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# HSLC 2026 Results Show Uptick in Pass Rate; Dima Hasao Emerges Top

GUWAHATI

The Assam State School Education Board on Friday declared the results of the High School Leaving Certificate (HSLC) Examination 2026, recording an overall pass percentage of 65.62 per cent-an improvement of approximately 2.5 percentage points over the previous year.

The results reflect a steady upward trend in academic performance across the state, with over 2.81 lakh students successfully clearing the examination and several districts registering strong outcomes.

Topping the state this year is Jyotimoy Das of Sankardev Sishu Niketan, Patacharkuchi in Bajali district. The second position was secured by Akanksha Bhuyan of Ambikagiri Rai Choudhury Jatiya Vidyalaya in Biswanath. The third rank was jointly held by Jiya Farah Islam from Little Flower HS School, Dibrugarh, and Surajit Akhtar of Little Flowers School, Nalbari.



According to official data, out of 4,38,564 candidates who registered for the examination, 4,29,249 students appeared, and 2,81,701 passed. A total of 9,315 candidates were absent, while five results were withheld and 135 students were expelled.

A closer look at the division-wise performance shows that 85,189 students secured first division, 1,50,167

achieved second division, and 46,345 passed in third division-indicating a gradual decline in lower-tier results and an overall improvement in quality outcomes.

Gender-wise analysis reveals that boys outperformed girls this year, with a pass percentage of 67.78 per cent compared to 63.96 per cent among female candidates. In terms of

merit achievements, 3,983 students secured distinction marks, while 13,681 earned star marks and 99,052 candidates obtained letter marks, highlighting strong academic performance across multiple categories.

District-wise, Dima Hasao emerged as the top-performing district with an impressive pass percentage of 88.23 per cent. It was followed by Sivasagar at 84.08 per cent and Dibrugarh at 78.46 per cent. At the other end of the spectrum, Cachar recorded the lowest pass percentage at 49.13 per cent.

ASSEB Chairman R.C. Jain noted that the results indicate consistent academic progress in the state. He highlighted the decline in the number of students in the third division as a positive sign of improving educational standards.

Jain also announced that compartmental examinations will be held in May. Students who have failed in a maximum of three subjects and secured at least 170 aggregate marks will be eligible to appear.

Welcoming the improved performance, Education Minister Ranaj Pegu said the rise in pass percentage reflects encouraging progress in the state's education sector.

Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma congratulated the successful candidates, expressing hope that their achievements would open new avenues for the future. He also urged those who did not meet expectations to remain determined and continue striving for success.

Echoing similar sentiments, Assam Jatiya Parishad president Lurinjyoti Gogoi extended his best wishes to students, encouraging them to use their success as a stepping stone while advising others to persist in their efforts.

The HSLC 2026 results, marked by improved pass rates and strong district-level performances, are being seen as a positive indicator of gradual strengthening in Assam's school education system.

## Heavy Security Blanket for TTAADC Polls as Campaigning Draws to a Close in Tripura

AGARTALA

Campaigning for the elections to the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council is set to conclude on Friday evening, with authorities rolling out extensive security arrangements, including the deployment of 24 companies of Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF), to ensure peaceful polling.

Voting for the high-stakes council elections will be held on April 12 across 28 constituencies, while counting of votes and declaration of results are scheduled for April 17.

The polls are expected to witness a keenly contested four-cornered battle, with major political parties-the Bharatiya Janata Party, Communist Party of India (Marxist), Indian National Congress, and Tripura Motha Party-fielding candidates across all seats. The Indigenous People's Front of Tripura is also in the fray, further intensifying the electoral contest.

In the run-up to the polls, political parties undertook extensive campaigning across the state, organising rallies, bike processions, door-to-door outreach programmes, and street-corner meetings to mobilise voters.

Tripura Director General of Police Anurag said elaborate measures have been put in place to ensure free, fair, and peaceful elections. Security personnel from Tripura Police and Tripura State Rifles will be deployed at all polling stations, which have been categorised based on their vulnerability.

WHO SAID WHAT



**TMC means - Too Much Crime - Too Much Corruption - Too Much Cut-Money - Too Much Conspiracy**  
~ Shivraj Singh houhan

## Manipur CM Pushes Hill Outreach with High-Security Senapati Visit Amid Tensions



IMPHAL

In a significant political and administrative outreach amid continuing tensions in Manipur's hill districts, Chief Minister Y. Khemchand Singh on Friday visited Senapati district, travelling through the Kuki-dominated Kangpokpi corridor under heavy security cover. The high-profile visit, marked by tight security arrangements and multi-layered deployment of forces, is being viewed as a calibrated attempt by the state government to reconnect with hill communities and reinforce its presence in sensitive regions. The Chief Minister's convoy passed through strategically vulnerable stretches, reflecting both the fragility of the situation and the administration's determination to maintain engagement on the ground. Accompanying the Chief Minister were Deputy Chief Minister Loshii Dikho and legislators Awangbow Newmai, Robinro, and J. Kumo Sha, signalling a coordinated political outreach effort across party and regional lines.

During his visit, Singh inaugurated a Multi-Level Parking facility alongside an Inter-State and Inter-District Agriculture and Economic Transportation Hub at the Senapati district headquarters. Designed to accommodate 147 vehicles, the infrastructure is expected to significantly improve logistical connectivity, facilitate smoother trade flows, and open new economic avenues for the region. Officials said the transportation hub

would serve as a critical node for agricultural produce movement, linking remote hill areas with larger markets and helping to reduce bottlenecks that have long constrained economic activity in the district.

In addition to economic infrastructure, the Chief Minister also inaugurated multi-purpose community halls in Khabadukung and Sangkumei villages. These facilities are intended to function as shared spaces for social gatherings, cultural programmes, and community-level engagements, aimed at strengthening local cohesion in a region marked by ethnic sensitivities. Further underscoring the government's focus on social development, Singh laid foundation stones for 69 Anganwadi centres under the SASCI initiative. The centres are expected to enhance access to early childhood care and pre-school education, while also providing support systems for working families in rural and semi-urban pockets.

Addressing local stakeholders, the Chief Minister described the projects as part of a broader roadmap for inclusive growth and grassroots empowerment. He emphasised that the government remains committed to bridging developmental gaps between the valley and hill districts, and to ensuring that public services reach even the most remote habitations. "The initiatives reflect our vision of a stronger, more inclusive Manipur where development is not confined to specific regions but shared across communities," Singh said during the programme.

The visit comes at a time when Manipur continues to grapple with sporadic unrest and deep-seated mistrust between communities. Against this backdrop, the successful execution of the Chief Minister's tour without major incident is being interpreted as a cautiously positive signal.

## Telangana HC Grants Transit Bail to Pawan Khera in Assam CM Row

GUWAHATI

In a temporary legal relief for Congress leader Pawan Khera, the Telangana High Court has granted him transit anticipatory bail for one week in connection with a case registered by Assam Police over allegations targeting Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma and his wife Riniki Bhuyan Sarma.

The interim protection allows Khera time to approach the appropriate court in Assam for regular anticipatory bail. Hearing the plea, Justice Sujana Kalasikam directed the Congress spokesperson to file his application within a week before the court having jurisdiction over the matter.

"The petitioner is granted time for one week to file an application before the concerned court," the court observed while extending conditional relief for the interim period. Appearing on behalf of Khera, senior advocate Abhishek Manu Singhvi argued that the FIR lodged by Assam Police was politically motivated and intended to pressure an opposition figure. He contended that even if Khera's statements were found to be incorrect, the matter would fall under defamation and did not warrant arrest.

"Khera is not absconding. He is ready to cooperate. He approached this court as he was in Hyderabad with his wife when he came to know about the FIR," Singhvi submitted.

Opposing the plea, Assam Advocate General Devajit Saikia questioned the maintainability of the petition in Hyderabad. He argued that Khera, a resident of Delhi, had not demonstrated sufficient grounds for seeking anticipatory bail outside Assam, where the case was registered.

## High Voter Turnout Signals Strong Engagement: Himanta



GUWAHATI

Citing robust participation across communities in the ongoing Assembly elections, Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Thursday said the polls witnessed "unusual enthusiasm," reflecting heightened public engagement in the democratic process.

Speaking to reporters at Vajpayee Bhawan in Guwahati after the conclusion of polling, Sarma pointed to several constituencies where voter turnout cut across community lines. He highlighted the example of Golakganj, where participation in both Hindu-majority and minority-dominated booths was nearly equal, with some areas recording turnout figures as high as 95 per cent.

"This time, people have voted with unusual enthusiasm. The turnout across communities has been very encouraging," the Chief Minister said.

Buoyed by the high voter turnout, Sarma expressed confidence that the BJP-led alliance is poised for a decisive mandate. He projected that the alliance could secure more than 90 seats in the 126-member Assam Legislative Assembly, adding that even crossing the 100-seat mark would not be unexpected. However, he noted that caution remains necessary until the electoral process is fully completed.

Assessing the opposition's prospects, Sarma predicted a limited electoral performance. He said the All India United Democratic Front might secure around four to five seats, while the Indian National Congress could remain below the 20-seat mark. According to him, a strong showing by the BJP would significantly constrain the opposition's overall tally. The Chief Minister also criticised the opposition's "three Gogois" narrative, suggesting it failed to resonate with voters. "People have not appreciated the concept. BJP candidates, including our Gogoi, will win with comfortable margins," he said.

Responding to allegations raised earlier by Congress leader Pawan Khera, Sarma dismissed them as baseless and questioned the credibility of the claims, stating that such accusations lacked substantiation.

With polling now complete, attention shifts to the counting of votes scheduled for May 4, when the final electoral outcome will determine whether the ruling alliance's projections translate into a renewed mandate.

# Highest ever voter turnout testimony not only for India but for entire democratic world: CEC Gyanesh Kumar



NEW DELHI

With the polling for the general elections to the legislative Assemblies of Assam, Kerala and Puducherry ended with record voting, Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar on Thursday said, they are historical testimony not only for India but for the entire democratic world.

In an official statement Kumar

said, "Assembly Elections 2026 in Assam, Kerala and Puducherry are a historic testimony not only for India but for the entire democratic World. On behalf of the ECI, I congratulate each and every elector of Assam, Puducherry and Kerala for this historic achievement. Chunav ka Parv, Matdaata ka Garv!"

The assembly elections in the two states and Union Territory of

Puducherry, along with bye-elections in four Assembly constituencies across Karnataka, Nagaland and Tripura, remained largely peaceful and unprecedented voter participation in key regions, officials in the Election Commission of India (ECI) said.

Explaining further the highest ever voters' turnouts in last 50 years, a source in the ECI said electors have a very high trust in the poll panel led by CEC Gyanesh Kumar.

"As per Article 324 of the Constitution of India, the ECI has two main roles to play including preparation of Electoral Rolls, which was conducted with electors having a very high trust in transparent Special Intensive Revision (SIR) by the poll panel and the conduct of elections during which electors have showed a very high trust in transparent conduct of elections."

With such a high faith of electors in elections conducted by the ECI, India is a much stronger Democracy now, they added.

CEC Gyanesh Kumar congratulates electors of Assam, Puducherry, Kerala; calls Assembly elections



"testimony" for democratic world.

According to the ECI, the final voters' turnout in Assam and

Puducherry recorded the highest-ever, with 85.38 per cent and 89.83 per cent, respectively. These surpassed

the previous records of 84.67 per cent in Assam (2016) and 86.19 per cent in Puducherry (2011). Kerala also witnessed a robust turnout of 78.03 per cent, reflecting strong voter participation.

In an official statement the ECI said, a total of over 5.31 crore voters exercised their franchise across 296 Assembly constituencies in Assam, Kerala and Puducherry.

Simultaneously, in bye-elections, which were held in four constituencies - two in Karnataka, one in Nagaland and one in Tripura, turnout was around 68 per cent in Karnataka and over 82 per cent in Nagaland's Koridang constituency.

"Polling began at 7 am across 63,084 polling stations and was conducted smoothly, with only a few minor incidents reported. Over 2.5 lakh polling personnel had reached their assigned stations a day in advance, ensuring timely commencement of voting. Mock polls were conducted before the start of voting in the presence of more than 1.8 lakh polling agents representing 1,899 candidates," the ECI said.



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## FRAGILE US-IRAN CEASEFIRE

**A**fter 39 days of a war that shocked the world in its ferocity, spread and sheer economic devastation, the United States and Iran agreed to a two-week ceasefire – a fragile, contested and deeply provisional pause that, nonetheless, represents the most significant diplomatic development since hostilities erupted on 28th February. Better sense has prevailed, even if only partially. The initiative deserves acknowledgement, even as the world holds its breath about what comes next. This was never a conventional war. What began as a declared act of punishment – the US and Israel framing their assault on Iran as the long-overdue settling of accounts over Tehran’s nuclear ambitions, its ballistic missile arsenal and its network of regional proxies – swiftly transformed into something far messier and more consequential. Within days of the opening salvos, the Strait of Hormuz, through which 20 per cent of the world’s oil and natural gas passes, was strangled. From that moment, the war ceased to be primarily a geopolitical confrontation and became an economic emergency for the entire planet. The world’s supply chains convulsed. Freight rates soared. Energy markets went haywire. Stock markets shed billions in a matter of days. What started as a punitive campaign ended, in effect, as a desperate scramble to reopen a waterway.

The human and material toll is staggering. With millions displaced and the death toll yet to be calculated, the miseries are far from over. Across the Gulf Arab states, oilfields, gas processing facilities and critical infrastructure have been gutted by Iranian missile and drone attacks. When historians eventually tally the final accounting, the economic damage – across shattered oil fields, paralysed shipping lanes, collapsed investment sentiment, and pulverised Government finances – will run into the trillions of dollars. Every nation touched by the Strait’s closure has bled.

The ceasefire announcement brought oil prices down and Asian stock markets up within hours – a testament to just how badly the world economy needed any signal of de-escalation. Yet the relief is tempered by the extraordinary ambiguity of the terms, or indeed the lack of them. Washington and Tehran appear to be operating from different scripts. President Trump initially praised an Iranian ten-point plan as “workable” before calling it fraudulent without elaboration. Pakistan, which emerged as a mediator, declared the ceasefire immediate and inclusive of the Lebanon front – only for Israel’s Prime Minister Netanyahu to repudiate that interpretation within hours, vowing to continue operations against Hezbollah. As the ceasefire was being announced, missile alerts sounded across the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Kuwait. A gas facility in Abu Dhabi was ablaze. In Tehran, headline demonstrators burnt American and Israeli flags and chanted, “Death to compromisers.”

The thorniest unresolved question concerns the Strait itself. Iran has announced that transit will resume under Iranian arrangement, with Tehran and Oman to levy tolls on passing vessels – ostensibly to fund reconstruction. This is an extraordinary assertion of sovereignty over one of the world’s most critical international waterways, one that upends decades of established practice. Whether the Gulf Arab states will accept this arrangement is highly doubtful. Whether Washington can persuade its regional allies to swallow an Iranian toll booth on the Hormuz Strait – with American warships, as Trump puts it, “hanging around” – is equally unclear. The Petrodollar order is already under strain: Iran has begun trading oil in Chinese yuan, and the coming months will reveal whether this represents a lasting structural shift or a temporary expedient.

The deeper questions are even harder. None of the core issues – Iran’s nuclear programme, its ballistic missile capabilities, its proxy network, its frozen assets, and the future of US forces in the region – have been remotely resolved. Washington and Tel Aviv went to war over these matters; they remain precisely as contested as they were on 27th February. The two-week window is a pause, not a settlement. What happens when it expires is anyone’s guess.

For India, the ceasefire brings a measure of relief that is real but insufficient. New Delhi had no direct involvement in the conflict, yet it suffered grievously. Billions were wiped from Indian equity markets. Both imports and exports were disrupted, with freight costs escalating sharply and supply chains for energy and commodities thrown into disarray. The Indian Government has wisely advised its citizens in Iran to use the ceasefire window to return home – a prudent precaution given how fragile the truce remains. Now, with Iran ready to resume oil supply, there is a strategic opportunity for New Delhi to renegotiate its energy partnerships, diversify its supplier base, and accelerate investments in storage capacity. The war’s central lesson for India – indeed for any open economy – is the catastrophic vulnerability that comes from over-reliance on a few trading corridors or single energy partners.

The conflict has exposed several other uncomfortable truths. NATO demonstrated alarming fractures: few member states showed any appetite for direct involvement, and the alliance’s cohesion – never unassailable – looked threadbare throughout. Iran’s military doctrine, built around drone warfare, missile salvos and the strategic leveraging of the Hormuz chokehold, proved a sophisticated and effective deterrent as well as an offensive instrument – a case study in asymmetric statecraft that analysts and defence planners will be studying for years. Israel’s presumed invincibility was punctured, not broken, but the myth of effortless regional dominance is harder to sustain after 39 days of grinding attrition. And the United States, for all its military firepower, found itself manoeuvring – ultimately – to contain rather than conclude a war that it launched. Both Washington and Tehran will claim victory, as protagonists invariably do. Both claims will be partly true and largely hollow. The Strait’s toll regime, if it holds, represents a tangible Iranian gain-but the reconstruction burden facing Tehran is enormous. Little has been truly won; much has been irreparably damaged. The world will not quickly return to where it stood before 28th February. Freight rates will remain elevated for weeks. Essential supply chains will require months of patient realignment. The geopolitical map has shifted: old alliances have been tested, new fault lines have appeared, and the architecture of Middle Eastern security will need to be substantially renegotiated. The clouds of uncertainty have not lifted – they have merely thinned enough to let a pale light through. That thin light matters.

### QUOTE OF THE DAY

“You are what you believe yourself to be.” - Paulo Coelho

# “CEASEFIRE OR COUNTDOWN? IRAN - ISRAEL - US PAUSE THAT COULD EXPLODE AGAIN”.



A Silence That Masks Strategic Tension.

The guns have fallen silent for now. The recently announced ceasefire involving Iran, Israel, and the United States has brought a temporary halt to what threatened to spiral into a wider regional war. Oil markets have steadied, the Strait of Hormuz has reopened to cautious traffic, and diplomatic channels long frozen are flickering back to life. Yet beneath this fragile calm lies an uncomfortable truth, this is not peace. It is a pause, calculated and compelled, where each actor is using the silence not to reconcile, but to recalibrate.

#### A Tactical Pause, Not a Political Settlement.

At first glance, the ceasefire appears to be a diplomatic success. A two-week halt in hostilities, achieved under intense international pressure and back channel negotiations, suggests that escalation fatigue has set in. The United States has managed to arrest a rapidly deteriorating situation without committing to a deeper military engagement. Iran has avoided sustained strikes on its strategic assets while preserving its posture of resistance. Israel, for its part, has secured a temporary lull after demonstrating its capacity for precision and reach.

Each side can claim a measure of tactical gain. But this is precisely what makes the ceasefire precarious, it satisfies immediate needs without resolving underlying contradictions. The central flaw lies in its temporariness it is designed not as a settlement, but as a window for repositioning.

#### The Trust Deficit: The Core Challenge.

At the heart of this uncertainty lies a profound trust deficit. Iran and the United States have spent decades locked in hostility marked by sanctions, covert actions, and

strategic suspicion. Israel views Iran’s regional ambitions and nuclear trajectory as existential threats, while Iran sees Israel as an extension of Western coercive power.

Such entrenched perceptions cannot be reversed in a matter of weeks. Trust, once eroded, requires sustained engagement and verifiable commitments both of which remain absent in the current framework.

#### Diverging Strategic Objectives.

The ceasefire brings together actors whose long term goals are fundamentally incompatible. Iran seeks sanctions relief, regional legitimacy, and security guarantees.

United States aims to prevent escalation while curbing Iran’s nuclear ambitions.

Israel remains focused on neutralizing Iran’s military and strategic capabilities.

These competing objectives ensure that the ceasefire is not a convergence of vision, but a temporary alignment of necessity.

#### Coercive Diplomacy at Play.

This ceasefire has not emerged from mutual trust but from calibrated pressure. The United States has combined diplomacy with implicit military threats. Iran has balanced defiance with restraint, avoiding actions that could trigger overwhelming retaliation. Israel has maintained deterrence without escalating into full-scale war.

Such coercive diplomacy can produce temporary results, but it rarely yields lasting peace. It creates compliance, not consensus.

#### The Proxy Factor: A Constant Threat.

The Middle East’s security landscape is shaped not just by states, but by a network of non-state actors. Groups such as Hezbollah and the Houthis operate with varying degrees of autonomy, capable of triggering escalation independent of state decisions.

Even if Iran, Israel, and the United States adhere to the ceasefire, a single provocation by a proxy actor could derail the fragile arrangement. This diffusion of control makes sustained peace far more difficult.

#### Who Gains? A No-Loss Equation.

From a strategic standpoint, the ceasefire is best understood as a “no-loss” outcome rather than a win-win.

United States avoids deeper military entanglement and stabilizes global markets.

Iran preserves its strategic assets and avoids escalation under pressure.

Israel gains operational pause while maintaining deterrence.

None of the actors achieve their core objectives, but all avoid immediate setbacks. It is a compromise born of compulsion, not consensus.

#### Global Implications: Temporary Relief, Lingering Risk.

For the global economy, particularly energy markets, the ceasefire offers short-term stability. The re-opening of the Strait of Hormuz reduces immediate supply concerns. However, this stability is fragile. Any breakdown in the ceasefire could quickly translate into market volatility, highlighting the interconnected nature of regional conflicts and global economics.

#### Lessons from History: A Pattern of Fragility.

Past ceasefires in the region have often served as intermissions rather than resolutions. They create space for recovery and recalibration but rarely address the root causes of conflict.

Without a structured roadmap addressing nuclear concerns, regional security, and sanctions, the current ceasefire risks following the same trajectory, temporary calm followed by renewed confrontation.

#### What Will Determine Success?.

For the ceasefire to evolve into lasting peace, three critical elements are required:

Sustained Dialogue beyond crisis management

Confidence-Building Measures to reduce mistrust

Balanced Diplomacy combining pressure with credible incentives.

At present, these elements remain weak or absent, limiting the prospects for long-term success.

#### To sum up, a Pause Before the Next Move

Ultimately, this ceasefire is a strategic intermission, not a resolution. It reflects both the limits of military escalation and the constraints of diplomacy under pressure.

The silence of guns offers temporary relief, but beneath it lies continued preparation military, political, and strategic. Whether this pause leads to peace or merely precedes another round of conflict will depend on what follows in the coming days.

For now, the world watches a fragile calm aware that in the Middle East, silence is often not the end of conflict, but the beginning of the next phase.

This is not peace. It is a countdown.

#### Author’s Note.

This article is written not in the comfort of abstraction, but from the hard realism of a soldier’s understanding of conflict and its consequences. Ceasefires, in military vocabulary, are seldom

endpoints, they are pauses where strategies are redrawn, capabilities reassessed, and intentions recalibrated. What appears as peace to the world often remains, on the ground, a tense silence loaded with possibility.

The present Iran - Israel & US ceasefire must therefore be viewed with clarity, not optimism. It is easy to celebrate the absence

### DIGITAL WAR OF WORDS

**I give six guarantees to West Bengal.**

**- BJP will replace the atmosphere of fear with trust and restore faith in the rule of law. - The system will be made accountable. - Every scam, every act of corruption, and every injustice will be investigated.**

**- Those involved in corruption under TMC will be sent to jail. - Refugees will receive all rights under the Constitution, while infiltrators will be expelled. - As soon as the BJP government is formed, the 7th Pay Commission will be implemented. ~ Narendra Modi, PM**



of fire, it is far more difficult to acknowledge the persistence of friction. History has repeatedly shown that when core issues remain unresolved, ceasefires merely defer confrontation, they do not dissolve it.

From an operational and strategic perspective, this pause reflects compulsion rather than convergence. No side has yielded its fundamental position. No side has secured its ultimate objective. And therefore, no side is at peace.

There is, however, a larger lesson, one that policymakers must not ignore. Military power can shape the battlefield, but it cannot, by itself, shape a lasting peace. That responsibility lies in political courage, diplomatic maturity, and the willingness to move beyond zero sum thinking qualities that remain uncertain in the present context. As someone who has witnessed the cost of conflict, I would caution against mistaking silence for stability. The true test of this ceasefire lies not in its announcement, but in what follows, whether it becomes a bridge to resolution or merely a brief halt before renewed hostilities.

In war, pauses are deceptive. The wise prepare for what comes after them.



## Cachar Sees Strong 82.19% Turnout as Peaceful Polling Ends Amid Last-Hour Rush



SILCHAR

Polling across the seven Assembly constituencies of Cachar district concluded peacefully on Thursday, recording a robust voter turnout of 82.19 per cent, with long queues persisting at several booths even after the official closing time. According to data from the Election Commission of India (ECINet), the district witnessed steady and sustained voter participation throughout the day, reflecting strong public engagement in the electoral process.

Despite minor and temporary glitches in a few Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs), officials reported no major disruptions or law and order concerns, ensuring a smooth and orderly polling

exercise. The turnout showed a consistent upward trajectory from the morning hours. Between 9 am and 11 am, participation picked up quickly, with Katigorah leading at 20.05 per cent, followed by Silchar at 16.41 per cent.

By midday (11 am to 1 pm), several constituencies had crossed the halfway mark, with Katigorah registering 62.83 per cent turnout and Silchar surpassing 53 per cent.

The sharpest surge came during the afternoon phase (1 pm to 3 pm), when Katigorah climbed to 78.93 per cent, while Lakhipur and Sonai recorded 74.37 per cent and 74.33 per cent respectively. Constituencies like Udharbond and Dholai, which had slower starts, also crossed 71 per cent by mid-afternoon.

At the close of polling at 5 pm, Katigorah topped the turnout chart with 86.37 per cent, followed by Borkhola at 83.96 per cent and Lakhipur at 83.70 per cent. Silchar recorded 79.97 per cent turnout, while Dholai stood at 78.55 per cent. Officials noted that several polling stations continued to see voters in queues beyond the official closing time, indicating strong last-hour participation. The final turnout figure may see a marginal increase once all votes are accounted for.

Overall, Cachar's polling day was marked by high voter enthusiasm, efficient election management, and effective security deployment, ensuring a peaceful electoral process across the district.

### Peaceful Polling in Kokrajhar Sees Robust 86.59% Voter Turnout

KOKRAJHAR

Polling in Assam's Kokrajhar district concluded peacefully on Thursday, recording a strong voter turnout of 86.59 per cent, with election authorities swiftly securing Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) in designated strong rooms after the close of voting.

Officials set up two secure storage centres at Kokrajhar Government Higher Secondary and Multipurpose School and Bodoland University to house EVMs from the district's five Assembly constituencies. EVMs from Baikhungri, Dotma and Kokrajhar constituencies were stored at the Kokrajhar Government Higher Secondary and Multipurpose School, while those from Gossaigaon and Parbatjara were secured at Bodoland University under tight security arrangements. Following the completion of polling, Presiding and Polling Officers transported the EVMs to designated collection centres, where they were formally received by District Election Officer Dr. P. Uday Praveen. In a gesture reflecting local tradition, officials were welcomed with aroi and fruits.

Constituency-wise turnout figures underscored strong voter participation across the district. Parbatjara recorded the highest turnout at 90.49 per cent, followed by Baikhungri at 87.74 per cent, Dotma at 85.84 per cent, Gossaigaon at 85.09 per cent, and Kokrajhar at 82.31 per cent.

### FIR Against Assam Jatiya Parishad Candidate Kunki Choudhury Over Poll Code Violations; Aide Detained

GUWAHATI

An FIR has been registered at Panbazar Police Station against Assam Jatiya Parishad (AJP) candidate Kunki Choudhury in connection with alleged violations of election rules during polling in the Guwahati Central Assembly constituency, police said.

The case was lodged following a complaint by Naba Kumar Lahkar, who alleged multiple breaches of the Model Code of Conduct and election laws during polling held on April 9.

According to the FIR, Choudhury, along with political worker Sandeep Yadav and others, is accused of engaging in activities that could influence voters during the restricted "silence period." The complaint claims that Yadav remained within the constituency despite rules mandating that non-local political workers vacate the area 48 hours prior to polling.

It further alleges that Choudhury entered a polling station accompanied by a group of five to six individuals and

interacted with voters in a manner aimed at swaying their choices. The FIR also cites the presence of vehicles associated with the candidate within a prohibited perimeter around the polling booth.

Additionally, the complaint accuses the candidate's personal security officer of being inside the polling premises without authorisation. It also mentions alleged door-to-door outreach conducted during the silence period, which is prohibited under election guidelines.

Police sources confirmed that Choudhury's social media manager has been detained as part of the ongoing investigation.

The FIR invokes provisions of election law as well as sections of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, including those related to undue influence and interference in the electoral process. The complainant has reportedly submitted video footage and digital evidence to support the allegations.

### Tronglaobi Victims' Kin Set Five-Day Deadline for Arrests, Reject Compensation as Substitute for Justice

IMPHAL

Grief-stricken family members of the victims of the Tronglaobi blast in Manipur have demanded that authorities arrest those responsible within five days, asserting that financial compensation cannot substitute the loss of lives.

The appeal was made during a media interaction at Raj Medicity, where Oinam (Ongbi) Binita-critically injured in the attack is undergoing treatment.

The incident, which occurred around 1 am on April 7 under the jurisdiction of Moirang police station, claimed the lives of her two young children-five-year-old Oinam Tomthin and his five-month-old sister Oinam Yaisana.

Addressing reporters, the children's grandmother, Oinam Loidam, acknowledged the government's announcement of ex-gratia assistance but stressed that justice and lasting peace must take precedence.

"No amount of compensation can replace the lives lost. We



want the real culprits to be arrested within five days," she said, urging authorities to act swiftly to ensure accountability and prevent recurrence of such violence.

Loidam also described the emotional toll on Binita, who was initially kept unaware of her children's deaths due to her critical condition. According to the family, she later learned of the tragedy

through a newspaper report, a revelation that deepened her trauma and affected her recovery.

Raising concerns over the prevailing law and order situation, the family questioned official claims of improving peace in the state, pointing to continued incidents of violence that have left civilians vulnerable.

They called on the government

to intensify efforts to restore security and ensure that those responsible for the attack are brought to justice without delay.

The Tronglaobi incident has further exposed the fragile security environment in Manipur, fueling public anger and renewed demands for decisive action to curb violence and restore normalcy in the region.

### Peaceful Voting Marks Dharmanagar By-Poll as Turnout Crosses 80%

AGARTALA

The by-election to the Dharmanagar Assembly constituency in Tripura's North district concluded peacefully on Thursday, recording a voter turnout of 80.04 per cent, with no reports of violence or technical disruptions.

Polling, which began at 7 am, proceeded smoothly until its close at 5 pm, officials confirmed. There were no instances of Electronic Voting Machine (EVM) malfunction or any untoward incidents during the exercise.

The by-poll was necessitated following the demise of Biswabandu Sen, BJP MLA and Speaker of the Tripura Legislative Assembly.

Returning Officer Debjani Chowdhury said voting was completed across the majority of polling stations without disruption. "The process remained smooth and peaceful throughout the day, with no pro-



cedural issues reported," she stated.

A total of six candidates are in the fray, representing a range of political parties. These include Jahar Chakraborty of the Bharatiya Janata Party, Chayan Bhattacharya of the Indian National Congress, Amitabh Datta of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), Sanjay Chowdhury of the Socialist Unity Centre of India (Communist), inde-

pendent candidate Brajraj Debnath, and Bibhas Ranjan Das of Amra Bangali.

The constituency has a total of 46,183 eligible voters, comprising 22,380 male voters, 23,763 female voters, and 924 newly registered voters. To facilitate the voting process, authorities set up 55 polling stations across the constituency.

Among these, eleven were des-

ignated as model polling stations, while another eleven were managed entirely by women polling personnel. Special "pink counters" were also introduced to assist women staff and voters, marking a notable feature of the election.

North District Superintendent of Police Avinash Rais said security arrangements were significantly strengthened to ensure peaceful polling.

"The election was held without incident. Central Armed Police Forces, Tripura State Rifles, and Tripura Police personnel were deployed at every polling station, along with Quick Reaction Teams," he said. Officials expressed satisfaction over both the orderly conduct of the by-election and the strong voter participation, reflecting a smooth democratic exercise in the constituency.

### Nine Detained in Scattered Clashes as Assam Polling Proceeds Smoothly

GUWAHATI

Nine people were detained in connection with sporadic incidents of poll-related violence across Assam on Thursday, even as voting for the Assembly elections continued largely uninterrupted under tight security.

Officials said clashes were reported from multiple locations, including Tamulpur and Sivasagar, though swift intervention by security forces ensured that the overall polling process remained smooth.

Inspector General of Police (Law and Order) Akhilesh Kumar Singh said the most serious incident occurred in Tamulpur on Wednesday night, hours before polling began. "We received reports of a clash between two groups. Police rushed to the spot and, when the crowd refused to disperse, fired a few rounds in the air to bring the situation under control," he said, adding that four individuals were arrested from the site.

Hagrama Mohily, Chief Executive Member of the Bodoland Territorial Council, said the situation in Tamulpur had since stabilised, with enhanced security deployment in place. "The situation is normal now. We are monitoring it closely," he said.

In Sivasagar, another incident saw two to three members of a political party attacked. Police detained three individuals in connection with the case and launched an investigation.

Akhil Gogoi, contesting from the Sivasagar constituency, alleged that

supporters of a rival candidate were behind the attack, claiming that two people were injured and vehicles were damaged.

Additional minor clashes were reported from districts including Sribhumi, Golaghat and Nagaon, largely attributed to overcrowding and disputes among voters at polling stations.

In Golaghat, police detained two individuals following a clash at a polling booth in Merapani Kalyanpur. The injured were later sent for medical treatment.

Officials said some confrontations broke out over queue management, with voters arguing over attempts to bypass lines at busy polling stations. In a few locations such as Patharkandi, Merapani and Raha, supporters of rival political parties were also involved in brief scuffles.

"Police were already deployed in sensitive areas, and situations were handled immediately. Polling has continued without disruption," an official said.

Despite these isolated incidents, authorities maintained that the election process remained firmly under control, with adequate security presence ensuring that voting progressed peacefully across the state.

The elections are being closely watched, with the BJP-led NDA seeking a third consecutive term in power, while the Congress aims to regain its political footing in Assam after a decade.

### Gunfire in Buffer Zone Sparks Shutdown Call in Manipur's Kangpokpi

IMPHAL

Fresh tensions gripped Manipur's Kangpokpi district after a Kuki-Zo man sustained a gunshot injury in a designated buffer zone late Wednesday night, triggering protests and a 24-hour shutdown call by a tribal organisation.

According to initial reports, the incident occurred around 10 pm on April 8 at Shantipur, a notified buffer zone situated between Gamgiphai in Kangpokpi district and Sekmai in Imphal West. The victim, one of three Kuki-Zo men present at the site, suffered a bullet injury to his left arm.

He was rushed to a hospital in Kangpokpi, where doctors successfully conducted surgery to remove the lodged bullet. Hospital sources confirmed that his condition is stable and he remains under observation, with no immediate threat to life.

The incident has led to renewed unrest in the district, with the Committee on Tribal Unity announcing a 24-hour shutdown across Kangpokpi



from midnight of April 9 to midnight of April 10. The shutdown will affect movement along National Highway-2, a crucial arterial route linking Manipur's hill districts.

In a statement, the organisation strongly condemned the shooting, alleging that three Kuki-Zo civilians were fired upon at close range by armed Meitei militants at Shantipur. It termed the incident a serious setback to ongoing peace efforts and raised concerns over the effectiveness of security arrangements in designated buffer zones.

Residents in the area voiced grow-

ing apprehension over a potential escalation of violence, noting that repeated incidents in fringe and buffer zones were undermining the fragile sense of normalcy that had begun to return in recent months.

Locals also flagged alleged lapses in security deployment, warning that such incidents risk eroding public confidence in enforcement mechanisms meant to maintain peace between communities.

Reiterating its earlier position, the organisation said buffer zones must remain strictly non-violable and demanded immediate identi-

fication and prosecution of those responsible for the attack. It added that the shutdown would serve as a form of protest until concrete action is taken.

However, the group clarified that essential services-including medical emergencies, water and electricity supply, funeral processions, and the movement of air passengers-would remain exempt from the shutdown.

The latest flare-up comes amid continuing volatility in Manipur, where sporadic incidents in sensitive zones continue to challenge efforts to restore lasting peace.

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## Indian team to visit US this month to revive stalled trade talks



NEW DELHI

India and the United States are set to resume negotiations on their proposed interim trade agreement, with an Indian delegation expected to visit Washington later this month.

The development signals a renewed push to stabilise bilateral trade ties after legal and policy disruptions stalled progress on a framework deal earlier this year.

US Ambassador to India Sergio Gor confirmed the upcoming visit following discussions with US Trade Representative Jamieson Greer.

"...The United States and India have previously agreed to a trade deal, and we look forward to welcoming an Indian delegation to Washington later this month," Gor said.

While dates are yet to be finalised, officials here said that the focus will be on translating the earlier understanding into a "workable, feasible and mutually beneficial" interim

agreement. The interim trade deal framework, announced on February 7, had outlined mutual tariff adjustments aimed at easing trade frictions. For India, a key gain was the rollback of an additional 25% tariff imposed by the US over its purchase of Russian crude oil.

The proposed arrangement had also included a reduction in reciprocal US tariffs on Indian goods to 18% from 25%, offering a measure of relief to exporters. However, the trajectory of the agreement was disrupted by a ruling of the US Supreme Court on February 20, which invalidated country-specific tariffs.

This forced a reset in US trade policy, complicating the path to finalising the bilateral deal. In response, Washington imposed a uniform 10% additional duty on imports under Section 122 of the Trade Act, a temporary measure aimed at addressing balance of payments concerns. The provision allows such duties for up

to 150 days, with a cap of 15%.

Further adding to the complexity, the US has initiated investigations under Section 301 of the Trade Act into trade practices of key partners, including India and the European Union, focusing on policies linked to excess manufacturing capacity and their impact on American industry.

Despite these challenges, diplomatic engagement remains active. India's Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri held talks in Washington with senior US officials, including Jeffrey Kessler and William Kimmitt, which focused on expanding trade and investment, particularly in strategic and emerging technologies, as well as aligning approaches on export controls. As negotiations resume, India is expected to push for retention of tariff advantages over competing economies, with officials saying that a balanced and durable interim agreement.

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## PM Modi holds rallies in Bengal; says TMC made state 'factory of infiltrators for vote bank'

KOLKATA

Escalating attacks on the Mamata Banerjee-led Trinamool Congress government in West Bengal, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday reiterated that "infiltrators" will have to get out of the country.

While addressing BJP election rallies in Haldia, Asansol, and Suri, the Prime Minister strongly criticised the ruling Trinamool Congress on several issues. He raised concerns about law and order, alleged infiltration leading to demographic changes, corruption, and syndicate raj. He also highlighted problems such as unemployment, the closure of industrial units, coal smuggling scam, and issues related to women's safety.

"Infiltrators will be pushed out of the country after the BJP comes to power in Bengal," Modi said, adding, "Trinamool Congress has made the state a factory of infiltrators for their vote bank politics. They prepare bogus documents so that the number of infiltrators can rise."

"Youths in Bengal are being cheated on two fronts by the Trinamool Congress -- destroying the private sector and looting the government posts for money," he alleged. He further said, "They arrange jobs for infiltrators even if little scopes are there."

He accused the Trinamool of following a "religion-based reservation policy to secure its vote bank". He slammed the Mamata Banerjee government in the state for its alleged misrule, and appealed to voters to oust the Trinamool from power in the upcoming assembly polls.

In Haldia, an industrial town in the state and a stronghold of the Leader of Opposition Suwendu Adhikari, who has been fielded by the BJP from both the Nandigram constituency in East Midnapore and Bhabanipur in south Kolkata, the Prime Minister said that the ruling government was "holding Bengal back".

"The country is walking on the path of progress, while TMC's 'nirnam sarkar' (cruel government) is pulling Bengal back. To usher in



'Viksit Bengal', it's essential that the party is removed from power," he claimed.

"Same thing that happened in Nandigram assembly five years ago will be repeated in Bhabanipur, and with this, real change in power will take place in Bengal in the upcoming assembly elections," he said. In the 2021 assembly elections, Adhikari had defeated Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee in Nandigram by a margin of nearly 2,000. He will fight against the TMC supremo from Bhabanipur, the hottest constituency in the state.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi speaks during a public meeting ahead of the West Bengal Assembly elections, in Haldia, West Bengal.

Criticising the ruling party, Modi said, "Even in 100 years, the TMC cannot absolve itself of sins it committed against Bengal's youth." Batting for a double-engine government in West Bengal, the Prime Minister told the gathering that the state "would not benefit by opposing the PM, but will profit only when a PM and a CM act together."

"Investment does not come in an atmosphere of fear, but in a climate of trust that the BJP will bring in Bengal," Modi said. The Prime Minister promised the people of West Bengal that the state would be self-suf-

ficient in fisheries and the seafood sector, while highlighting that the BJP government at the Centre has set up a dedicated ministry for the welfare of the fisherfolk and allotted a record budget for them.

"People's huge attendance at Haldia rally despite inclement weather is an indicator of change in Bengal, and a sign of TMC's exit," the Prime Minister asserted. He also alleged that TMC is unleashing a reign of terror, corruption, syndicate raj, cut money, crimes against women and closure of industries in the state.

"BJP will file a case on corruption and atrocities against women during the Trinamool Congress regime in Bengal. No Trinamool hooligans, leaders and ministers involved in corruption and crimes will be spared. Everybody will be put behind bars as per the law after the BJP forms a government in the state," the Prime Minister said.

"Factories here in Haldia industrial town have been lying locked during the past 20 years. Youths are not getting jobs and going to Andaman, Odisha and other states, leaving Bengal. Trinamool Congress has brought down growth index in terms of all parameters of development as compared with other states ruled by the BJP across the country," he added.

Trinamool does not even implement central government schemes prefixed with PM, Modi said. "They change the names of schemes, in which the letters 'PM' are mentioned. The fact is that they are jealous of the prefix PM. As a result, common people of Bengal are being deprived of getting benefits of the national schemes," he said.

In Asansol, he also blamed the TMC government for ruining the once-thriving industrial belt in Durgapur and Asansol areas. The Centre has allocated around Rs 45,000 crore for industrial revival in the region, he claimed.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi speaks during a public meeting ahead of the West Bengal Assembly elections, in Haldia, West Bengal.

"Fooling Muslims is easy": Controversy in Bengal over Humayun Kabir's video, TMC seeks probe

At the Suri poll rally in Birbhum district, Modi addresses the incident of gherao of judicial officers, including three women, at Kaliachak BDO office in Malda district and said, "Trinamool is unleashing reign of terror in the state, which is reeling under lawlessness."

Underlining the six Modi guarantees for the people, the prime minister said the BJP, once in power in the state, will replace the TMC's "reign of fear" with BJP's "trust" and make public servants accountable to citizens for their actions.

While pledging that government facilities and scheme benefits will be made available to all citizens, Modi underlined that "infiltrators won't be allowed to stay in this country".

"Once the BJP government is formed, we will immediately implement the 7th Pay Commission in Bengal for state employees, teachers and those working in related sectors," the PM said, defining his final guarantee.

The Haldia rally assumes significance since the party seeks to retain its hold over the region, projecting Adhikari's influence in the area, which serves as one of the epicentres of the party's challenge to the TMC.

## INTERNATIONAL

### Melania Trump delivers statement at the White House denying knowledge of Jeffrey Epstein's crimes



WASHINGTON

First lady Melania Trump is denying ties to Jeffrey Epstein and knowledge of his sex crimes, saying Thursday that the "stories are completely false" and calling accusations that she was somehow involved "smears about me."

Reading an extraordinary statement at the White House, Melania Trump said she and her attorneys were fighting back against "unfounded and baseless lies" in regards to her connections to the late financier, a convicted sex offender who leveraged connections to the rich, powerful and famous to recruit his victims and cover up his crimes.

"The lies linking me with the disgraceful Jeffrey Epstein need to end today," she said. "The individuals lying about me are devoid of ethical standards, humility and respect. I do not object to their ignorance, but rather I reject their mean-spirited attempts to defame my reputation."

The seemingly out-of-the-blue message came as her husband, President Donald Trump, and his administration had finally seemed to move past more than a year of controversy surrounding Epstein, especially as the Iran war had become all-consuming in Washington. The first lady's comments almost

assuredly will serve to push the story back into the political spotlight even as the president urged the public and media to move on from the case.

Nick Clemens, a spokesperson for the first lady, said the West Wing was aware beforehand that she was making a statement. But he deferred to the West Wing on whether the content of what Melania Trump planned to say was known. The White House press office did not respond to requests for comment.

The first lady spoke for about five minutes, reading her statement in the Grand Foyer, then walked away without taking questions. She did not go into detail on the accusations against her, but said they came from "individuals and entities looking to cause damage to my good name."

She added that they were financially and politically motivated.

Melania Trump also called on Congress to hold a public hearing centered on survivors of Epstein's crimes, with a chance to testify before lawmakers and have their stories entered into the congressional record.

"Each and every woman should have her day to tell her story in public if she wishes," she said. "Then, and only then, we will have the truth."

Two of Epstein's accusers, Maria

and Annie Farmer, said in a subsequent statement: "What we want is accountability, transparency, and justice."

Former Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, a Georgia Republican and onetime fierce Trump supporter who resigned from Congress after a public falling out with the president, posted on X, "I am grateful to the First Lady for her brave statement today about Epstein and his victims."

Democrats, meanwhile, jumped on Melania Trump's comments, saying they agreed with her call for a congressional hearing. In a social media post, Rep. Robert Garcia, the top Democrat on the House Oversight Committee that is investigating Epstein, called on the Republican chair of the committee, Rep. James Comer, to schedule a public hearing "immediately."

Rep. Thomas Massie, R-Ky., who sponsored a bill prompting the release of millions of Epstein documents, turned attention back to the Justice Department, saying it's the attorney general's job to bring in survivors for testimony. Massie, who has pressed for more arrests in the Epstein case, ended a social media post with a call to "PROSECUTE!"

Questions about Epstein's reach have loomed over the administration and divided Republicans, driving a wedge into Trump's MAGA base as some pressed for the government to release more files and prosecute figures linked to the financier.

The issue has dogged Trump and fractured some of his alliances, including the one with Greene. Trump dismissed the issue as a "Democrat hoax" but later signed a bill to release files from Epstein's case.

It was not clear what prompted the first lady to revive the issue. She noted that several individuals and organizations have had to apologize for their "lies about me." Of the examples she cited, the most recent was in October. In that case, book publisher

HarperCollins UK apologized to the first lady and retracted passages from a book suggesting Epstein played a role in introducing her and Donald Trump.

Melania Trump mentioned her husband several times in her comments. She said Epstein did not introduce her to Trump, and that she met her future husband at a New York City party in 1998.

The first lady brought Epstein back to the forefront months after federal authorities released millions of pages of documents under the Epstein Files Transparency Act, the law enacted after months of public and political pressure that requires the government to open its files on the late financier and his confidant and onetime girlfriend, Ghislaine Maxwell.

Lawmakers complained when the Justice Department made only a limited release last month, but officials said more time was needed to review additional documents that were discovered and to ensure no sensitive information about victims was released.

Melania Trump said Thursday that she was not friends with Epstein or Maxwell, but was in overlapping social circles in New York and Florida. She described an email reply she sent to Maxwell as "casual correspondence" without elaborating.

"My polite reply to her email doesn't amount to anything more than a trivial note," she said.

Among the documents released by the Justice Department was a brief email from 2002 with the sender and recipient blacked out. It begins, "Dear G!" and ends "Love, Melania," and compliments the recipient on a magazine article about "JE."

"I know you are very busy flying all over the world," it says. "How was Palm Beach? I cannot wait to go down. Give me a call when you are back in NY."

That email was sent the same month that a New York Magazine article was published about Epstein in which Trump called him a "terrific guy."

## Israel-Lebanon talks likely to start next week in US; Hezbollah rejects proposal



JERUSALEM

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Thursday he ordered his cabinet to open direct talks with Lebanon to disarm Hezbollah and establish "peace relations" between the two countries.

"In light of Lebanon's repeated requests to open direct negotiations with Israel, I instructed the cabinet yesterday to begin direct negotiations with Lebanon as soon as possible," his office wrote in a statement.

"Negotiations will focus on disarming Hezbollah and establishing peace relations between Israel and Lebanon. Israel appreciates today's call by the Prime Minister of Lebanon to demilitarise Beirut," the press release added.

Israel-Lebanon talks are expected to start next week in Washington to boost tentative ceasefire in Iran war, AP reported citing sources.

However, a Hezbollah lawmaker reiterated his group's rejection of any direct negotiations between Lebanon and the Israeli enemy, and the necessity of upholding national principles, foremost among them the Israeli withdrawal, the cessation of hostilities, and the return of residents to their villages and towns," Ali Fayyad said in a statement shared by



the Iran-backed group's media channels.

Fayyad added that the group called "on the Lebanese government to adhere to the ceasefire as a precondition before proceeding with any further steps".

A Lebanese government official with knowledge of the matter told AFP on Thursday that the country could only enter negotiations after a ceasefire was announced.

Israeli media outlets reported that Yechiel Leiter, Israel's ambassador to the US, would represent the country in the talks, which would take place "under fire," meaning without Israel halting its strikes in Lebanon.

The statement came a day after Israel launched its largest wave of strikes on Lebanon since the start of its war with Hezbollah on March 2, leaving more than 300 people dead according to authorities.

Netanyahu's statement also followed calls on Wednesday with President Trump and White House envoy Steve Witkoff, according to US publication Axios.

Senior US officials said Witkoff asked Netanyahu to "calm down" the strikes in Lebanon and open negotiations.

The publication quoted a senior Israeli official who said the direct negotiations will begin next week in Washington.

Lebanese President Joseph Aoun had renewed a call last month for a truce and

the opening of negotiations to stop the war between Israel and Hezbollah.

Lebanon's cabinet on Thursday instructed security forces to restrict weapons in Beirut exclusively to state institutions, in a warning to Hezbollah.

"The army and security forces are requested to immediately begin reinforcing the full imposition of state authority over Beirut Governorate and to monopolise weapons in the hands of legitimate authorities alone," Prime Minister Nawaf Salam said at the end of a cabinet meeting.

The Lebanese government banned Hezbollah's military activities at the beginning of March, shortly after the start of war with Israel, but the decision has not stopped the Iran-backed group from conducting military operations.

Beirut had also committed last year to disarming the group, the only one to keep its weapons after Lebanon's 1975-1990 civil war.

In December, Lebanese and Israeli civilian representatives held their first direct talks in decades, part of a ceasefire monitoring mechanism.

Before then, Israel and Lebanon, which have no formal diplomatic relations, had insisted on keeping military officers in the role.

The efforts for negotiations come after Lebanon's health ministry said on Thursday that Israeli strikes across the country a day before killed more than 300 people and wounded at least 1,150.

In a statement, the ministry said "the Israeli enemy's airstrikes yesterday, Wednesday, resulted in a preliminary toll of 303 martyrs and 1,150 wounded", adding that the cumulative toll since the start of the war between Israel and Iran-backed Hezbollah on March 2 rose to 1,888 dead and 6,092 wounded.

It warned the death toll could rise further as search efforts were ongoing, as well as DNA testing of bodies transferred to hospitals.

## TOGETHER, LET US EMPOWER OUR NARI SHAKTI!



**NARENDRA MODI**

In the coming days, India will be immersed in a festive season, with celebrations taking place across the length and breadth of the nation. The people of Assam will mark Rongali Bihu while Odisha will celebrate Maha Bishuba Pana Sankranti. In West Bengal, Poila Boishakh will usher in the Bengali New Year and in Kerala, Vishu will be observed with immense enthusiasm. In Tamil Nadu, Puthandu will be celebrated while in Punjab and other parts of Northern India, it will be Baisakhi, which will usher in a spirit of hope as well as positivity. I convey my best wishes to all those across India and the world who are marking these festivals. May these auspicious occasions bring happiness and prosperity to everyone's lives.

Furthermore, on the 11th of April, we will commence the 200th birth anniversary celebrations of Mahatma Phule and on the 14th, India will pay homage to Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar on Ambedkar Jayanti.

In addition to these special occasions, when the spirit of renewal fills our hearts and minds, our nation stands at the threshold of another historic occasion. It is an opportunity to deepen the foundations of our democracy and to reaffirm our collective commitment to equality and inclusion.

On the 16th of April, Parliament will be convened to discuss and pass an important bill that advances women's reservation. To describe this merely as a legislative exercise would be an understatement. It is a reflection of the aspirations of crores of women across India. It is an affirmation of a principle that has long guided our civilisational ethos, that society progresses when women progress.

Women constitute nearly half of India's population. Their contributions to our nation are vast and invaluable. Today, India is witnessing remarkable achievements by women across every field. From science and technology to entrepreneurship, from sports to the armed forces and from

music to the arts, women are at the forefront of India's progress. Over the years, sustained efforts have been made

to create an enabling environment for women's empowerment. Greater access to education, improved healthcare, enhanced financial inclusion and better access to basic amenities have strengthened the foundations of women's participation in economic and social life.

Yet, their representation in the world of politics and legislative bodies has not always been commensurate with their role in society. This is particularly unfortunate because when women participate in administration and decision-making, they bring with them experiences and insights that enrich public discourse and improve the quality of governance.

It is imperative that the 2029 Lok Sabha elections and the Assembly elections to the various states in the coming times are conducted with women's reservation in place. Over the decades, there have been repeated efforts to provide women with their rightful place in democratic institutions by the previous governments. Committees were made, bill drafts were introduced but they never saw the light of day. But the broad consensus has remained that women's representation in legislative bodies has to increase. In September 2023, Parliament passed the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam with the same spirit of consensus. I consider it to be among the most special occasions of my life.

This opportunity to ensure women's reservation also resonates deeply with the spirit of our Constitution. The makers of our Constitution, envisioned a society where equality is both enshrined and realised in practice. Strengthening women's participation in legislative institutions is an important step towards fulfilling that vision. It reflects our commitment to building a society where every citizen has an equal stake in shaping the nation's destiny.

This is a moment that cannot be deferred any longer. Every delay in advancing women's representation is, in effect, a delay in strengthening the quality and inclusiveness of our democracy. For decades, the need for greater participation of women in legislative institutions has been acknowledged, discussed and reaffirmed. To postpone action now would mean extending an imbalance that we already recognise and have the capacity to correct. At a time when India is moving forward with confidence and purpose, it is essential that our institutions reflect the aspirations of all citizens, especially those who form

half our population. Timely action will not only honour long-standing commitments but also ensure that the momentum of progress is sustained. This is truly a historic opportunity to make our democracy more representative, responsive and future-ready.

This moment calls for collective action.

It is not about any one government, party or individual. It is about the nation as a whole recognising the importance of this step and coming together to realise it. It is what we owe to our Nari Shakti. That is why the passage of a bill for women's reservation should reflect the broadest possible consensus and be guided by the larger national interest. Such opportunities call upon us to act not for ourselves, but for future generations. They remind us that the true strength

of a democracy lies in its ability to evolve and to become more inclusive over time.

As we approach this historic Parliament sitting, I appeal to all Members of Parliament, across party lines, to come together in support of this important step for the women of India. Let us seize this opportunity with a sense of responsibility and purpose. Let us act in a manner that reflects the highest traditions of our democracy.

India has always shown that when it comes to matters of national importance, it can rise above differences and act with unity. This is one such moment. Let us move forward together and strengthen Constitutional values and empower our Nari Shakti for national progress.

(The author is Prime Minister of India)

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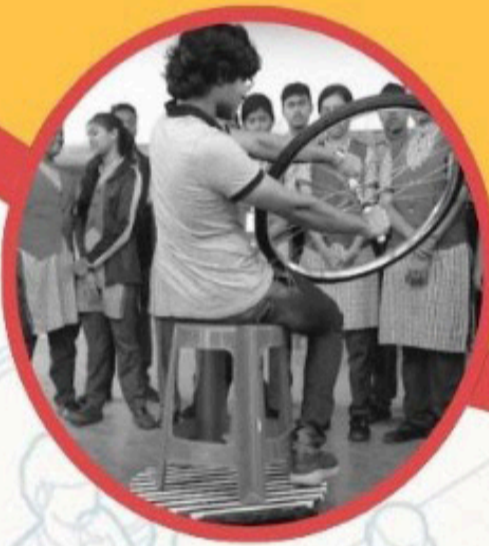
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