congress leaders also indicated that the party may pursue legal action over the seizure of the chargesheets and the arrest of the workers.

K. Ranjit Singh resigns as Deputy CLP leader in Manipur Assembly

IMPHAL

Senior Congress leader K. Ranjit Singh has resigned from the post of Deputy Leader of the Congress Legislative Party (CLP) in the Manipur Legislative Assembly, a move that could lead to changes in the party's legislative leadership in the state. According to sources, Singh submitted his resignation letter to Mallikarjun Kharge, requesting to be relieved of his responsibilities as the Deputy CLP leader. In the letter, Singh thanked the party leadership for the opportunity to serve in the role. "It has been an honour to serve the party and uphold its principles and responsibilities. I am sincerely grateful for the trust and opportunity given to me. I request you to kindly accept my resignation," he stated.

A six-time legislator, Singh represents the Sngnu Assembly Constituency in the Manipur Assembly.

The Indian National Congress has not yet issued an official statement regarding the resignation. However, the development is expected to trigger discussions within the state unit about possible restructuring of leadership within the CLP in Manipur. Party leaders are likely to deliberate on the next course of action once the resignation is formally reviewed by the central leadership. KSO slams MP Bimol Akojiam for remarks on Hill Areas Committee in Manipur

The Kuki Students' Organisation General Headquarters (KSO-GHQ) has strongly criticised remarks made by Angomcha Bimol Akojiam questioning the relevance of the Hill Areas Committee (HAC) in the Manipur Legislative Assembly.

In a press statement, the organisation described the MP's comments as "surprising and disappointing," saying they either reflect a misunderstanding of constitutional safeguards for hill areas or an attempt to weaken long-standing protections for indigenous tribal communities.

Indigenous unity more important than Tipra Motha: Pradyot Manikya

AGARTALA

Pradyot Kishore Manikya Debbarma on Monday said the unity and prosperity of indigenous communities are more important than political parties, stressing that divisions among tribal groups would prevent progress. Speaking at the foundation stone laying ceremony of the YBA Community Hall at Anandabazar in Kancharpur, the founder of the Tipra Motha Party urged indigenous people to prioritise solidarity over political affiliations. "Tipra Motha is not important. What is important is how indigenous people of Tripura and beyond can prosper," he said. Pradyot, who is also a royal scion of the former Tripura monarchy, emphasised the need for "Thansa" (unity) among indigenous groups. He said political differences should not divide tribal communities. He noted that political parties such as the Communist Party of India (Marxist), Indian National Congress, Bharatiya Janata Party, Tipra Motha and the Indigenous People's Front of Tripura may have differences, but tribal identity should

come first. He urged members of the Reang community and other tribes to remain united despite religious or political differences. During his address, Pradyot said he feels deeply troubled when he visits Reang-dominated areas and witnesses poverty among tribal communities. "I will not do politics with my youths. From my heart, I am working for the upliftment of tribal youths," he said, adding that his efforts are focused on improving the lives of indigenous people rather than pursuing political gains.

Pradyot urged tribal communities to think beyond immediate political interests and work collectively for the rights, development and dignity of indigenous people.

"Our main fight is for our rights, the upliftment of indigenous people from poverty, and to make indigenous people the owners of Tripura," he said.

He concluded by emphasising that community unity and mutual respect are essential for ensuring a better future for the next generation of indigenous people.

AASU Demands Probe into Claims Students Were Forced to Attend BJP's Jana Ashirwad Yatra

GUWAHATI

The All Assam Students' Union (AASU) has called for an investigation into allegations that students were pressured to participate in the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party's ongoing Jana Ashirwad Yatra in Assam.

The student body raised the demand after reports and viral screenshots surfaced on social media claiming that students from Sati Sadhani University in Golaghat were allegedly asked to attend a rally of Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma and other BJP leaders.

According to the allegations cited by AASU, students were warned that they would be marked absent for three days if they did not stand along the roads and participate in the programme.

AASU reaction
Reacting to the reports in a social

media post, AASU president Utpal Sarma said participation in any political programme should not be imposed on students.

"The Jana Ashirwad Yatra is a party programme of the BJP. No one can force any student to participate in a political party's programme," Sarma said.

He demanded that authorities investigate the allegations and take action against individuals who may have exerted pressure on students.

"Action must be taken against such hypocrites who, under the guise of teachers, exert mental pressure on students in an attempt to get into the BJP's good books," he said.

Sarma further alleged that certain individuals were attempting to convert educational institutions into "political laboratories" to please those in power.

"No one expects those holding

administrative responsibilities in educational institutions and engaged in the noble profession of teaching to be driven by political ideologies. This is a form of academic injustice," he said.

According to the AASU leader, students are being treated like "guinea pigs" in political activities, and he claimed that such practices were allegedly receiving tacit support from the government.

Sarma also cited the case of the principal of Pragiyotish College, claiming that the individual continues to hold the post despite joining the BJP earlier this year.

He contrasted the situation with a previous incident involving the principal of Bhawanipur College in Barpeta, who was suspended for participating in a protest during the constituency delimitation process.

The AASU leader urged author-

ities and educational institutions to refrain from issuing directives that compel students to attend political events.

Meanwhile, the BJP's Jana Ashirwad Yatra entered its eighth day on Monday, continuing its outreach ahead of the upcoming assembly elections.

The day's programme began in Bajali and was scheduled to pass through Tihu before concluding in Nalbari.

Earlier, on March 7, the sixth day of the yatra started from Sarupathar and moved through Golaghat, Khumtai before ending at Dergaon.

According to BJP leaders, the outreach campaign had by then covered 23 assembly constituencies across eight districts, attracting participation from over 10 lakh people and travelling nearly 625 kilometres in its first six days.

80 Police Constable Posts Remain Vacant in Nagaland Recruitment: Deputy CM Y Patton

DIMAPUR

Around 80 vacancies remain unfilled in the ongoing police constable recruitment drive in Nagaland, Deputy Chief Minister Y. Patton informed the state Assembly on Monday.

Responding to a starred question raised by MLA and adviser Tongpang Ozukum, Patton said several districts were unable to fill their allotted quota as candidates failed to qualify in the physical efficiency test conducted as part of the recruitment process.

District-wise vacancies Providing a breakdown of the unfilled posts, Patton said Mokochung has the highest number with 43 vacancies, followed by one vacancy in Longleng, three in Tseminyu, and one in Wokha.

In addition, 30 male and two



female posts remain vacant across the districts of Dimapur,

Chumoukedima and Niuland.

No immediate fresh recruitment During the discussion, Ozukum welcomed the recruitment exercise conducted by the state's home department after a long gap, saying it offered an important opportunity for unemployed youth in the state.

He also asked whether the vacant posts would be filled through a separate recruitment process for the concerned districts.

In response, Patton clarified that no separate recruitment will be conducted immediately, and the vacancies will also not be included in the next departmental recruitment advertisement.

Instead, the backlog vacancies will be advertised separately through a dedicated recruitment drive, while ensuring that the posts remain reserved for the respective districts and tribal communities

concerned.

MLAs raise concerns over recruitment process

Several legislators also participated in the discussion and offered suggestions regarding the recruitment process. Among them were Chief Minister Neiphiu Rio and MLAs Kuzholuzo Nienu, Achumbemo Kikon and Pongshi Phom.

Some members suggested that the authorities should review the weightage assigned to the written examination and instead give greater emphasis to the physical efficiency test, noting that policing duties require strong physical capability.

Patton said the suggestions made by the Assembly members would be examined by the department.

"The views expressed by the members have been taken into consideration, and a report will be sub-

Four Arrested After Police Seize 10 Lakh Congress Leaflets Targeting BJP Government in Assam



GUWAHATI

Four youths were arrested in Guwahati on Monday after police seized nearly 10 lakh printed leaflets containing allegations against the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party-led government and Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma.

Police identified the arrested individuals as Rekitabul Haque, Joyanal Abedin, Akshay Kumar Bordoloi and Pranjit Patar.

A case (No. 135/26) has been registered at Dispur Police Station under several provisions of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, including Sections 61(2), 152, 175, 196, 197 and 353.

According to police, the seizure followed a late-night alert regarding a dispute involving a truck inside a housing society in the Rukmininagar area.

Deputy Commissioner of Police (East) Tabu Ram Pegu said the recovery was made during routine patrolling and an investigation has been launched to determine the source and intended distribution of the printed material.

"When the vehicle was checked, a huge quantity of printed leaflets around 10 lakh was discovered. The materials contained allegations against the Chief Minister and were meant for large-scale distribution," Pegu said.

He added that given the sensitive political climate ahead of the assembly elections in Assam, police registered a case and initiated an investigation to prevent potential law-and-order issues.

Investigators are currently examining where the pamphlets were printed, who financed them and how they were planned to be distributed across the state.

Meanwhile, leaders of the As-

sam Pradesh Congress Committee visited Dispur Police Station and alleged that the action was politically motivated.

Assam Pradesh Mahila Congress president Mira Borthakur said the seized leaflets were newly printed copies of a "chargesheet" released on February 19 during the visit of Priyanka Gandhi Vadra to Assam.

"The chargesheet outlining what the BJP government has done and failed to do for the people was released during a press conference when Priyanka Gandhi visited the state," Borthakur said.

She added that the four youths were only transporting the printed materials when police intercepted the vehicle.

Borthakur also argued that the action was premature since the Model Code of Conduct for the elections had not yet come into force.

"Since no election code of conduct has been issued yet, if there was anything objectionable in the material it should have been examined by the Election Commission, not the police," she said.

According to Congress leaders, the seizure was aimed at preventing the party's campaign materials from reaching voters.

"We respect Assam Police, but the Chief Minister is running the police administration like a private company," Borthakur alleged.

She demanded the immediate release of the arrested individuals and said the party would pursue legal action over the matter.

The incident has triggered a fresh political controversy in the state as campaigning intensifies ahead of the upcoming assembly elections.

Congress Seeks Breakthrough with Rajior Dal as Assam Alliance Talks Remain Stalled

GUWAHATI

The Indian National Congress has expressed hope of reviving its stalled alliance negotiations with Rajior Dal ahead of the upcoming assembly elections in Assam, even as disagreements over seat sharing continue to hold up a final agreement.

Assam Pradesh Congress Committee (APCC) president Gaurav Gogoi said on Monday that the party remains engaged in efforts to reach a consensus with the regional party despite the current deadlock.

"Efforts are still on from our end on how to conclude alliance talks with Rajior Dal and we are expecting a positive outcome. Our discussions on seat sharing are nearing completion with the three parties with whom we held a joint press conference earlier, and we are waiting for a formal announcement," Gogoi said.

He made the remarks while speaking to reporters in New Delhi during a joint programme where former Asom Gana Parishad leader Jayanta Khaund formally joined the Congress.

The alliance talks hit a snag after Rajior Dal chief Akhil Gogoi indicated on Sunday that negotiations had broken down.

According to him, the impasse emerged because the Congress was unwilling to con-

cede the Dhing constituency in Nagaon district to his party as part of the seat-sharing arrangement.

Despite the setback, Congress leaders said they remain hopeful that discussions could still produce a compromise before the election schedule is finalised.

Pamphlet seizure sparks political row
Meanwhile, Gogoi criticised the Assam Police for seizing nearly 10 lakh pamphlets in Guwahati and arresting four Congress workers.

The pamphlets reportedly contained criticism of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party government in Assam and Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma.

Gogoi alleged that the seizure reflected the state government's anxiety over criticism.

"There is a rumour that the Chief Minister is a very powerful leader. But today he appears so scared of a few pamphlets that our materials were seized. These pamphlets simply highlight how the BJP government and the Chief Minister failed to fulfil promises made to the people of Assam," he said.

He further accused the government of undermining democratic practices.

"Do they think that seizing pamphlets will stop people from knowing the truth? Such anti-democratic actions show why people no longer want Sarma as Chief Minister," Gogoi said.

Speaking after joining the Congress, Khaund said he would work towards strengthening the party and contributing to national development.

"Congress has always worked for na-

tional progress, and I will try to contribute to those efforts," he said.

Senior Congress leader Jitendra Singh said Khaund joined the party without placing any conditions. He added that the party's Central Election Committee could consider him for a ticket if it finds him to be a strong candidate.

Election preparations under way
Earlier in the day, D. K. Shivakumar, who has been appointed as the party's observer for the Assam assembly elections, met Gogoi in New Delhi to review the party's preparations.

Shivakumar said discussions focused on electoral strategy and organisational coordination ahead of the polls.

"There was a meeting today regarding the Assam elections, and I am now heading to the party office for further engagements," he told reporters.

In a parallel organisational move, the All India Congress Committee announced the appointment of three new secretaries to the APCC.

Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge approved the appointment of Palash Pawan Saikia, Dipankar Bora and Johnson Sangma as secretaries of the state unit with immediate effect.

The appointments are expected to strengthen the party's organisational structure in Assam as it prepares for a closely contested assembly election.

BJP to Release Assam Poll Candidate List by March 16-17, Says CM Himanta Biswa Sarma

Guwahati/Nalbari, March 9: The Bhar-

Quest!

Lack of sleep causes the brain to remember events incorrectly.

PM Modi is compromised, will get exposed if discussion happens on West Asia in Parliament, says Rahul Gandhi



tests by the Opposition demanding a discussion on the situation in West Asia.

The Lower House will meet again on March 10 at 11:00 A.M. The second phase of the Budget Session began with intense confrontation on Monday as BJP MPs accused the Congress-led opposition of disrupting proceedings with a protest over the West Asia conflict.

Earlier, INDIA bloc MPs protested at the Makar Dwar of Parliament, raising slogans against the Centre over the West Asia conflict. Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha, Rahul Gandhi and LoP in Rajya Sabha, Mallikarjun Kharge, were also among the MPs protesting outside Parliament.

This comes after External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar made a statement in Rajya Sabha regarding the conflict situation in West Asia, while the Opposition demanded a discussion to question the Centre. Addressing the House regarding the volatile situation in West Asia, Jaishankar confirmed that the government has issued formal advisories to Indian nationals residing in Iran and emphasised that the safety of citizens remains the administration's primary concern. "The Prime Minister continues to closely monitor the emerging developments, and relevant ministries are coordinating to ensure effective responses," Jaishankar stated.

There is unlikely to any discussion in Parliament on the West Asia Conflict, as according to parliamentary rules, there are no provisions for a discussion if a suo motto statement is made by a minister on an urgent matter, said sources.

after that. Is West Asia not important? Fuel price and economic devastation are not important matters of discussion. These are public issues," Rae Bareilly MP said.

Gandhi said the Prime Minister will not be able to face the Parliament if a discussion is held on the West Asia crisis in both Houses. "We deem these important and want a discussion... But they do not want a discussion because other things will come out of that, because the PM's position will come out of it. He will get exposed. How he is compromised and how he is being blackmailed will come up. So, they do not want to discuss. You saw how the PM ran away from the Parliament. He will not be able to come, I am telling you," he said.

Proceedings in the Lok Sabha adjourned on Monday amid noisy pro-

No immediate hike in petrol, diesel prices; adequate stock to meet any contingency: Govt sources

NEW DELHI

Petrol and diesel prices will not be increased for now despite international crude oil rates crossing USD 100 per barrel, government sources said on Monday, even as authorities stepped up efforts to maintain uninterrupted fuel supply lines across the country.

As the conflict in West Asia entered the tenth day, world markets plummeted, and Brent crude oil, the international standard, surged to nearly USD 120 a barrel, about 65 per cent higher than when the war started, before retreating.

Top government sources said the government is closely monitoring global oil markets, but there is no immediate plan to raise retail fuel prices. Oil marketing companies are expected to absorb the current cost pressure for the time being.

While the country has adequate stocks of both raw material (crude oil) and finished products (fuels) to meet requirements for the next 6-8 weeks, the government has tweaked the policy for ordering a cooking gas LPG refill.

The minimum gap for booking a domestic LPG refill has been increased to 25 days from the current 21 days, a move aimed at preventing hoarding and ensuring equitable distribution of cylinders.

Sources said the minimum waiting period for booking a domestic LPG cylinder refill increased from 21 days to 25 days to prevent hoarding.

Average households consume 7-8 LPG cylinders of 14.2 kg in a year and should normally not need a refill in less than 6 weeks, they said, adding the refill booking period has been increased to prevent hoarding and creation of artificial scarcity in the market.

The oil companies have an adequate stock of LPG, they added.

Sources said the government is closely monitoring the evolving global energy situation and has taken steps to ensure that supply chains remain stable.



The widening conflict in the Middle East, which began on February 28 when the United States and Israel carried out strikes on Iran, followed by retaliatory attacks from Tehran, has disrupted energy flows through the Strait of Hormuz.

The narrow shipping corridor is a crucial artery for India's energy supplies, with about 40-50 per cent of the country's crude oil imports and nearly 85-90 per cent of its LPG shipments from Gulf nations passing through the route.

Sources said that while there is enough crude oil available from alternative sources, such as Russia, replacing any loss of LPG supplies is more time-consuming, as other alternative sources are largely located in the United States and Canada.

To ensure uninterrupted supplies, the government has ordered refineries to maximise LPG production and not use any of its streams for making petrochemicals.

On petrol and diesel, the situation is "very comfortable", one of the sources said.

"Every petrol pump in the country is functioning, every piped natural gas (to household kitchens) is operational, every CNG station is

open," he said. "There is no cause for panic."

For India, which imports 88 per cent of its requirement of crude oil, which is turned into fuels like petrol and diesel at refineries, higher global prices translate into a larger import bill and potential inflationary pressures.

However, retail fuel prices are not expected to be raised immediately, as the government continues to follow a calibrated policy of allowing companies to build margins when international prices are low and cushioning consumers when rates rise, sources said.

Retail petrol and diesel prices have been on a freeze since April 2022, with fuel retailers like Indian Oil Corporation (IOC), Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd (BPCL) and Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Ltd (HPCL) absorbing losses when crude prices are high and making profits when rates are low. This meant that when global fuel prices went up in response to elevated crude prices, prices were stable in India. And when softening of crude prices pushed down fuel rates globally, rates in India remained unchanged.

The government wants to con-

tinue to shield consumers, and the same policy will continue unless there is a huge spike in crude prices, they said.

India imports 88 per cent of its crude oil needs and roughly half of its natural gas requirement. These mostly come via the Strait of Hormuz.

As India scouts for more LPG and gas supplies, some recalibration in supplies to different sectors is being done.

Following the US and Israeli attacks on Iranian government, military and nuclear facilities, Iran warned shipping away from the strait, and insurers withdrew coverage, effectively halting tanker movements.

"They (oil companies) have enough cushion to sustain this kind of price spike," a source with direct knowledge of the matter said.

"We have seen prices rise to USD 119 per barrel in June 2022 in the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. That year, they had nominal profits, but in FY24, they posted record Rs 81,000 crore profit."

This year, the three companies have posted Rs 23,743 crore profit in the December quarter alone.

INTERNATIONAL

Global stocks tumble as oil briefly nears USD 120 amid fears Iran war could choke supplies through Hormuz

NEW YORK

Stock markets shuddered worldwide Monday on worries about whether the global economy can withstand spiking prices for oil, which briefly got to nearly \$120 per barrel, their highest level since four summers ago.

The S&P 500 fell 1.3%, coming off its worst week since October. The Dow Jones Industrial Average was down 721 points, or 1.5%, as of 9:35 a.m. Eastern time, and the Nasdaq composite was 1.2% lower. That followed even worse losses in European and Asian stock markets.

Since the war with Iran began with attacks by the United States and Israel, the central worry for financial markets has been how high oil prices will go because of it and how long they will stay there. Early Monday, the price for a barrel of Brent crude, the international standard, briefly touched \$119.50. It hasn't been that expensive since the summer after Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, another military conflict that likewise raised the risk for blockages in the global flow of oil.

If oil prices stay very high for very long, households' budgets that are already stretched by high inflation could break under the pressure. Companies, meanwhile, would see their own bills jump for fuel and to stock items on their store shelves or in their data warehouses. It all raises the possibility of a worst-case scenario for the global economy "stagnation," where growth stagnates and inflation remains high.

To be sure, oil prices pared their huge gains Monday following talk that some of the world's largest economies could coordinate a response to the spiking price of oil. A barrel of Brent crude pulled back to \$101.76, though that's still up 9.8% from Friday.

A barrel of benchmark U.S. crude, meanwhile, jumped 9.6% to \$99.59 after briefly spiking as high as \$119.48.

The U.S. stock market has a history of bouncing back relatively quickly from



past military conflicts, such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, as long as oil prices don't stay too high for too long. And for all of the recent swings in the market, the S&P 500 index that sits at the heart of many 401(k) accounts is still within 5% of its record set in January.

That has some professional investors suggesting drops in prices for stocks could ultimately offer opportunities to buy them at cheaper levels before they rise again.

"We continue to believe that the current acute shortage of oil will be reversed in the coming months as new supply comes online and oil should drop significantly," according to Sameer Samana, head of global equities and real assets at Wells Fargo Investment Institute.

All that hinges, though, on the flow of oil returning toward normal. At the moment, it's far from that.

Consider the Strait of Hormuz, a narrow waterway off Iran's coast that a fifth of the world's oil sails through on

a typical day. Now, tanker traffic has all but stopped because of worries about a possible attack by Iran.

If the strait remains closed for only a few weeks, the price of oil could push to \$150 per barrel of higher, according to oil and gas strategists at Macquarie Research.

"Although we are not attempting to predict how long Hormuz transit will be substantially or completely curtailed, we are growing more confident that without an agreement and a fast cessation of all kinetic activity, the crude market will begin to break in days, and not in weeks or months," the strategists led by Vikas Dwivedi wrote in a report.

The most immediate pain on Wall Street is hitting companies that have already big fuel bills.

Carnival lost 7.3% because it has to fill huge cruise ships with fuel. United Airlines sank 6.9%, and Old Dominion Freight fell 3.8%.

Retailers who have to ship in prod-

ucts from far away, while also needing their customers to have enough budget space leftover after gasoline to spend, also struggled. Best Buy fell 4.4%, and Williams-Sonoma dropped 4%.

In stock markets abroad, where economies are more dependent on the import of oil and natural gas, stocks fell even more. South Korea's KOSPI sank 6%, Japan's Nikkei 225 tumbled 5.2% and France's CAC 40 dropped 1.7%.

A Chinese special envoy to the Middle East, Zhai Jun, called for an end to the attacks and said strikes on non-military targets and civilians should be condemned. Meanwhile, South Korean President Lee Jae Myung warned against hoarding, panic buying and collusion between refiners and gas stations.

Both sides in the war struck new targets over the weekend, including civilian ones. Bahrain accused Iran of hitting one of the desalination plants that are crucial for drinking water in Gulf countries. Its national oil company declared force majeure after the country's sole oil refinery was attacked. Israel struck oil depots in Tehran, sending up thick smoke and causing environmental alerts.

President Donald Trump said late Sunday that high oil prices at the moment are worth the cost.

"Short term oil prices, which will drop rapidly when the destruction of the Iran nuclear threat is over, is a very small price to pay for U.S.A., and World, Safety and Peace," he said in a posting on his social media network.

In the bond market, the yield on the 10-year Treasury remained at 4.15%, where it was late Friday.

Worries about high inflation and oil prices are pushing upward on Treasury yields. But worries about a potentially slowing economy are pulling downward at the same time.

Worries about possible stagflation worsened Friday following a surprisingly weak report on the U.S. job market showing that employers cut more jobs last month than they added.

Macron says France, allies preparing 'defensive' mission to reopen Strait of Hormuz



PAPHOS

President Emmanuel Macron on Monday warned that an attack on Cyprus was an attack on all of Europe and said France and its allies were preparing a "defensive" mission to reopen the Strait of Hormuz as the Middle East war entered its second week.

Speaking during a visit to Cyprus to discuss regional security, Macron said the mission would be aimed at escorting container ships and tankers in order to gradually reopen the Strait of Hormuz "after the end of the hottest phase of the conflict".

"This is essential for international trade, but also for the flow of gas and oil, which must be able to leave this region once again," said Macron in Paphos on the southwestern coast of Cyprus.

Speaking alongside Cypriot President Nikos Christodoulides and Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos

Mitsotakis, Macron said a "purely defensive, purely support mission" will be put together by European and non-European states.

The European Union on Monday said it was ready to "enhance" its operations to protect maritime traffic in the Middle East.

The EU has been discussing reinforcing its naval mission in the Red Sea after US-Israeli attacks on Iran triggered a broader regional war.

Maritime traffic in the Strait of Hormuz, a key Gulf waterway through which a fifth of global crude passes, has all but halted since the war broke out on February 28.

Macron visited Cyprus after the island nation and EU member was targeted by Iranian-made drones in early March.

The French leader said an attack on Cyprus was an attack on all of Europe.

"When Cyprus is attacked, it is Europe that is attacked," he said.

"We will not accept that the slightest piece of European territory, like Cyprus, be exposed to danger," added Mitsotakis.

The drone attack in Cyprus led to France's deployment of the Charles de Gaulle aircraft carrier to the Mediterranean, as well as a frigate and air defence units to the island.

Paris has insisted its stance in the region is "strictly defensive".

Later Monday, Macron was set to board the Charles de Gaulle carrier, which according to his office is currently stationed off the coast of Crete.

Once on board, Macron will speak with the sailors serving in the carrier strike group, the Elysee said.

France's flagship is at the heart of a French naval operation that will also mobilise eight frigates and two amphibious helicopter carriers in a vast area including the eastern Mediterranean, the Red Sea and the Strait of Hormuz, he said.

A French frigate was already taking part in the EU's "Operation Aspidochelone", which was launched in the Red Sea in 2024 to prevent attacks on trade vessels by Iran-backed Houthi rebel forces.

Macron said that France would contribute "in the long term" with two frigates to Operation Aspidochelone.

"What we want to do is to ensure freedom of navigation and maritime security," he said.

Separately, Macron on Monday morning spoke to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu about the situation in the Middle East and Lebanon, the Elysee said.

Beyond Hydropower: Rethinking Energy and Climate Strategy for India's North-East



India's North-East has long been described as the nation's "Ashtalakshmi" - a constellation of eight states blessed with rich forests, powerful rivers, cultural diversity and immense strategic value. Positioned at the crossroads of South and Southeast Asia, the region holds enormous geopolitical and economic significance. Yet despite this abundance, development outcomes across much of the region have remained uneven and fragile.

For decades, structural constraints such as weak infrastructure, geographic isolation, limited industrialisation and fragile connectivity have slowed the region's economic progress. But today, a new possibility is emerging: energy transformation as the catalyst for a different development trajectory.

However, the question confronting policymakers today is not simply how to generate more energy in the North-East. The deeper challenge is how to design an energy strategy that balances growth with ecological preservation, climate resilience and the well-being of communities that live within one of the most fragile landscapes in Asia.

The region's future will depend less on how much energy it produces, and more on how wisely it integrates energy planning with environmental stewardship and regional development.

Unlike many other parts of India, the North-East sits within the Eastern Himalayan ecological corridor - a globally recognised biodiversity hotspot. Its forests, rivers and mountains are not merely natural resources; they provide critical ecosystem services such as carbon sequestration, water regulation and slope stability.

These environmental systems underpin both regional livelihoods and broader climate security for India.

At the same time, the North-East is among the country's most climate-vulnerable regions. Rising temperatures, erratic rainfall patterns and increasingly frequent extreme weather events are already reshaping the landscape. Floods along the Brahmaputra basin are intensifying, riverbank erosion continues to displace communities in Assam, and landslides are becoming more common across hill states.

In such a setting, conventional development models built around large-scale infrastructure expansion risk generating unintended consequences.

Energy planning, therefore, must evolve from a narrow supply-driven approach to one that integrates climate risk, environmental sustainability and community resilience.

If one resource defines the energy future of the North-East, it is water.

The mighty Brahmaputra river system and its numerous tributaries cascade down the Eastern Himalayas, creating one of the largest hydropower potentials in the country. Estimates suggest the region possesses more than 60 gigawatts of exploitable hydropower capacity.

Yet only a small fraction of this potential has been harnessed.

Large projects like the Subansiri Lower Hydroelectric Project represent the scale of ambition associated with hydropower expansion in the region. When fully operational, such projects could significantly increase the supply of renewable electricity not only for the North-East but also for the national grid.

Supporters of hydropower argue that these projects offer a rare opportunity: clean electricity

generation combined with regional economic benefits such

as infrastructure development, employment and revenue generation for state governments.

However, hydropower development in the Himalayas also carries serious risks.

The region sits in a highly seismic zone. Geological instability, frequent landslides and intense rainfall patterns complicate dam construction and reservoir management. Climate change is further increasing hydrological uncertainties, with glacier melt and erratic rainfall altering river flow patterns.

In the Brahmaputra basin, floods are already becoming more intense and prolonged. Any alteration in river systems - whether through dams or reservoirs - must therefore be carefully studied.

There are also concerns about sedimentation, which is particularly significant in Himalayan rivers that carry heavy silt loads. Poorly planned projects could lead to reservoir degradation and affect downstream ecosystems.

Equally important are the social dimensions of hydropower development. Many proposed projects affect indigenous communities and fragile ecosystems. Without transparent environmental assessments and meaningful consultation with local populations, energy infrastructure risks generating long-term social tensions.

Hydropower, therefore, cannot be approached as a simple engineering solution. It requires basin-level planning, climate-informed design and strong institutional oversight.

Transmission: The Missing Link in the Energy Chain

Even where electricity generation has improved, the North-East has historically faced a different challenge - delivering power reliably across difficult terrain.

Weak transmission infrastructure, outdated substations and high technical losses have often undermined the benefits of energy production. Many areas have experienced power outages despite being located close to generating stations.

Addressing these structural constraints requires modernising the electricity grid.

Upgrading transmission corridors, deploying smart-grid technologies and strengthening distribution networks will be essential to ensure reliable supply. Real-time monitoring systems, better maintenance practices and improved financial management of power utilities can also significantly reduce transmission losses.

Transmission infrastructure is not merely a technical issue; it is central to economic development. Reliable electricity underpins manufacturing, agriculture processing, tourism and digital connectivity.

Without a robust grid, even large increases in power genera-

tion may fail to translate into economic transformation.

Regional Energy Cooperation: A Strategic Opportunity

The North-East's location also presents an opportunity that remains underutilised: regional electricity trade.

Bordering countries such as Bhutan, Bangladesh and Myanmar, the region could emerge as an energy exchange corridor connecting South and Southeast Asia.

Bhutan already exports hydropower to India, and Bangladesh has shown increasing interest in electricity imports to support its growing economy. Improved transmission links could enable the North-East to play a central role in cross-border energy markets.

Such cooperation offers multiple benefits. It strengthens regional economic ties, creates stable revenue streams and contributes to geopolitical stability through shared infrastructure and mutual dependence.

For India's broader "Act East" policy, energy cooperation could become one of the most practical instruments of regional integration.

Electrification Is Not Enough

Over the past decade, significant progress has been made in expanding electricity access across the North-East. Most villages and households are now connected to the grid.

But electrification statistics alone do not capture the full picture.

Reliable power supply remains uneven in many areas. Voltage fluctuations, outages and high distribution losses continue to affect both households and businesses.

The next phase of energy reform must therefore focus on service quality rather than mere connectivity.

Farmers require stable electricity to operate irrigation pumps and cold storage facilities. Small enterprises depend on predictable power supply to remain competitive. Tourism - a major economic opportunity in states like Meghalaya and Sikkim - requires reliable hospitality infrastructure.

Similarly, digital education, telemedicine and online public services cannot function effectively without consistent electricity.

Improving power reliability is thus central to unlocking the region's broader economic potential.

Oil and Gas: A Legacy That Still Matters

While renewable energy now dominates global climate discussions, hydrocarbons remain an important part of the North-East's economic landscape.

Assam has historically been the birthplace of India's oil industry, and the region continues to contribute significantly to the country's crude oil and natural gas output.

Efforts such as the Hydrocarbon Vision 2030 initiative aim to revitalise this sector by encouraging exploration, modernising infrastructure and expanding downstream industries.

The development of the North-East Gas Grid represents a major step toward integrating regional gas resources with national markets. Natural gas is widely seen as a transition fuel - cleaner than coal and capable of supporting industrial growth while renewable capacity expands.

Gas infrastructure can also support city gas distribution networks, compressed natural gas transport systems and petrochemical clusters.

For a region that has long struggled with industrialisation, these developments could generate new economic opportunities and employment.

Decentralised Renewable Energy: Powering Remote Communities

While large energy projects often dominate policy discussions, smaller decentralised systems may have equally transformative potential.

The North-East's rugged terrain makes grid expansion expensive in remote villages and hill districts. Decentralised renewable solutions - such as solar mini-grids, rooftop solar installations and biomass-based energy systems - can provide reliable local power where centralised infrastructure struggles to reach.

The region's abundant biomass resources, including bamboo and agricultural residues, offer promising opportunities for community-based energy production.

Decentralised energy systems also enhance resilience. When floods or landslides disrupt the central grid, local generation can sustain essential services such as health-care facilities, schools and communication networks.

For remote communities, such systems often provide not just electricity but also a sense of energy independence.

Critical Minerals: Opportunity with Environmental Risks

Another emerging dimension of the region's energy landscape lies beneath its soil.

The North-East is believed to contain deposits of critical minerals such as graphite and rare earth elements - ma-

terials essential for electric vehicles, batteries and renewable energy technologies.

As the global economy accelerates its shift toward clean energy, demand for these minerals is rising rapidly.

For India, developing domestic sources of critical minerals has strategic importance, reducing reliance on imports and strengthening supply chains.

However, mining activities in ecologically fragile mountain ecosystems pose serious risks.

Without strict environmental safeguards and transparent governance, mineral extraction could damage forests, water systems and community livelihoods. Any strategy for critical mineral development must therefore prioritise ecological protection and equitable benefit-sharing with local populations.

Climate Resilience Must Guide Development

Across the North-East, climate risks are becoming increasingly visible. Assam's Brahmaputra valley experiences devastating floods almost every year, displacing thousands of families and eroding agricultural land. Hill states face growing threats from landslides triggered by extreme rainfall.

These are not isolated incidents but part of a broader pattern driven by climate change.

Development planning in the region must therefore incorporate long-term climate projections and disaster risk assessments.

Infrastructure - whether roads, dams or transmission lines - should be designed to withstand extreme weather conditions. Basin-level environmental assessments should guide hydropower development to avoid cumulative ecological damage.

Equally important is the integration of indigenous knowledge. Local communities have long managed forests, rivers and slopes using practices adapted to fragile ecosystems. These insights should inform modern development strategies rather than being overlooked.

Toward a New Energy Vision for the North-East

The North-East possesses all the ingredients to become a dynamic energy hub. Its hydropower potential is immense, its hydrocarbon resources remain significant, and new opportunities are emerging in renewable energy and critical minerals.

But the region's transformation cannot be measured solely in megawatts generated or infrastructure built.

True progress will depend on whether energy development improves livelihoods, strengthens climate resilience and preserves the ecological wealth that defines the region.

This requires a new policy mindset - one that moves beyond sectoral planning and embraces integrated development strategies linking energy, environment, disaster management and community participation.

If pursued thoughtfully, energy can become more than a commodity in the North-East. It can serve as the foundation for a development model that is resilient, inclusive and environmentally responsible.

Such an approach would finally allow the region to realise the promise long associated with the idea of the "Ashtalakshmi" - not merely as a symbol of abundance, but as a living example of sustainable development in one of the world's most extraordinary landscapes.

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