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## PERSPECTIVE

Nothing holds you back more than your own insecurities.

## Manipur all-party meet condemns Tronglaobi incident, appeals for peace

IMPHAL

An all-party meeting convened under the chairmanship of Chief Minister Yumnam Khemchand Singh on April 7 strongly condemned the recent Tronglaobi incident and appealed for calm and restraint across Manipur.

The meeting, held at the Chief Minister's Secretariat, reviewed the prevailing law and order situation in the state. Leaders cutting across party lines termed the incident a "cowardly act" and expressed concern over rising tensions.

Participants stressed the need to maintain unity and communal harmony, particularly in the current sensitive environment, and assured full cooperation to the government in restoring normalcy.

It was unanimously decided that those responsible for the incident would be identified at the earliest, arrested and dealt with strictly in accordance with the law.

A joint appeal was issued urging citizens to remain calm and refrain from violence, including damage to public property. Leaders emphasised that public cooperation would be crucial in maintaining peace and order.

Representatives of major political parties, including the Bharatiya Janata Party, Indian National Congress, National People's Party, Naga People's Front and the Communist Party of India, attended the meeting.

Among those present were former chief minister Okram Ibobi Singh and former deputy chief minister Yumnam Joykumar Singh.

### WHO SAID WHAT



Assam ain't a dependent State anymore- it now contributes to the national economy and its growth. Our economy size is now over 7 lakh crore and by 2028, we will be a 10 Lakh Crore economy- a turnaround never imagined. That's a new Assam, an #AtalAvichalAgragamiAssam  
- Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma, Assam CM

### GUWAHATI

More than 2.49 crore voters are set to exercise their franchise on April 9 as Assam goes to the polls in a single phase to elect representatives to its 126-member assembly.

The election will determine the next government in the state, with the tenure of the current assembly set to end in May. Counting of votes is scheduled for May 4, according to the Election Commission.

Polling across all constituencies will be conducted in a single phase, a move aimed at ensuring a smooth and efficient electoral process. A party or alliance will require at least 64 seats to secure a majority and form the government.

The contest is primarily between the BJP-led NDA and the Congress-led opposition alliance, with several regional and smaller parties also in the fray. Key issues influencing the electoral landscape include ethnic identity, development concerns and minority rights.



Opposition parties have raised concerns over alleged mistreatment of minorities, displacement of indigenous communities and corruption allegations against ruling party leaders,

while the ruling alliance has focused on development initiatives. Among high-profile constituencies, Jalukbari is witnessing Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma seeking another term. In Jorhat, state Congress

president Gaurav Gogoi is contesting against BJP's Hitendranath Goswami in a keenly watched battle. In Sivasagar, Rajjor Dal leader Akhil Gogoi is among the prominent candidates, while several constituen-

cies in the Bodoland Territorial Region are witnessing multi-cornered contests involving the BJP, UPPL and BPF.

In Tamulpur, a key contest is underway between Assembly Speaker Biswajit Daimary and UPPL chief Pramod Boro. In Kokrajhar and adjoining seats, regional dynamics and party alignments are expected to play a significant role.

Upper Assam constituencies such as Mariani and Jorhat are also witnessing closely fought contests, reflecting a mix of generational and political rivalries.

In the hill district of Dima Hasao, the Haflong seat is witnessing a triangular contest among candidates from the BJP, NPP and the Congress.

With a diverse electorate spread from the tea garden belts of Upper Assam to the riverine areas and hill districts, voter turnout, local issues and shifting political loyalties are expected to play a decisive role in determining the outcome of the election.

## Manipur tense but calm amid curfew, internet curbs; no fresh violence reported

**Manipur Launches Massive Security Operation After Deadly Tronglaobi Blast; Case Handed to NIA**



GUWAHATI/NEW DELHI

IMPHAL: The situation in Manipur remained tense but under control on Wednesday, with no fresh incidents of violence reported from the valley districts where curfew, internet suspension and heavy security deployment continue to be in force, officials said.

Clashes between protesters and security forces were reported late Tuesday in parts of Imphal East and Imphal West districts, during which police resorted to tear gas shelling to disperse the crowds, a senior officer said.

Protesters also burnt tyres and blocked roads at several locations, including Khurai Lamlong and Wangkhei in Imphal East district, and Uripok and Kwakeithel in Imphal West, demanding action against those responsible for the killing of two children in a recent attack.

"The situation has been brought under control after overnight clashes. No fresh violence has been reported this morning. The overall situation remains calm," the officer said.

Curfew and internet restrictions remain in place in Imphal East, Imphal West, Bishnupur, Thoubal and Kakching districts, he added. Violence had erupted in Bishnupur

district on Tuesday after two children were killed in a mortar attack on their residence at Moirang Tronglaobi. The victims, a five-year-old boy and his six-month-old sister, were asleep at the time of the attack, while their mother sustained injuries.

Subsequently, a mob of around 400 people reportedly stormed a CRPF camp in protest, prompting security forces to open fire. Two persons were killed and around 20 others injured in the incident, officials said.

Angered protesters also torched two oil tankers and a truck, vandalised a police outpost and blocked movement along key roads.

Chief Minister Yumnam Khemchand Singh chaired an all-party meeting to review the prevailing law and order situation. He condemned the attack and said the probe would be handed over to the National Investigation Agency.

Leaders across political parties expressed concern over the deteriorating situation and emphasised the need to maintain peace, unity and communal harmony.

Meanwhile, the state government dismissed rumours circulating on social media alleging that security forces had killed a large number of protesters.

In an official statement, the government warned that spreading misinformation could aggravate tensions and urged citizens to verify information before sharing it.

"Spreading fake news and rumours can worsen the situation. People are advised to rely on verified information and maintain calm," the statement said.

## Manipur Govt Refutes 'Protester Killings' Claims

IMPHAL

The Government of Manipur has firmly dismissed rumours circulating on social media alleging that security personnel were responsible for the deaths of civilians during recent protests, describing the claims as "misleading" and "baseless." In an official statement issued on April 7, the government said that several posts and tweets claiming that innocent people had been killed in the state were unverified and lacked factual basis. Authorities urged citizens to exercise caution and refrain from sharing unconfirmed information, particularly given the prevailing sensitivities in the region.

Emphasising the importance of responsible communication, the statement appealed to the public to verify information before forwarding it. "Before sharing any message, it is important to ensure its authenticity and consider whether it contributes positively or negatively to the situation," the government said, warning that rumours could further inflame tensions. The administration also underlined that spreading misinformation capable of disturbing public order constitutes a punishable offence under provisions of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita. It cautioned that strict legal action would be taken against individuals found deliberately circulating false or provocative content.

The clarification follows unverified reports suggesting that security forces had opened fire on protesters, leading to civilian casualties. Rejecting these allegations, Manipur Police stated that no such incident had occurred and reiterated that the claims were entirely unfounded.

Officials added that legal proceedings would be initiated against those responsible for spreading misinformation online, as part of efforts to maintain law and order. Reiterating its appeal for calm, the government called on citizens to prioritise truth and unity, stressing that reliance on verified information is critical to preserving peace and stability during uncertain times.

## RSS Files Police Complaints in Assam Over Kharge's Alleged Remarks at Election Rally



SILCHAR

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) has lodged police complaints in Assam's Dispur and Silchar, alleging hate speech during an election rally by Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge.

Complaints were filed by the RSS's Uttar Assam Prant unit at Dispur Police Station in Guwahati and by its Dakshin Assam Prant unit at Silchar Police Station.

The organisation has sought legal action over remarks allegedly made by Kharge during a recent rally at Nilambazar in the Karimganj South Assembly constituency.

According to the complaints, Kharge allegedly compared the ideology of the RSS and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to a "poisonous snake" and suggested its elimination.

The RSS has termed the remarks derogatory, provocative, and communally sensitive. The organisation has argued that the state-

ments could incite hostility and violence against its members and BJP supporters. It also alleged that invoking religious references during an election campaign may disturb communal harmony and influence the electoral environment.

In the complaints, RSS functionaries have claimed that the remarks amount to a corrupt electoral practice under the Representation of the People Act, 1951, and could promote enmity between different groups. They further stated that such language may lead to public unrest if not addressed promptly.

The complaints were submitted by Khagen Saikia, Prant Karyavah of RSS Uttar Assam Prant, and Jyotsnamoy Chakraborty, Prant Sangchalak of RSS Dakshin Assam Prant.

The RSS has urged authorities to take appropriate legal action, stressing that democratic discourse should remain within constitutional limits and avoid statements that could endanger public peace.

# BJP eyes third term, Congress seeks comeback

## EC Deploys Webcasting, CAPF Across Assam for Single-Phase Assembly Polls

### GUWAHATI

Assam will go to the polls on April 9 in a high-stakes contest for its 126-member assembly, with the ruling BJP-led NDA seeking a third consecutive term and the Congress-led opposition alliance aiming to return to power.

Polling will be held from 7 am to 5 pm across 31,490 polling stations spread over 35 districts. A total of 2.50 crore voters are eligible to exercise their franchise, including 1.25 crore women and 318 from the third gender category.

A total of 722 candidates are in the fray, among them Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, state Congress president Gaurav Gogoi, Leader of Opposition Debabrata Saikia, AIUDF chief Badruddin Ajmal, Rajjor Dal leader Akhil Gogoi and Assam Jatiya Parishad (AJP) president Lurinjiyoti Gogoi.

Among political parties, the Congress is contesting the highest number of seats at 99, followed by the BJP with 90. AIUDF has fielded 30 candidates, while NDA allies AGP and BPF are contesting 26 and 11 seats, respectively. Other parties in the fray include Rajjor Dal (13), AJP (10), CPI(M) (3), APHLC



(2), AAP (18), UPPL (18), TMC (22) and JMM (16), besides 258 Independent candidates.

The constituencies of Algapur-Katlicherra and Karimganj South have the highest number of candidates at 15 each. In contrast, nine constituencies - Rangia, Jagiroad (SC), Hojai, Naduar, Jonai (ST), Doomdooma, Mahmora, Teok and Lakhipur - are witnessing straight contests with only two candidates each.

Out of the total contestants, 59 are women. The Congress has fielded 14



women candidates, while the BJP has nominated seven.

Key electoral battles include Jalukbari, where Sarma is seeking a sixth consecutive victory against Congress candidate Bidisha Neog, and Jorhat, where Gaurav Gogoi is making his assembly debut against BJP's Hitendranath Goswami.

In Nazira, Saikia is contesting to retain his traditional stronghold against BJP's Mayur Borgohain. In the Bodoland Territorial Region seat of

Tamulpur, a direct contest is expected between BJP candidate Jolen Daimary and UPPL chief Pramod Boro.

Other prominent contests include Ajmal in Binnakandi, Akhil Gogoi in Sibsagar, Lurinjiyoti Gogoi in Khowang, AGP president Atul Bora in Bokakhat and minister Keshab Mahanta in Kalibabor.

Chief Electoral Officer Anurag Goel said all polling stations will be equipped with webcasting facilities for real-time monitoring. Central Armed Police Forces, including CRPF personnel, have been deployed across the state to ensure free and fair elections.

The electorate includes 6.42 lakh first-time voters, 2.50 lakh senior citizens aged 80 and above - including 2,466 centenarians - and 2.05 lakh persons with disabilities. The Election Commission of India has completed extensive preparations for the 2026 Assam Legislative Assembly elections, scheduled to be held in a single phase on April 9, with a focus on ensuring a free, fair and secure polling process across all 126 constituencies.

Chief Electoral Officer Anurag Goel said that comprehensive administra-

tive and logistical arrangements are in place, backed by coordinated efforts among multiple departments. Central observers have already been deployed to oversee key areas such as law and order, as well as monitoring election expenditure.

According to official figures, a total of 2,50,54,463 voters are eligible to cast their ballots, deciding the electoral fate of 722 candidates. The electorate comprises 1,25,31,552 male voters, 1,25,22,593 female voters, and 318 voters in the 'others' category, along with 63,423 service voters.

To enhance transparency, authorities have introduced webcasting facilities at all polling stations. Of the 31,490 polling stations - including 31,486 main booths and four auxiliary booths - each will be monitored in real time from the offices of District Election Officers, the Chief Electoral Officer, and the Election Commission. Security has been strengthened with the deployment of personnel from the Central Armed Police Forces to ensure peaceful polling across the state.

Polling stations have been equipped with basic amenities such as drinking

water, waiting areas, toilets, and wheelchair access for persons with disabilities. Additional provisions include seating arrangements for voters in queues and designated spaces for mobile phone storage.

For the conduct of polling, 1,51,132 polling personnel have been deployed. The Election Commission has arranged 41,320 ballot units, 43,975 control units, and 43,997 VVPAT machines, including reserves to address contingencies. Backup polling staff have also been kept on standby.

The electorate includes a significant number of first-time and special-category voters, with 6,42,314 voters aged 18-19, 2,50,006 voters above 80 years, and 2,05,085 persons with disabilities.

Under provisions of the Representation of the People Act, 1951, postal ballot voting from home has been facilitated for senior citizens aged 85 and above, as well as for identified persons with disabilities. So far, 26,032 senior citizens and 8,373 voters have availed of this option. Appealing for maximum participation, Goel urged all eligible citizens to exercise their democratic right and contribute to the electoral process.



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## PEACEMAKER TO WARMONGER

As the sun rises in the Persian Gulf today, the world enters day 36 of the conflict that was expected to be a swift surgical strike, intended to bring a 47-year-old regime to halt. However, this ordinary strike has instead turned into a dangerous month – long war. Even though the battle is thousands of miles away from many nations, the middle class in these countries are being caught by the wrath of the war. The impact is most visible across Asia where national emergencies, soaring fuel prices, lockdowns and widespread jobs losses have become the new reality. On 28th Feb, the U.S. and Israel launched Operation Epic Fury on Iran when the talks on Iran's nuclear programme were actively underway between the United States and Iran. The timing of the Operation Epic Fury was not a military choice, it was a psychological one. By attacking in the midst of the talks, the U.S. and Israel pointed out that the era of negotiation was over. This calculated move revealed the true face of Trump's 2026 administration. The self-proclaimed Peacemaker of 2025 had spent months building a reputation and making people believe the impossible but that was merely a strategic mask, or to put it correctly, perhaps a theatrical act. To understand how the Trump administration reached this 36-day deadlock in the Gulf, we must first look at the 'First Face' of this year: the rise of the 2026 Warmonger.

While the world hoped to start 2026 on a quiet note, the Trump administration had a completely different image of 2026 in their minds. Contrary to the peace efforts in 2025 by Trump, On January 3, the United States launched Operation Absolute Resolve in Venezuela. U.S. forces captured President Nicolás Maduro and his wife, bringing a 25-year old political era to a sudden end. While the stated reasons varied, many analysts believed that the goal was twofold: to secure control over the region's vast oil resources and to roll back the growing influence of China and Russia in the region.

By invoking the 21st century version of the Monroe Doctrine, the Trump administration signaled that it would no longer tolerate the external powers in the Western Hemisphere. This sent a shockwave across the world, with countries asking if a government could be dissolved over a weekend to protect U.S. interests, who would be next? While many assumed the next target would be another South American state, the administration took a calculated pivot towards the Persian Gulf.

The quick win in Venezuela was a trap for the Trump administration as they believed every government could be toppled just as easily. But when they pivoted to the Persian Gulf, they realised that they were not fighting a crumbling government but a fortress. On February 28, the U.S. and Israel collectively launched Operation Epic Fury against Iran. While the stated goals were to destroy nuclear facilities and dismantle the regime, the result was a total collapse of International Humanitarian Law, which is designed to protect civilians from the devastating effects of armed conflict. Modern warfare often claims precision strikes against criminals, but in reality civilians are frequently caught in the crossfire. A tragic example is Minab, where U.S. and Israel jointly strike reportedly hit a primary school killing nearly 175 young girls, showing how even protected spaces can become targets and innocent lives are lost.

One should note, while the United States has spent decades managing a queue of global adversaries, stretching from the South China Sea to Eastern Europe, Tehran has had only one focus i.e. United States. For nearly half a century, they have built an invisible, underground military infrastructure that the world's most expensive smart bombs cannot reach. As we enter the second month of the conflict, the reality is staggering: trillions of dollars in American military assets, built over 30 years across Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar, are going up in smoke. This collapse has forced a desperate Washington to use Pakistan as a diplomatic postman for a 15-point exit strategy. This sudden scramble to end a war they cannot win brings us to the next section.

Throughout 2025 and early 2026, Trump labeled himself a Peacemaker, which surprised everyone by switching from threats to sudden negotiations. He claimed he could resolve his 9th war, the Russia-Ukraine conflict. This attempt to act as a mediator revealed a side of him that even his loyal supporters found hard to align with his tough-guy image. A similar pattern emerged during the 2025 India-Pakistan conflict. While Pakistan praised Trump as a "friend of peace," India directly denied he was involved at all. This revealed that Trump often acted as a peacemaker in name only, without engaging in the actual work of diplomacy.

Ultimately, his decision to form a Board of Peace to supposedly bring harmony to the world only to suddenly shift into a warmonger indicates that his peaceful persona was merely a theatrical act, maybe only to compete with his predecessors like Barack Obama for a Nobel Prize. The 2026 war has finally stripped away this mask, proving that the image of Peacemaker was nothing more than a temporary script for a leader now trapped in a permanent conflict.

While the Trump administration swings between the roles of Peacemaker and Warmonger, India has remained a steady, balanced force. Throughout the 2025 peace theater and the 2026 military crisis, New Delhi has consistently followed its policy of Strategic Autonomy. By refusing to take sides, India has proven that the spirit of the Non-Aligned Movement is more relevant today than ever. Even as Trump used his "Board of Peace" to build his personal legacy, India maintained a careful distance as an Observer. This move signaled that India supports genuine peace but will not endorse a diplomatic performance. While the U.S. and Israel focused on Operation Epic Fury, India focused on stability, protecting its energy supplies and millions of citizens in the Gulf. In a world of unpredictable leaders and theatrical acts, India's consistency has made it the true stabilizing power of 2026.

### QUOTE OF THE DAY

"Be the change that you wish to see in the world."

Mahatma Gandhi

# WHEN THE WEST ASIA CRISIS HITS HOME AND HARD



DILRUKSHI HANDUNNETTI

As the West Asia conflict continues into its fifth week, Sri Lanka may feel it has avoided diplomatic wrangles and has not become a target of hostility from warring nations. Colombo has strived to maintain neutrality and avoid being coerced into taking sides. But the challenges are far from over.

The island, an unlikely participant in the US-Israeli-Iran war, grabbed headlines when the US Navy torpedoed IRIS Dena, an Iran-flagged vessel in the Indian Ocean, close to Sri Lanka. During the Raisina Dialogue 2026 last month, Sri Lankan foreign minister Vijitha Herath was repeatedly questioned about the repatriation of Iranian sailors, but he kept his answers simple: Colombo's response to the distressed Iranian vessels IRIS Dena and IRIS Bushehr was guided by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and the principles of international humanitarian law. He sidestepped attempts to extract further explanations.

Proof of Colombo's stance was also in the refusal to permit two American warplanes to land. Around the same time when Iranian vessels requested permission for three naval vessels to dock in Sri Lanka, a US request to deploy two warplanes equipped with anti-ship missiles to land at the Mattala Rajapaksa International Airport was refused to maintain neutrality, President Anura Kumara Dissanayake told parliament recently. Colombo has been lauded for navigating such choppy diplomatic waters with aplomb.

conflict or not. Colombo understands it should prioritise neighbouring India and balance China, while also not provoking the US and Israel, two old allies. But Sri Lanka's real test may lie elsewhere, in how the island faces the full force of an energy crisis.

The theatre of war is elsewhere; Colombo has no direct role but always has strong interests. The US is Sri Lanka's main trading partner, and Iran imports high volumes of Ceylon tea. Thus, for Sri Lanka, the impact of the West Asia conflict is very real and economic. The disrupted global supply chains, disrupted shipping activities and rising oil prices are already having an impact that will worsen, even if the war ends soon. The entire world may soon need to start over, and for Sri Lanka—which has been struggling to herald an economic comeback after the debilitating 2022 collapse—short-term fixes are unlikely to help turn things around. Colombo is heavily energy-dependent and to meet its annual demand of 14,150 GWh, a steady supply of coal and petroleum is required. Even as Colombo reassures the public of steady fuel and gas supplies, people are already feeling the weight of the war. Colombo received 38,000 MT of fuel from India last week and is locked in discussions with Russia, after sanctions on Moscow were temporarily lifted.

Meanwhile, Colombo has taken urgent measures in response. Fuel is now rationed via a QR code system, and the country has a four-day workweek. People are now grappling with fuel quotas, electricity and gas price hikes, which are driving up food

living. The surge in prices and inflation will slow down tourism and impact remittances from the war-hit Gulf countries. Sri Lanka's Petroleum Distributors Association, meanwhile, will hold a silent protest on April 6 over unresolved issues affecting their operations. To cap it all, the government has also imposed water cuts as the nation prepares to herald the Sinhala-Hindu New Year in a few days.

As Sri Lanka braces for water and power cuts with a distant war's impacts reaching home, the National People's Power administration is facing its first proper test of credibility following the country's energy minister, Kumara Jayakody, being indicted in the Colombo High Court over allegations of corruption dating back to his tenure as a senior public official.

While the matter dates back to his tenure as procurement manager of the Ceylon Fertiliser Company, the issue has raised strong criticism against the government which came to office on a strong anti-corruption platform, for not asking Jayakody to step down, and is willing to entrust the vital energy sector to someone who is now under a corruption probe. Sri Lanka's Commission to Investigate Allegations of Bribery and Corruption filed corruption charges against Jayakody for a questionable procurement that caused millions in losses. The more recent controversy is linked to a coal purchase under his watch as energy minister, denting the administration's reputation.

The government has so far managed to oversee diplomatic

government's real challenge will be its response to the impending energy crisis and bolstering the island's energy security. The country lacks a national energy policy and mechanisms to weather crises and shocks, which has increased public questioning of its capacity.

It is also not acceptable to use war as an excuse for failing to

### DIGITAL WAR OF WORDS

**The 63 km long Lucknow-Kanpur Expressway will reduce travel time between Lucknow and Kanpur from 1.5-3 hours to around 30 minutes, significantly saving time and fuel for commuters. Built with modern engineering standards, robust safety systems, flyovers, underpasses, and planned rest areas, the corridor is designed to ease congestion, improve logistics efficiency, and support economic growth. Beyond connectivity, the expressway is set to benefit farmers, students, businesses, and industries by improving access to markets, education, healthcare, and employment opportunities, reinforcing its role as a catalyst for development in the state of #UttarPradesh. ~ NHA**



ensure energy security, as industries will require reliable energy supplies to keep the economy moving, even as it slows due to external shocks.

It is indeed healthy to take no sides in this war or any other. Colombo has a well-defended position of non-alignment. It is prudent to have avoided offering Sri Lankan soil to be used as anyone's base or its waters.

The Gulf Cooperation Council countries offer a classic example of being made collateral damage, and Sri Lanka must avoid such an alignment that can prove expensive, both in terms of finances and national security. In these extremely challenging times, Sri Lanka should prioritise its economic interest and energy security, drawing important lessons from 2022. Political stability is strongly linked to economic stability, and in the absence of normalcy and the weight of hardships, people tend to turn against governments. It is time to put the house in order and to clear its stable. It can start with the energy minister.



Maintaining neutrality is difficult, whether a party to the

and transport costs and adding to the already prohibitive cost of

matters and maintain neutrality despite challenges. However, the

# Assam Police Register Case Against Pawan Khera Over Alleged Forgery, Defamation Linked to CM's Family

GUWAHATI

The Assam Police has registered a First Information Report (FIR) against Congress leader Pawan Khera and others following allegations of forgery, defamation, and criminal conspiracy arising from statements made during recent press conferences.

The case was filed by the Crime Branch in Guwahati on April 6 based on a complaint lodged by Riniki Bhuyan Sharma, wife of Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma. The FIR (No. 0004/2026) invokes multiple provisions of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, including sections related to forgery of documents and electronic records, use of forged material as genuine, defamation, criminal conspiracy, and acts intended to cause public



mischievous.

According to the complaint, the allegations stem from remarks made by Khera during two press briefings on April 5 - one at the All India Congress Committee (AICC) headquarters in New Delhi and another at a hotel in Guwahati. The FIR notes that the statements were accompanied by visual presentations and promotional content disseminated through social media platforms, including official party handles.

In her complaint, Sharma has alleged that the presentations falsely claimed she held citizenship or passports from multiple countries, including Egypt and Antigua and Barbuda, and possessed a "Golden Card" issued by the United Arab Emirates. Additional claims included alleged ownership of undisclosed foreign as-

sets and links to a company based in Wyoming in the United States.

Sharma has categorically denied the allegations, describing them as "false, fabricated and baseless." She further claimed that documents displayed during the press conferences were forged, featuring fabricated seals and QR codes designed to resemble official government records.

The FIR also refers to the use of promotional messaging and visuals during the press events, which, according to the complainant, were intended to amplify the allegations and draw public attention. It alleges that the exercise formed part of a coordinated attempt to damage her reputation and influence public perception during an ongoing electoral period in Assam.

Police documents state that the

content was widely circulated across media and social media platforms, triggering public reactions, including online harassment and reputational harm to Sharma and her family. The timing of the allegations - days ahead of polling scheduled for April 9 - has also been flagged in the complaint as a factor with potential implications for public order and the electoral environment. Based on the complaint, the case has been registered under multiple sections of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, covering offences including forgery, defamation, criminal conspiracy, and acts affecting public tranquillity. Officials said the investigation has been assigned to senior officers of the Crime Branch, with both digital and physical evidence set to be examined as part of the ongoing probe.

**FIR Filed Against Kharge in Assam Over 'Inflammatory' Speech Targeting BJP, RSS**

GUWAHATI

A complaint has been lodged against Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge at Basistha Police Station in Guwahati, alleging that he made inflammatory and derogatory remarks during a political rally in Assam's Sribhumi district.

The complaint, filed by BJP Assam spokesperson Ranjib Kumar Sarmah, pertains to a speech delivered by Kharge at Nilambazar on April 7. According to the FIR, Kharge allegedly described the ideology of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) as "poisonous" and likened it to a "poisonous snake."

The complaint further alleges that the Congress leader called for the "elimination" of the BJP during his address-remarks the complainant claims are derogatory and capable of inciting tensions.

According to the FIR, such statements have hurt the sentiments of party members and may promote enmity between groups, potentially disturbing public peace and communal harmony in the state, which has a sensitive socio-political environment.

Police officials at Basistha Police Station have confirmed receipt of the complaint and indicated that further investigation will proceed in accordance with legal provisions.

There was no immediate response from Kharge or the Congress party at the time of filing this report.

## Arunachal Activist Seeks CM Pema Khandu's Resignation Ahead of Reported Court-Monitored CBI Probe

ITANAGAR

An anti-corruption activist in Arunachal Pradesh has called for the resignation of Chief Minister Pema Khandu, citing the need to ensure an impartial inquiry reportedly to be conducted by the Central Bureau of Investigation under the supervision of the Supreme Court of India.

Nabam Tagam, who heads the Jan Andolan Anti-Corruption Movement, said in a statement on Tuesday that the Chief Minister stepping down would help uphold the integrity and transparency of the proposed preliminary probe.

He argued that public confidence in the investigation would be strengthened if it proceeds without any perceived administrative influence. The organisation has been actively mobilising public opinion around the issue. On March 5, it organised a 12-hour peaceful bandh across the Capital

Complex region, which, according to organisers, was observed without major untoward incidents.

Tagam noted that while a phase of protests had been temporarily suspended in January following requests from the administration, the group's core demands - including accountability and an independent investigation - remain unchanged. However, the campaign has also drawn scrutiny from authorities. A bandh called in December 2025 was declared unlawful by the administration, citing concerns over disruption to essential services and inconvenience to the public.

There has been no immediate response from the Chief Minister's Office regarding the demand for resignation. Officials have also not issued a public statement on the timeline or scope of the reported CBI inquiry referenced by the group.

## Sarma Targets Kharge Over Passport Allegations Row, Calls Claims Unverified

GUWAHATI

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Tuesday sharpened his attack on the Congress, criticising party president Mallikarjun Kharge over remarks defending allegations made against his family, amid an escalating political confrontation.

The controversy stems from claims raised by Congress leader Pawan Khera, who accused Sarma's wife, Riniki Bhuyan Sharma, of holding multiple passports and possessing undisclosed foreign assets. The allegations have since triggered both political exchanges and legal action.

Responding to the charges while campaigning, Sarma questioned the credibility of the documents cited by the Congress, alleging that the party had failed to verify the information before making it public. He suggested that due diligence, including consultation with relevant authorities such as the Ministry of Exter-



nal Affairs, should have preceded the claims.

In a pointed remark aimed at Kharge, Sarma criticised his call for a probe by central agencies, using strong language to question the Congress leadership's handling of the issue. He accused the party of first making public

allegations and then seeking verification.

Kharge, speaking at a press conference in Guwahati, maintained that investigative agencies should examine the matter. He noted that an FIR had already been registered against Khera and said the Congress would

respond as the legal process unfolds. He also indicated that the party had sought an inquiry by agencies such as the Enforcement Directorate or the Central Bureau of Investigation.

Meanwhile, teams of the Assam Police visited Khera's residence in New Delhi earlier in the day in connection with the case. Sarma claimed that the Congress leader had travelled to Hyderabad and asserted that further action would follow.

The Chief Minister also hinted at the possibility of the issue widening, suggesting that other senior Congress leaders, including Rahul Gandhi, could come under scrutiny in relation to the documents cited during the controversy.

The developments mark a further intensification of the political and legal standoff between the ruling party in Assam and the Congress, just days ahead of polling in the state.

## High-Decibel Campaign Ends in Assam with Roadshows, Rallies Across Cities

GUWAHATI

Campaigning for the Assam Assembly elections concluded on a high-pitched note on Tuesday, with political parties staging a final show of strength through roadshows and rallies across key urban centres, particularly in Guwahati.

In the city, candidates Mira Borthakur and Kunki Chowdhury led vibrant processions, drawing large crowds of supporters. Party workers waving flags and raising slogans accompanied the candidates, turning major thoroughfares into scenes of intense political mobilisation.

The final day push reflected last-minute efforts by candidates to consolidate voter support and create a strong visual impact ahead of polling.

Across the state, similar high-energy campaigning unfolded, with parties making closing appeals through rallies, public meetings and door-to-

door outreach. With the campaign window closing at 5pm, the focus now shifts to voting scheduled for April 9, when 722 candidates will contest for seats in the 126-member Assembly in a single-phase election.

The run-up to the polls witnessed a sharp and often acrimonious contest between the ruling NDA and the Congress-led Opposition alliance, marked by aggressive rhetoric and competing narratives.

Top BJP leaders, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Union Home Minister Amit Shah, spearheaded an intensive campaign, targeting the Congress on issues such as alleged infiltration, insurgency and governance deficits during its tenure.

The ruling alliance highlighted its record in governance, citing initiatives such as land rights for tea garden workers, welfare schemes for women, financial assistance for

girl students, and a reported decline in child marriage. It also reiterated its intent to implement a Uniform Civil Code (UCC) in the state.

The Opposition, led by the Congress, countered by accusing the BJP of divisive politics, corruption and uneven development. It promised expanded welfare measures, including financial assistance for women, improved healthcare coverage and land rights for indigenous communities.

The campaign was further intensified by personal allegations exchanged between leaders. Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma accused state Congress president Gaurav Gogoi of links with Pakistan's ISI, while the Congress questioned the assets and financial dealings of the Chief Minister's wife.

Prominent national figures, including Congress president

Mallikarjun Kharge and Rahul Gandhi, also led campaign efforts across the state.

Key candidates in the fray include Himanta Biswa Sarma, Gaurav Gogoi, AIUDF chief Badruddin Ajmal, Assembly Speaker Biswajit Daimary, Leader of the Opposition Debabrata Saikia, along with regional leaders such as Akhil Gogoi and Lurinjyoti Gogoi.

The NDA alliance comprises the BJP, Asom Gana Parishad and the Bodo Peoples' Front, while the Opposition bloc includes the Congress, Rajiv Dal, Assam Jatiya Parishad, CPI(M), CPI(ML) and the All Party Hill Leaders' Conference.

Unlike previous elections held in multiple phases, Assam will go to the polls in a single phase this time, raising the stakes for all political players as they head into a DECIDING contest.

## Katigora Turns Swing Battleground as Defections, New Voters Reshape Contest in Barak Valley

SILCHAR

The Katigora Assembly constituency in Assam's Cachar district has emerged as a high-stakes electoral battleground ahead of the polls, with shifting political loyalties, an expanded voter base and prominent defections reshaping the contest.

With over 2.13 lakh voters - including more than 6,200 first-time electors - Katigora is the largest constituency in the district and increasingly reflects volatile electoral behaviour. The seat has gained a reputation as a swing constituency, with voters frequently altering their political preferences between elections.

This time, the contest has evolved into a multi-cornered fight involving the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Congress and the All India Trinamool Congress (AITC), adding further complexity to the electoral landscape.

Historically, Katigora has witnessed alternating mandates. The BJP secured a breakthrough in 2016 with Amar Chand Jain, while the Congress reclaimed the seat in 2021 through Khalil Uddin Mazumder, underlining the constituency's unpredictability.

The political arithmetic has shifted significantly following delimitation,

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which added nearly 40,000 voters to the rolls. The inclusion of industrial belts such as Panchgram has introduced new socio-economic dynamics, prompting parties to recalibrate their campaign strategies.

Adding to the intrigue are high-profile defections that have blurred traditional party lines. Kamalakhya Dey Purkayastha, a Congress leader and North Karimganj MLA, recently joined the BJP, strengthening the ruling party's campaign in the region. Expressing confidence, he said the electorate was showing "new hope" and a desire for change aligned with the state's development trajectory.

In a twist, former BJP MLA Amar Chand Jain is now contesting on a Congress ticket after being denied renomination by his former party. Banking on his grassroots connect, Jain said his development record would resonate with voters despite the shift in political affiliation.

Meanwhile, AITC candidate Fazlur Rahaman Laskar has positioned himself as a local alternative, criticising fre-

quent party-switching by rivals and emphasising his long-standing connection with the constituency.

Despite the high-decibel campaign, voter concerns remain rooted in everyday issues, including road connectivity, employment generation and flood management - persistent challenges in the region.

At the intersection of continuity and change, Katigora encapsulates the broader political churn underway in Assam, with evolving demographics, shifting loyalties and local aspirations set to play a decisive role in shaping the electoral outcome.

Amit Shah Pitches Development, Stability in Silchar as Campaigning Concludes

Silchar, April 7: Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Tuesday underscored development, governance credibility and cultural outreach while addressing a key rally in Silchar, marking the close of campaigning for constituencies in Cachar district.

With polling imminent, Shah framed the election as a decisive choice on governance priorities, urging voters to back what he described as a model driven by "decisiveness" and delivery. "This election is not merely about forming a government; it is about choosing a direction between drift and decisiveness, between delay and delivery," he said.

Focusing on development, Shah outlined a vision for the Barak Valley centred on long-term infrastructure expansion and urban transformation. He said

Silchar would be developed into a more accessible and economically vibrant city, with improved connectivity and planned civic upgrades aimed at easing congestion and boosting commerce.

Positioning the BJP as a party of administrative efficiency, he emphasised the need for time-bound solutions to persistent civic challenges, asserting that a stable government would be better equipped to execute large-scale projects without delays.

Alongside development, Shah sought to strike a cultural chord with the electorate by invoking the legacy of the Bengali Language Movement 1961, paying tribute to its martyrs and situating the party's outreach within the region's historical consciousness.

He also referenced key cultural and spiritual landmarks of the Barak Valley, underscoring the BJP's commitment to preserving local heritage, in what appeared to be a calibrated effort to align governance promises with identity-sensitive messaging.

Stressing accountability, Shah said development must go hand in hand with transparency and efficient delivery. He called for a decisive mandate in favour of the BJP, stating it would ensure "development with direction, identity with dignity, and governance with accountability" in the Barak Valley.

While briefly touching upon national security and electoral integrity, the thrust of his address remained focused on development outcomes and governance as the campaign drew to a close.

## Congress Pushes for Opposition Presence in Nagaland By-Poll, Calls It Key to Accountability

KOHIMA

The Indian National Congress on Tuesday outlined its strategy ahead of the Koridang by-election in Nagaland, stressing the need to restore an effective opposition in the State Assembly and raising concerns over governance and development issues.

Addressing a press conference at Congress Bhavan in Kohima, Saptagiri Sankar Ulaka said the by-poll holds significance beyond electing a representative, describing it as an opportunity to reintroduce democratic balance in an Assembly currently without an opposition.

Ulaka announced that the party has fielded T. Chalukumba Ao as its candidate and said senior leaders have been actively campaigning in the constituency. He claimed the party has received encouraging responses from voters during outreach efforts.

Condemning recent incidents of violence in the constituency, Ulaka said such actions undermine democratic processes and urged authorities to ensure law and order. He also appealed to local bodies and stakeholders to facilitate a free and fair election, free from inducement or coercion.

Highlighting the broader political context, Ulaka said the absence of an opposition weakens institutional checks and accountability. He maintained that even a single Congress legislator could help strengthen democratic oversight in the Assembly.

Referring to national leadership, he noted that Rahul Gandhi has con-

sistently raised key public issues, underscoring the importance of a functioning opposition at all levels.

The Congress leader also flagged several policy concerns. He pointed to the lack of clarity over the proposed Frontier Nagaland Territorial Authority, calling for a defined timeline and legislative action.

On infrastructure, Ulaka highlighted delays in the Foothill Road project and urged the government to resolve its standoff with the Foothills Road Coordination Committee to ensure timely completion.

He further criticised the implementation of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act in the state, citing low wage rates and delays in fund disbursement that have affected rural livelihoods. Concerns were also raised over proposed amendments to the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act, with Ulaka cautioning that changes could impact institutions engaged in education and health-care.

He additionally stressed the importance of safeguarding Article 371A, calling it integral to the state's identity. The Congress also targeted the BJP-led central government, with Ulaka criticising leadership under Narendra Modi and Amit Shah over what he described as a lack of progress on key regional issues. Also present at the briefing, Meghachandra Singh said the by-election presents an opportunity to restore democratic balance, alleging that the BJP-NPF alliance government has fallen short on transparency and timely project execution.

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## Rajnath Singh hits out at Khawaja Asif over 'Kolkata threat'; says Pakistan should not forget memories of 1971



KOLKATA

Union Defence Minister Rajnath Singh on Tuesday hit back at Pakistani counterpart Khawaja Asif for his alleged comments related to striking Kolkata, stressing that he should not give "such provocative statement" because they suffered the consequences when Pakistan was divided into two parts.

While reacting to reporters' questions in connection with West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata's allegations about Prime Minister Narendra Modi's silence on Asif's threat, Singh said, "Pakistan should remember the memories of 55 years ago when it was divided into two countries in 1971. They will feel the dire consequence again if they dare to go beyond."

Later, Singh participated in an election campaign rally for the BJP in Barrackpore

on the outskirts of Kolkata. Addressing the rally, he slammed the Mamata Banerjee government on several issues, including lawlessness, infiltration, non-industrialisation and plights of migrant workers leaving Bengal because of unemployment. Pakistan's Defence Minister Khawaja Asif on Saturday reportedly said that Islamabad would retaliate by striking Kolkata in the event of any future misadventure by India.

Mamata on Monday lambasted the prime minister and demanded his immediate resignation for his silence on the recent threat from the Pakistan minister. At a poll rally at Bethuadahari in Nadia district, the Trinamool Congress supremo made scathing attacks on Modi for his blistering attack on TMC in his election speeches — including one in Cooch Behar district

on Sunday — while failing to respond to remarks from the Pakistan defence minister. The catalyst for her outrage was Khawaja Asif's warning to India on Saturday that it would respond to any "future misadventures" with a strike on Kolkata. Asif said in Sialkot, "If India tries to stage any false flag operation this time, then God-willingly, we will take it to Kolkata."

Modi's silence even in his Cooch Behar rally on Sunday, prompted Mamata to come heavily on him. "You target Bengal in your election rallies, but when Pakistan talks about attacking Calcutta, you remain silent. You should resign... You must immediately resign," Mamata said.

"Why did the Prime Minister not raise the issue in his Bengal rally? Why didn't he say 'We will take strong action'?" she raised questions. There was no mention of Asif or any threat from Pakistan in Modi's speech. Abhishek Banerjee, national general secretary of Trinamool Congress, was also equally relentless in his criticism of Modi. "Prime Minister Modi is silent while Khawaja Asif threatens Calcutta. He uses central agencies against political opponents but lacks the spine to respond to Pakistan. Is this your 56-inch chest? The day the INDIA bloc comes to power, we will teach him (Asif, presumably) a lesson..." he asserted on Monday.

## Campaigning ends in Assam, Kerala, Puducherry as leaders make last-ditch pitch to voters

NEW DELHI

Campaigning for the high-stakes Assembly elections in Assam, Kerala and Puducherry ended on Tuesday, with leaders across parties making a final push to woo voters through a slew of promises and sharp attacks on their rivals.

Polling for 126 seats in Assam, 140 in Kerala, and 30 in Puducherry will be held in a single phase on Thursday.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Home Minister Amit Shah, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, Health Minister JP Nadda, BJP chief Nitin Nabin and Congress leaders Mallikarjun Kharge, Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi were among leaders who held rallies in poll-bound states to shore up prospects of their candidates.

In Kerala, the ruling Left Democratic Front (LDF) is seeking a third successive term. The LDF created a record in 2021 as it retained the southern state which has seen power alternating between the coalitions led by CPI(M) and Congress.

Having missed the bus in 2021, the Congress-led United Democratic Front is hopeful of winning the assembly polls riding on its promises and what its leaders call a "yearning for change".

The elections are also crucial for the Left front as Kerala is the only state where it is in power, having been squeezed in Tripura and West Bengal. The BJP, which has been gaining vote share in the state, is also hopeful of its prospects in the southern state.

In Assam, the Congress has stitched a six-party alliance to take on the ruling BJP-led NDA, which is seeking third successive term in office.

The campaign turned more bitter in the last few days after Congress allegations against Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma and his wife Riniki Bhuyan Sharma, who has filed a FIR.

Assam Police carried out searches at the residence of Congress media department chairperson Pawan Khara, a day after he made the allegations at a press conference on Sunday. BJP has



strongly hit back at Congress over the allegations.

In Puducherry, the contest involves the ruling NDA which includes NR Congress and BJP and the Congress-DMK alliance. Actor Vijay's Tamilaga Vetri Kazhagam (TVK) is seeking to make it triangular.

Union Home Minister Amit Shah, who addressed rallies in Assam on Tuesday, expressed confidence that the BJP will again form a government in Assam.

He said a decision to bring the Uniform Civil Code will be taken in the first meeting of the state cabinet.

He attacked Congress leader Rahul Gandhi and West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee in a rally in Cachar over "vote-bank politics" and said BJP will throw out every single infiltrator from the country.

Shah also appealed to the voters to form the BJP's third consecutive government in Assam.

Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan said that despite limited campaign time, the people of Kerala are

firmly with the LDF, and there is no anti-incumbency sentiment in the state. Speaking at a Meet the Leader programme in Kannur, he said the absence of anti-incumbency has left the opposition disappointed.

He claimed that 97% of the promises made in the 2021 elections have been fulfilled, and that the government has successfully combined development and welfare initiatives over the past ten years. "This progress must continue for a comprehensive New Kerala," he said.

The Chief Minister pointed out that the Centre's share in development funding has reduced, with the state bearing nearly 75% of the burden, affecting development stability and social justice.

He alleged that corruption charges are now being raised against the opposition rather than the ruling front, and said the UDF behaves similarly whether in power or opposition on corruption matters.

Congress leader Priyanka Gandhi Vadra on Tuesday called the Left

Democratic Front (LDF)-led government "corrupt" and expressed belief that the United Democratic Front (UDF) is competent to lead the state.

Speaking with reporters, Priyanka Gandhi claimed that the ruling government in Kerala has no ideology left, accusing it of "making deals with the BJP."

"I want to say to the people (of Kerala) that you have a corrupt government, a govt which has no ideology left because they are making deals with the BJP. You need a government, especially at this time when there are more troubles coming your way. You need a government with a vision and one that stands for you and understands your problems and also is not afraid of the Opposition. I believe the UDF has enough competence and experience amongst its leaders to provide leadership to the state," she said.

Campaigning is also being held for Tamil Nadu assembly polls scheduled for April 23 and in West Bengal on April 23 and 29.

Votes will be counted on May 4.

## INTERNATIONAL

### US-Iran agree for two-week ceasefire; Strait of Hormuz to reopen, truce extends to Lebanon

TEHRAN

U.S. President Donald Trump pulled back on his threats to launch devastating strikes on Iran late Tuesday, swerving to deescalate the war less than two hours before the deadline he set for Tehran to capitulate or face a major escalation.

Trump said he was holding off on his threatened attacks on Iranian bridges, power plants and other civilian targets as the U.S. and Iran agreed to a two-week ceasefire that includes the reopening of the Strait of Hormuz. He said Iran has proposed a "workable" 10-point peace plan that could help end the war launched by the U.S. and Israel in February.

Iran's Supreme National Security Council said it has accepted the ceasefire and that it would negotiate with the United States in Islamabad beginning Friday. Neither Iran nor the United States said when the ceasefire would begin.

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi said passage through the strait would be allowed under Iranian military management. It wasn't immediately clear whether that meant Iran would loosen its chokehold on the waterway. The plan includes allowing both Iran and Oman to charge fees on ships transiting through the Strait of Hormuz, the narrow mouth of the Persian Gulf, a regional official said Wednesday. The official said Iran would use the money it raised for reconstruction.

In addition to control of the strait, Iran's demands for ending the war include withdrawal of U.S. combat forces from the region, the lifting of sanctions and the release of its frozen assets.

Even as the ceasefire was announced, missile alerts continued in the United Arab Emirates, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Kuwait early Wednesday, hinting at the chaos surrounding the diplomatic moves. A gas processing facility in Abu Dhabi was ablaze after incoming Iranian fire,

officials said. The U.S. military has halted all offensive operations against Iran but continues defensive actions, said an official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to describe sensitive military operations. Since the war began, Trump has repeatedly backed off deadlines just before they expire.

In doing so again Tuesday, Trump said in a social media post he had come to the decision "based on conversations" with Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Gen. Asim Munir, Pakistan's powerful army chief.

Sharif, in a post on X hours earlier, urged Trump to extend his deadline by two weeks to allow diplomacy to advance. He used the same post to ask Iran to open the strait for two weeks.

"Almost all of the various points of past contention have been agreed to between the United States and Iran, but a two week period will allow the Agreement to be finalized and consummated," Trump said. Israel has also agreed to the ceasefire, according to a White House official who was not authorized to comment publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity. And Sharif said the ceasefire extends to Israel and Hezbollah halting fighting in Lebanon.

But there are concerns in Israel about the agreement, according to a person familiar with the situation who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not allowed to speak to the media. The person said Israel would like to achieve more.

Iran's stockpile of highly enriched uranium is still buried at enrichment sites. The program had been one of the main issues cited by both Israel and the U.S. in launching the war.

Trump's expansive threat Tuesday did not seem to account for potential harm to civilians, prompting Democrats in Congress, some United Nations officials and scholars in military law to say such strikes would violate international law. Tehran's representative

at the U.N., Amir-Saeid Irvani, said the threats "constitute incitement to war crimes and potentially genocide" and that Iran would "take immediate and proportionate reciprocal measures" if Trump launches devastating strikes.

The U.S. and Israel have battered Iran with attacks targeting its military capabilities, leadership and nuclear program. Iran has responded with a stream of strikes on Israel and Gulf Arab neighbors, causing regional chaos and outsized economic and political shock.

Late Tuesday, Pakistan's prime minister urged Trump to extend his deadline by two weeks to allow diplomacy to advance. In a post on X, Shehbaz Sharif, whose country has been leading negotiations, also asked Iran to open up for two weeks the Strait of Hormuz.

Before the deadline, airstrikes hit two bridges and a train station, and the U.S. hit military infrastructure on Kharg Island, a key hub for Iranian oil production. While Iran cannot match the sophistication of U.S. and Israeli weaponry or their dominance in the air, its chokehold on the strait since the war began in late February is rolling the world economy and raising the pressure on Trump both at home and abroad to find a way out of the standoff.

"A whole civilization will die tonight, never to be brought back again," if a deal isn't reached, Trump said in an online post Tuesday morning. But he also seemed to keep open the possibility of an off-ramp, saying that "maybe something revolutionarily wonderful can happen."

Earlier, Iranian official Alireza Rahimi issued a video message calling on "all young people, athletes, artists, students and university students and their professors" to form human chains around power plants.

Iranians have formed human chains in the past around nuclear sites at times of heightened tensions with the West. State media posted videos online that showed hundreds of flag-waving people

massed at two bridges and at a power plant hundreds of kilometers (miles) from Tehran, though it was not clear how widespread the practice was.

"They're not allowed to do that," Trump said in a phone call with NBC News.

A general in Iran's Revolutionary Guard general warned that Iran would "deprive the U.S. and its allies of the region's oil and gas for years" and expand its attacks across the Gulf region if Trump carries out his threat.

In Tehran, the mood was bleak. A young teacher said that many opponents of Iran's Islamic system had hoped Trump's attacks would quickly topple it. As the war drags on, she fears U.S. and Israeli strikes will spread chaos.

"If we don't have the internet, and if we don't have electricity, water, and gas, we're really going back to the Stone Age, as Trump said," she told The Associated Press, speaking on the condition of anonymity for her safety.

Intense airstrikes pounded Tehran, including in residential neighborhoods. In the past, such strikes have targeted Iranian government and security officials.

The Israeli military said it attacked an Iranian petrochemical site in Shiraz, the second day in a row it hit such a facility. The military later said it also struck bridges in several cities that were being used by Iranian forces to transport weapons and military equipment.

A U.S. official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive military operations, described the strikes on Kharg Island as hitting targets previously struck and not directed at oil infrastructure.

Saudi Arabia said it intercepted seven ballistic missiles and four drones launched by Iran. Iran also fired on Israel.

More than 1,900 people have been killed in Iran since the war began, but the government has not updated the toll for days.

## Crude prices plunge over 13 per cent after US announces ceasefire in West Asia conflict



NEW DELHI

Crude oil prices in the international market dropped sharply following the announcement of a ceasefire by the United States in the ongoing West Asia conflict.

Brent crude prices fell by more than 13%, trading at \$94.94 per barrel—down 13.62% or \$14.88—at 7:04 AM Indian Standard Time. Meanwhile, US WTI crude declined by 14.60%, or \$16.49, to \$96.46 per barrel.

The conflict, now in its 35th day, had pushed crude prices to nearly double their pre-war levels.

Brent crude, which was trading between \$62 and \$65 per barrel before the conflict, surged to a high of \$119 per barrel and had been hovering above \$110 in recent weeks.

US President Donald Trump, in a post on Truth Social, announced a two-week ceasefire in the conflict. He stated that he would suspend bombing and attacks on Iran for a limited period.

"I hold off the destructive force being sent tonight to Iran, and subject to the

Islamic Republic of Iran agreeing to the COMPLETE, IMMEDIATE, and SAFE OPENING of the Strait of Hormuz, I agree to suspend the bombing and attack of Iran for a period of two weeks. This will be a double sided CEASEFIRE! The reason for doing so is that we have already met and exceeded all Military objectives, and are very far along with a definitive Agreement concerning Longterm PEACE with Iran, and PEACE in the Middle East..."

The conflict had severely disrupted cargo movement through the Strait of Hormuz, a vital chokepoint that accounts for nearly 20% of global oil and gas supplies. In addition to the blockade, Iran targeted several oil and gas facilities in the region, further exacerbating supply concerns. Production was also affected in some countries due to storage constraints, as exports were hindered by the disruption in the Strait.

India, which depends on imports for nearly 90% of its crude oil needs, is particular-

ly vulnerable to such disruptions. The country sources nearly 90% of its total LPG imports through routes passing via the Strait of Hormuz.

During the month-long crisis, India had to increase the prices of aviation turbine fuel (ATF), premium petrol and diesel, as well as domestic and commercial LPG, to absorb the impact of rising crude prices and supply disruptions of gas in the country. According to estimates, a sustained increase of \$1 per barrel in crude prices can raise India's annual import bill by approximately Rs 16,000 crore.

Oil marketing companies raised the prices of aviation turbine fuel (ATF), premium petrol, diesel, and both domestic and commercial LPG cylinders. ATF prices were increased by around 8.5%. In the national capital, jet fuel now costs Rs 1,04,927 per kilolitre, compared to Rs 96,638 in March.

Commercial LPG prices were also increased by around Rs 200, marking the second hike within a month. In Delhi, a 19-kg LPG cylinder now costs Rs 2,078.50, up Rs 195.50 since the last revision on March 7.

However, petrol and diesel prices remain unchanged, as the government reduced excise duties to shield consumers. Additionally, the government has imposed an export duty of Rs 21.5 per litre on diesel and Rs 29.5 per litre on aviation turbine fuel (ATF) to discourage exports and ensure adequate domestic supply.

State-run oil companies such as Indian Oil Corporation (IOC) and Bharat Petroleum Corporation (BPCL) have also postponed routine maintenance shutdowns at some of their refineries to maintain uninterrupted fuel supply across the country.

## Ballots and Benefits: How Public Money Becomes Political Mandate in India's Election Economy

Indian democracy has long been celebrated for its vibrancy—its ability to accommodate dissent, absorb shocks, and renew itself through the ballot box. Elections in India are grand exercises in participation, rich with symbolism and rhetoric. Yet beneath the spectacle lies a quieter, more consistent pattern: elections are increasingly less about shaping the future and more about redistributing the present. The contest is not so much over ideas of transformation as it is over mechanisms of allocation.

At the heart of this evolving political economy lies a simple but profound dynamic: the taxpayer generates the state's revenue, and the political class decides how it is spent. This relationship, foundational to any democracy, has taken on a distinctive character in India—one where electoral success is closely tied to the ability to promise, deliver, and publicise direct benefits. Over time, this has created a system where public money is not merely administered but strategically distributed to secure political legitimacy.

The Standardisation of Electoral Strategy When multiple states go to the polls simultaneously—as in Kerala, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Assam, and Puducherry—the political rhetoric tends to amplify. Each election is framed as a watershed moment, a decisive turn in history. But a closer look reveals a more uniform script. Across regions and parties, a familiar grammar dominates: promise, transfer, consolidate.

This is often described under the broad and benign label of "welfare." Yet the term, while not inaccurate, does not fully capture the electoral calculus behind these schemes. Welfare, in principle, is meant to address structural inequalities and provide a safety net for the vulnerable. In practice, however, many of these initiatives are designed with electoral timing and visibility in mind, blurring the line between social support and political inducement.

The Scale of Redistribution What was once episodic has now become systemic. Welfare schemes are no longer peripheral gestures; they are central pillars of state budgets. In Tamil Nadu, expansive welfare programmes cost tens of thousands of crores annually. West Bengal's Lakshmi Bhandar scheme alone accounts for an estimated ₹12,000-15,000 crore each year. Assam's Orunodoi initiative exceeds ₹3,500 crore, while Kerala's social security pensions cross ₹10,000 crore annually.

These figures underscore a critical shift: redistribution is no longer incidental to governance—it is embedded within it. Governments are not merely responding to need; they are institutionalising direct benefit transfers as a primary mode of political engagement. The metaphor often used is telling: instead of teaching citizens how to fish, the state hands out fish. What is less frequently acknowledged is that the fish itself comes from the collective catch of taxpayers.

Targeting the Voter: Arithmetic Over Ethics

One of the most striking features of this redistribution model is its segmentation. Benefits are rarely universal in the truest sense; they are targeted by gender, occupation, caste, or income group. Among these, gender-based schemes have gained particular prominence. Cash transfers for women, free transport, subsidised utilities—these are now common features in electoral manifestos.

This segmentation is not accidental. It is rooted in electoral arithmetic. Women, as a voting bloc, have demonstrated increasing political agency and turnout. Targeting them with direct benefits is both a recognition of their importance and a strategic move to consolidate support.

Yet this raises uncomfortable questions. When a policy such as free public transport for women is proposed—particularly in financially strained systems—the issue is not merely fiscal but ethical. Why universalise benefits based on gender rather than economic need? Why exclude other vulnerable groups, such as male daily-wage workers, from similar support? The answers are seldom articulated in policy terms; they are embedded in electoral logic.

The Moral Economy of Welfare The ethical tension at the core of this system is difficult to ignore. Political parties promise benefits with great flourish, but the resources they distribute are not their own. They are drawn from public revenue—taxes paid by citizens. When these benefits are announced or expanded in the run-up to elections, the distinction between governance and inducement becomes increasingly tenuous.

Defenders of welfare politics argue, rightly, that such schemes promote equity, empower marginalised groups, and stimulate consumption. In a country marked by



deep inequalities, these interventions are necessary. However, this defence is incomplete. It overlooks the asymmetry in political credit: while the taxpayer funds the system, the political class receives the gratitude. The act of allocation becomes a source of legitimacy, even though the underlying resources are collectively generated.

In effect, public money is transformed into political capital. The voter, as both contributor and beneficiary, occupies a paradoxical position—financing a system that seeks to win their approval through redistribution.

The Missing Conversation: Capacity Building

Perhaps the most significant consequence of this model is what it leaves out. The focus on direct transfers often crowds out discussions on long-term capacity building. Employment generation, industrial development, research ecosystems—these are complex, slow-moving processes that do not yield immediate electoral dividends. As a result, they receive less attention in political discourse.

Manifestos frequently mention ambitious projects—industrial corridors in Tamil Nadu, infrastructure-led growth in Assam, startup ecosystems in Kerala, or industrial revival in West Bengal. While these proposals are not without merit, they often lack the specificity and clarity that characterise welfare promises. A cash transfer of ₹1,000 per month is tangible and easily understood. A plan for industrial growth, by contrast, is abstract and uncertain.

This imbalance reflects a deeper structural issue: the political system rewards immediacy over sustainability. Voters respond to visible, short-term benefits, and parties adapt accordingly. The result is a cycle where consumption is prioritised over production, and relief over reform.

Structural Vulnerabilities and Policy Gaps

The absence of detailed planning is particularly evident in areas that are critical for long-term resilience. Energy security, for instance, is a growing concern in an increasingly volatile global market. Rising fuel prices have a direct impact on inflation and cost of living, affecting even the most basic commodities.

India, with its abundant sunlight, has a natural advantage in solar energy. Yet political discourse often focuses on installation targets rather than the broader ecosystem required to sustain growth—research and development, storage technologies, grid innovation, and domestic manufacturing. The emphasis is on capacity, not capability.

Similarly, essential aspects of urban governance—waste management, sewage treatment, environmental protection—rarely feature prominently in electoral campaigns. These are issues that significantly impact quality of life, but they lack the immediacy and visibility of direct benefits. No party wins votes by promising efficient garbage recycling or clean rivers, even though these are fundamental to sustainable development.

Continuity Beneath Change The interplay between continuity and change is particularly evident in states like West Bengal. The transition from the Left Front to the current regime was widely perceived as a political rupture. In terms of leadership style and rhetoric, this is true. However, the underlying administrative framework has remained largely intact.

The Left Front, under leaders such as Jyoti Basu and Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, built a system rooted in rural mobilisation, land reforms, and strong organisational networks. The current government has not dismantled this structure; it has adapted it. Where the Left relied on ideological mobilisation and cadre networks, the present approach emphasises direct cash transfers and branded welfare schemes.

Despite these changes, the fundamental challenges persist. Industrial growth re-

mains uneven, employment opportunities lag behind aspirations, and investor confidence fluctuates with political conditions. This pattern is not unique to West Bengal; it is mirrored, with variations, across other states. Kerala's economy, for instance, is sustained by remittances, tourism, and human capital. Governments manage these strengths but struggle to fundamentally transform the economic base. Tamil Nadu continues to grow on the foundation of its industrial sector, even as welfare costs rise. Assam navigates a complex interplay of identity politics and development constraints. Puducherry experiences political volatility while relying on a stable service economy.

The Limits of Political Agency

These examples point to a broader reality: the deeper currents of economic growth are often structural, shaped by geography, history, and global trends. Governments can influence outcomes at the margins—improving efficiency, reducing corruption, enhancing delivery—but they do not fully control the trajectory. Elections, therefore, have limited impact on long-term economic direction. What they do influence decisively is distribution. The allocation of resources—who gets what, when, and how—becomes the central arena of political competition.

The Marketplace of Benefits In this context, elections resemble a competitive marketplace. Political parties act as bidders, offering packages of benefits to different segments of the electorate. Women, farmers, youth, specific communities—each group is targeted with tailored schemes.

The language used to describe these initiatives is often universal and inclusive, but

the practice is highly segmented. This segmentation allows parties to maximise electoral returns by focusing on groups that can deliver decisive margins.

The taxpayer, meanwhile, remains an abstract figure—present in the background as the source of funding but largely absent from the narrative. The benefits are visible; the costs are diffuse. This asymmetry makes it easier to sustain a system where redistribution is politically rewarding, even if it is fiscally and structurally constrained.

Equity vs Productivity: A False Choice? The central question that emerges from this analysis is not whether welfare is necessary—it undoubtedly is—but whether it has become the dominant mode of politics at the expense of other priorities. In an unequal society, redistribution is essential to ensure social stability and justice. However, when it becomes the primary focus, it risks crowding out investments that could reduce dependency in the long run.

Employment generation, industrial expansion, and innovation are the engines of sustainable growth. They create opportunities, increase productivity, and expand the revenue base. Yet these are precisely the areas that receive less attention because they are complex, uncertain, and slow to yield results.

This creates a paradox: the very policies that are politically effective in the short term may undermine the conditions needed for long-term prosperity. A system built on perpetual distribution risks becoming self-limiting, as it depends on resources that are not being sufficiently replenished.

The Voter's Dilemma For voters, the choices presented in elections often appear diverse, but in practice, they converge around similar models of redistribution. Different parties may offer different schemes, but the underlying logic remains consistent: direct benefits in exchange for electoral support.

This does not mean that voters are unaware of the trade-offs. Many recognise the limitations of welfare-driven politics but are constrained by immediate needs and the lack of credible alternatives. When faced with uncertainty, tangible benefits provide a sense of security.

Conclusion: A Script That Endures As the five states head into elections, the narratives will vary, the rhetoric will intensify, and the outcomes will be closely analysed. Governments may change, alliances may shift, and political fortunes may rise or fall. Yet the underlying script is likely to remain the same.

Indian democracy continues to be robust in contestation but cautious in transformation. It has become increasingly adept at distributing resources, even as it struggles to expand the capacity that generates them. The taxpayer funds the system; the political class allocates it; and the mandate flows to those who promise the most compelling distribution.

In the end, elections may alter the actors, but the playbook endures.

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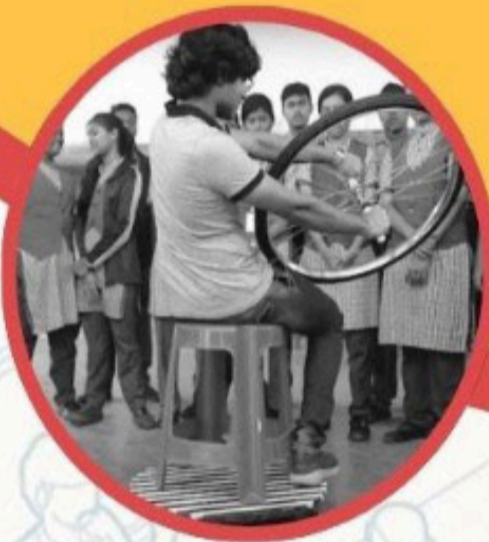
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