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**PERSPECTIVE**  
Sometimes we don't need advice. We just need somebody to listen.

## Civil Society Team Visits Attacked Border Villages in Manipur

**IMPHAL**  
A delegation comprising several Manipur-based civil society organisations on Monday visited Naga villages along the India-Myanmar border that were affected by the deadly May 7 attacks allegedly carried out by Myanmar-based armed groups. The team included representatives from the Indigenous People's Forum Manipur, All Manipur United Clubs' Organization, and Manipur Naga Youth Organization, along with Tangkhul community elders and Meitei intellectuals. During the visit, the delegation inspected the affected villages of Namlee, Wanglee and Choro, where they assessed the extent of the damage and distributed relief materials to residents impacted by the violence. According to the delegation's inquiry findings, several houses were burnt down while vehicles and household belongings were either looted or destroyed during the attacks. Members of the team described the incident as a major cross-border security breach and condemned the violence in strong terms. AMUCO advisor Devan alleged that the attacks were carried out by the Kuki National Army-Burma and criticised remarks made by the Manipur Home Minister, who had reportedly stated that no official reports of foreign aggression had been received.

Calling the statement "deeply unfortunate", Devan pointed to recent rescue operations conducted by the Indian Army in the area as evidence of the seriousness of the situation.

IPFM chief advisor Ashang Kasar, while addressing villagers in Namlee, termed the incident an "external aggression" and urged the authorities to establish either an Indian Reserve Battalion or Manipur Rifles outpost in the region. He also demanded immediate reconstruction of homes damaged in the attacks.

### WHO SAID WHAT

**Donald J. Trump**  
I have been asked by the Emir of Qatar, Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud, and the President of the United Arab Emirates, Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, to hold off on our planned military attack of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which was scheduled for tomorrow, in that serious negotiations are now taking place, and that, in their opinion, as Great Leaders and Allies, a Deal will be made, which will be very acceptable to the United States of America, as well as all Countries in the Middle East, and beyond. This Deal will include, importantly, NO NUCLEAR WEAPONS FOR IRAN! Based on my respect for the above mentioned Leaders, I have instructed Secretary of War, Pete Hegseth, The Chairman of The Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Daniel Gaine, and The United States Military, that we will NOT be doing the scheduled attack of Iran tomorrow, but have further instructed them to be prepared to go forward with a full, large scale assault of Iran, on a moment's notice, in the event that an acceptable Deal is not reached. Thank you for your attention to this matter! President DONALD J. TRUMP

## Guwahati Selected for Phase I of National Water Metro Project; Tezpur, Dibrugarh in Next Phase

**GUWAHATI**  
Guwahati has been shortlisted for the first phase of the Centre's ambitious nationwide Water Metro initiative, Union Minister for Ports, Shipping and Waterways Sarbananda Sonowal announced.

The project aims to introduce modern water-based public transport systems in 18 cities across India, modelled on the successful Kochi Water Metro.

Apart from Guwahati, Assam's Tezpur and Dibrugarh have been included in the second phase of the proposed network. Other cities selected for Phase I include Srinagar, Patna, Varanasi, Ayodhya and Prayagraj.

The announcement came after Sonowal chaired a high-level review meeting on the rollout of Water Metro services across the country. He also confirmed that the Draft National Water Metro Policy, 2026 has been circulated for inter-ministerial consultations.

According to the minister, the proposed systems aim to transform navigable waterways into sustainable and efficient urban transport corridors.

"The proposed Water Metro systems are significantly less capital intensive as they utilise existing waterways with minimal



civil infrastructure. With faster construction timelines, lower land requirements and reduced operational costs through

electric and hybrid ferries, the system offers a viable and eco-friendly alternative to conventional urban transport," Sonowal

## Crime Branch Summons Surjewala in Assam Passport Row, Appearance Scheduled for May 23

### GUWAHATI

The controversy surrounding allegations against Riniki Bhuyan Sharma, wife of Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, intensified further on Monday after Congress leader Randeep Singh Surjewala was summoned by the Crime Branch for questioning in connection with the ongoing investigation.

According to sources, Surjewala has been asked to appear before the Crime Branch on May 23 as investigators probe allegations linked to the passport controversy involving the Chief Minister's family.

The row erupted after Congress spokesperson Pawan Khera levelled a series of allegations against Sarma and his family. Khera claimed that Riniki Bhuyan Sharma allegedly possessed passports from three countries - the UAE, Egypt, and Antigua and Barbuda - raising questions over citizenship status, as Indian law does not permit dual citizenship.

Khera also alleged that the family



owns a Wyoming-based company in the United States reportedly valued at nearly Rs 53,000 crore. In addition, he claimed that properties allegedly owned by Sharma in Dubai were not disclosed in election affidavits filed by the Chief Minister.

The Congress leader further questioned whether Union Home Minister Amit Shah would order a formal inquiry into the allegations and demanded accountability over the mat-

ter. Sources indicated that Surjewala reportedly mentioned Khera during developments related to the investigation. Meanwhile, allegations have also surfaced claiming that Congress MP Gaurav Gogoi and Surjewala were involved in orchestrating the controversy. However, investigating agencies have not officially confirmed these claims so far.

The Crime Branch investigation into the matter remains underway.

## Fear Continues to Grip Kamjong Border Villages Nearly Two Weeks After Deadly Attack



### IMPHAL

Nearly two weeks after suspected Myanmar-based militants launched coordinated attacks on villages along the Indo-Myanmar border in Manipur's Kamjong district, residents of the affected areas say fear and uncertainty continue to overshadow daily life amid what they describe as inadequate security arrangements. The attacks took place during the early hours of May 7 when armed men allegedly crossed into Indian territory from Myanmar and targeted Tangkhul Naga-inhabited villages, including Z Choro, Wanglee and Namlee. According to villagers, the attackers opened indiscriminate fire, torched houses and looted properties, forcing residents to flee into nearby hills to escape the violence.

Although local MLA Leishiyoo Keishing and Manipur Home Minister Govindas Konhoujam later visited the

affected villages, residents alleged that no concrete security measures have been implemented so far. Many villagers have since returned despite continuing safety concerns, saying they were determined to protect their ancestral land from what they termed "foreign invaders". Recalling the attack, Z Choro resident Konap Ansari said villagers were caught completely unprepared.

"On May 7, we were never ready for that kind of invasion in our village. We were sleeping peacefully. We are good citizens of India. We don't have any enmity with neighbouring villages from Burma," he said. Ansari alleged that the armed men launched the assault from nearby hill areas across the Myanmar border, firing several rounds and using explosives during the attack.

He claimed that almost all 22 houses in Z Choro were burnt down, while the village church building was spared. However, valuables kept inside the church were allegedly looted.

"During the war time, they came to our village. We provided temporary shelter, food and clothes. We never expected they would launch an attack like this," he added, referring to Kuki refugees who had previously taken shelter in the area.

## Nagaland Launches Rs 49 Crore Coffee Mission to Build Premium Global Brand



### KOHIMA/NEW DELHI

Nagaland has taken a major step towards positioning itself as a premium coffee-producing state with the launch of the ambitious "Coffees of Nagaland" mission, a Rs 49.48-crore cluster-based coffee value chain project aimed at creating a complete ecosystem from cultivation to branding and global marketing. The initiative was jointly launched virtually on Sunday by Union DoNER Minister Jyotiraditya Scindia and Nagaland Chief Minister Neiphiu Rio. The launch event in New Delhi was attended by Union Minister of State for DoNER Sukanta Majumdar, Nagaland Deputy Chief Minister TR Zeliang, officials of the Coffee Board of India, along with farmers, entrepreneurs and state officials who joined virtually from Kohima and Niuland districts.

The project will initially focus on two pilot clusters - Touphema in Kohima district for Arabica coffee cultivation and Ghotovi in Niuland district for Robusta coffee production. These clusters are expected to serve as model centres for future expansion across Nagaland. Under the initiative, the state plans to establish five hi-tech nurseries, expand plantation coverage across 400 hectares, and develop critical infrastructure including washing stations, roastery-cum-cafes and a coffee quality control laboratory. The project will also introduce modern infrastructure such as internal farm roads, drip irrigation systems and blockchain-based traceability mechanisms with QR code authentication to enable farm-to-cup tracking of coffee products.

Addressing the programme, Scindia said the initiative would help establish coffee as Nagaland's unique selling proposition while generating sustainable livelihood opportunities for rural communities.

He said the mission is expected to enhance farmer incomes through premium coffee production while creating jobs in processing, roasting, brewing, tourism and allied sectors. The Union minister added that the project aligns with the broader vision of Viksit Bharat 2047 and would encourage sustainable agroforestry practices, reducing dependence on traditional jhum cultivation. As part of the programme, farmers and entrepreneurs will also receive specialised training in plantation management, post-harvest processing, roasting, brewing and barista skills through collaborations with the Coffee Board of India. An umbrella branding campaign titled "Coffees of Nagaland - Taste of Eminence" will further promote the state's coffee products through digital platforms, e-commerce channels and participation in national and international trade fairs.

Speaking during the launch, Rio said coffee cultivation in Nagaland has seen steady growth since plantation revival efforts began in 2014-15. He noted that the state's coffee output increased from 21 metric tonnes in 2021-22 to nearly 73 metric tonnes in 2024-25.

The chief minister said Nagaland aims to bring 50,000 hectares under coffee cultivation by 2047 as part of the state's "Viksit Nagaland" vision.

Rio also highlighted plans to promote experiential coffee tourism through farm stays and farm-to-cup experiences, which he said would open up new opportunities for local youth and entrepreneurs.

## UNC Rejects Role in Killing of Thadou Church Leaders, Alleges Kuki Militant Involvement

### IMPHAL

The United Naga Council has rejected allegations linking Naga groups to the killing of three Thadou church leaders in Manipur and instead alleged that suspected Kuki militant groups operating in the area may have been involved in the attack.

In a statement issued on May 18, the UNC condemned the May 13 ambush and described the slain church leaders as "warriors of peace and understanding". The organisation said it would support legal action against those responsible for the killings. The council claimed that social media campaigns accusing Naga groups of involvement surfaced shortly after the incident. It specifically referred to a statement allegedly issued by Kuki Inpi Manipur, which reportedly named the ZUP-Kamson Group and NSCN-IM as perpetrators within hours of the killings.

According to the UNC, the condemnation letter carried the date "6/5/2026", seven days before the ambush occurred. The organisation questioned whether the statement had been prepared in advance and demanded what it termed "concrete proof" from KIM regarding allegations against Naga groups. "The UNC also criticised the response of security forces during the hostage situation that followed the ambush. It alleged that the headquarters of the 57 Mountain Division at Leimakhong was located close to the incident site and claimed stronger intervention could have been undertaken on the same day. The organisation further alleged that deployment of security personnel in vulnerable Naga-inhabited areas remained "discriminatory and highly inadequate". Calling for stricter action against suspected Kuki militant groups operating under the Suspension of Operations (SoO) agreement, the UNC urged both the Centre and the Manipur government to disarm militants and confine them to designated camps. It also stated that the SoO agreement should be scrapped if armed groups continued to violate the law.

## Assam Govt Warns of Licence Cancellation Over Unfair Price Hike Amid Fuel Cost Surge

### GUWAHATI

The Assam government has directed strict action, including cancellation of trade licences, against shops and commercial establishments found charging abnormal prices amid the recent increase in fuel costs and rising prices of essential commodities across the state.

The decision was taken after Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma reviewed the state's price monitoring mechanism on Monday and instructed officials to intensify surveillance to prevent unjustified price escalation and ensure market stability. "Our government and administration are keeping a close eye on the market and will not allow any unfair price rise. I have instructed officials in every district to keep a tab on prices of items and take stringent action against any defaulter," Sarma said in a social media post.

During the review meeting, the chief minister directed Deputy Commissioner-led District Monitoring Committees to convene within the next three to four days and undertake intensive field-level inspections to identify abnormal pricing practices in local markets.

He also instructed district administrations to hold weekly meetings with chambers of commerce and trade bodies to monitor commodity price fluctuations and maintain coordination with traders.

In another key measure, the state government made it mandatory for shops and wholesale outlets across Assam to prominently display retail and wholesale prices in order to ensure transparency for consumers.

The chief minister further stressed expeditious Aadhaar seed-

ing of beneficiaries under the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana to eliminate duplication in LPG cylinder distribution.

The state government's intervention comes amid growing public concern over rising prices of daily essentials following the recent Rs 3 per litre increase in fuel prices.

A shopkeeper in Guwahati said prices of several commodities had increased sharply in recent days.

"Today's fresh stock has seen a rise of Rs 10 to Rs 20. The price of one egg tray two days ago was Rs 180. We have also learned that bread prices have increased," the trader said.

He added that retailers were facing mounting pressure due to higher procurement costs.

"We are facing difficulties while purchasing commodities as the price surge demands higher investment. Customers often question us when they see the revised prices. Purchasing capacity has also declined, as people are buying only essential items," he said.

Residents in Guwahati also voiced concern over the impact of rising fuel prices on household expenses and commodity costs.

"This is completely wrong. I would request the state government to reduce the hike in petrol, diesel and commodities instead of offering free money through schemes. We only need lower prices for goods and essentials," a resident said.

Another resident warned that continued inflation could create serious hardship for common people.

"If prices continue rising instead of coming down, we will face a crisis. Our only request to the government is to provide relief from these soaring prices," the resident said.

## Late Manipuri Nata Sankirtana Maestro Yumnam Jatra Singh to Be Honoured with Padma Shri Posthumously

### IMPHAL

Renowned Manipuri Nata Sankirtana exponent Yumnam Jatra Singh will be conferred the Padma Shri posthumously for his outstanding contribution to Manipuri classical and devotional traditions. The Ministry of Home Affairs on Monday announced that President Droupadi Murmu will present the Padma Awards for 2026 during the Civil Investiture Ceremony-I scheduled to be held at Rashtrapati Bhavan on May 25.

Yumnam Jatra Singh is among the 131 Padma awardees selected this year. The Government of India has announced five Padma Vibhushan awards, 13 Padma Bhushan awards and 113 Padma Shri honours for 2026. Of the total recipients, 19 are women while 16 awards will be presented posthumously.

Born on September 12, 1923, at Tendongyan Awang Leikai in Imphal West district, Jatra Singh began learning music at an early age and devoted more than

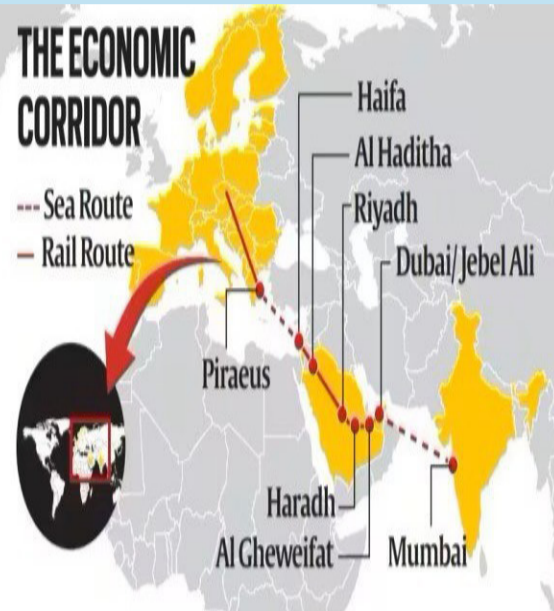
seven decades to preserving and promoting the traditions of Manipuri Sankirtana. A distinguished exponent of Nata Sankirtana and visiting guru at the Jawaharlal Nehru Manipur Dance Academy, he trained generations of performers and played a major role in carrying forward Manipur's spiritual and cultural heritage both nationally and internationally. He earned diplomas in Nat Eshei in 1976 and Nat Cholom in 1980 from the academy, demonstrating mastery over devotional singing and rhythmic dance traditions.

Beginning his artistic journey in 1949, Jatra Singh performed extensively across Manipur and other parts of India, participating in programmes organised by the Manipur Sahitya Parishad, Manipur State Kala Academy and Guru Gulapi Nat Sankirtana Academy. He also staged performances in Tripura, West Bengal and Delhi.

Internationally, he represented Manipuri culture during the Barak Festival held in Bangladesh in 1949.



## INDIA-UAE GROWTH CORRIDOR



In a world convulsed by conflict and haunted by the spectre of supply chain disruption, the meeting between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan in Abu Dhabi was far more than a diplomatic courtesy call. It was a decisive reaffirmation that in times of profound global uncertainty, the bonds of genuine friendship between nations are not merely desirable – they are indispensable. The six landmark agreements signed during Modi's stopover represent a coming of age for one of Asia's most consequential bilateral relationships. Spanning energy security, defence, shipping, infrastructure and advanced technology, these accords collectively signal that India and the UAE are no longer simply trade partners – they are strategic anchors for each other in an increasingly turbulent world order.

For a nation of 1.5 billion people, India's energy arithmetic is unforgiving. The wheels of the world's most populous democracy must keep turning – factories, farms, hospitals, homes – and all of them depend on an uninterrupted supply of fuel. The ongoing conflict in West Asia has cast a dark shadow over the Strait of Hormuz, through which a substantial portion of India's crude oil and gas imports passes. Every disruption to that critical artery sends tremors through the Indian economy. Against this precarious backdrop, the UAE's commitment to enhance its participation in India's strategic petroleum reserves to 30 million barrels is not merely generous – it is transformative. Building storage capacity of that magnitude demands enormous capital investment and considerable time. The UAE's pledge effectively compresses that timeline, offering India a meaningful strategic buffer that it could not easily have assembled on its own. Equally significant is the commitment to develop liquefied petroleum gas storage facilities in India. LPG is not a luxury commodity in India; it is the cooking fuel for hundreds of millions of households, particularly in rural areas. Ensuring long-term, stable supply through a dedicated sale-and-purchase agreement with Abu Dhabi National Oil Company addresses a vulnerability that has long concerned Indian policymakers. In an age where sustainability must be the governing principle of energy policy, this partnership lays a foundation that transcends the immediate crisis and looks towards decades ahead.

The UAE has, over recent years, emerged as what one might fairly describe as India's all-weather friend. This relationship has matured quietly but with remarkable consistency – through global pandemics, financial turbulence and geopolitical upheaval. The new accords elevate that friendship to an altogether different plane. The strategic defence partnership framework, which envisages joint development of military hardware, technology sharing and maritime security cooperation, is particularly noteworthy. It signals a level of trust between the two nations that goes well beyond commerce – it speaks to a shared vision of regional stability. The UAE's investment commitment of USD 5 billion is a further testament to this deepening bond. Infrastructure has long been India's Achilles heel – the gap between what exists and what is needed remains vast. The Abu Dhabi Investment Authority's planned collaboration with India's National Infrastructure and Investment Fund, the Emirates NBD investment in RBL Bank, and the International Holding Company's stake in Sammaan Capital collectively represent the kind of patient, long-term capital that India urgently needs to upgrade and expand its physical and financial infrastructure. These are not speculative bets; they are expressions of sustained confidence in India's growth story. Tourism, too, deserves special mention. The UAE is already one of the most visited destinations. As bilateral relations deepen, UAE's experience will help infrastructure upgrade-bringing revenue, employment and people-to-people understanding – will flourish further. The operationalisation of a virtual trade corridor linking customs and port authorities, the ship repair centre, and the supercomputing cluster for artificial intelligence – each of these initiatives reflects a partnership that is thinking not just about today's challenges but tomorrow's opportunities.

What makes the India-UAE relationship particularly remarkable is the mutual trust upon which it rests. Trust, as any seasoned diplomat will attest, cannot be manufactured overnight. It is earned through consistency, reciprocity and goodwill demonstrated across years and crises alike. India and the UAE have built precisely that. As the West Asia conflict eventually subsides – as all conflicts must – the architecture erected during this visit will provide the scaffolding for far greater cooperation.

### QUOTE OF THE DAY

Living based in security is living based in fear.

- T. Harv Eker

# CLIMATE CHANGE & WILDFIRES: ENVIRONMENTAL, HUMAN AND ECONOMIC COSTS



UMANATH SINGH

The recent wildfire in Tamil Nadu's Nilgiris region, which destroyed vast stretches of forest amid soaring temperatures and dry winds, has once again highlighted the alarming impacts of climate change across the Indian subcontinent. Scientists warn that 2026 is already witnessing unprecedented wildfire activity worldwide, with massive fires raging across Asia, Africa, Australia and South America as extreme heat and prolonged drought continue to fuel devastating blazes. In April this year Nilgiris district experienced its largest forest wildfires in recent years, affecting over 5,000 acres. The Nilgiris wildfires could be tamed following nearly a fortnight of intense firefighting efforts.

Wildfires have wide-ranging impacts that seriously affect the environment, health of the people in the effected and adjoining areas, economies and global climate systems.

Wildfires cause severe environmental damage with consequences that often last for years. One of the most devastating impacts is the destruction of forests, grasslands and natural habitats, which often leads to a sharp decline in biodiversity as countless animals are killed, injured or displaced. The massive fires also release huge amounts of smoke, carbon monoxide and harmful particulate matter into the atmosphere, causing dangerous levels of air pollution that can spread across entire regions and countries.

At the same time, burning forests emit enormous quantities of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases, intensifying climate change by weakening the Earth's natural carbon absorption capacity. Wildfires also damage soil quality as extreme heat destroys essential nutrients and microorganisms, reducing fertility and increasing the risk of desertification in affected areas. In addition, ash, toxic chemicals and debris from burned land often contaminate rivers, lakes and groundwater sources, threatening drinking water supplies and harming aquatic ecosystems and wildlife.

Wildfires also have serious consequences for human health, affecting both physical and mental well-being. One of the most immediate impacts is the spread of respiratory illnesses caused by dense smoke and toxic pollutants released into the air. Exposure to smoke can trigger breathing difficulties, asthma attacks, lung infections and other respiratory problems particularly among children, the elderly and people with pre-existing health conditions.

Beyond physical illness wildfires also leave deep psychological scars on affected communities. People who lose their homes, livelihoods, belongings or loved ones often experience trauma, anxiety, depression and long-term emotional stress. The uncertainty and displacement caused by large-scale fires can further worsen mental health conditions.

In addition, wildfires usually occur during periods of intense heat and dry weather, increasing the risk of dehydration, heat exhaustion and heat-

stroke among both residents and firefighters. Together, these impacts make wildfires a major public health challenge across many parts of the world.

Wildfires also cause massive economic costs on countries and communities, often causing long-term financial damage. One of the biggest impacts is the destruction of property and infrastructure, as fires engulf homes, roads, railways, power lines and public facilities, resulting in billions of dollars of losses and very costly reconstruction efforts, which further put the already affected people and the government agencies in financial trouble. The agricultural sector also suffers heavily, with fires destroying crops, grazing fields, forests and livestock, disrupting food production and affecting farmers' livelihoods as well as supply chains.

In many regions, tourism declines sharply when wildfires strike popular destinations as smoke, environmental destruction and safety concerns discourage visitors, severely impacting local businesses dependent on hospitality and travel. Emergency firefighting operations, evacuation measures, disaster relief, rehabilitation programs and rebuilding damaged infrastructure cost tremendously. These expenditures place additional pressure on the economy, particularly in developing countries already struggling with climate-related disasters and limited financial resources.

Wildfires also have severe social consequences that deeply affect communities and everyday life. Large-scale fires often force thousands of people to evacuate their homes, sometimes permanently, creating major humanitarian and rehabilitation challenges. Many families lose their belongings, security and social support systems during such disasters. Wildfires also destroy livelihoods, especially for forest-dependent communities, farmers and indigenous populations who rely

on natural resources, agriculture and forests for survival and income.

In addition, educational activities are frequently disrupted as schools close due to poor air quality, safety concerns or evacuation orders, interrupting children's learning and creating long-term academic and psychological challenges for affected students and families.

Wildfires also have far-reaching global and long-term consequences that extend well beyond the immediate destruction caused by flames. Repeated wildfires disrupt ecological balance by altering natural ecosystems, damaging habitats, affecting wildlife migration patterns and disturbing food chains essential for biodiversity. Burned forests also become increasingly vulnerable to future fires, particularly when vegetation regrows unevenly, creating conditions for more frequent and intense blazes.

Taking all the consequences into accounts climate scientists warn that large-scale wildfires can influence global weather systems by releasing massive amounts of heat and greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, contributing to worsening heatwaves, prolonged droughts and other extreme weather events worldwide.

As temperatures continue to rise due to climate change, the frequency and intensity of wildfires are expected to increase further. Today, wildfires are no longer seen as isolated natural disasters but are a major global environmental and humanitarian crisis, which is closely linked to climate change, deforestation and unsustainable land-use practices.

Without doubt wildfires have emerged as a global crisis with devastating environmental, health, economic, social and climatic consequences. Fuelled by rising temperatures and extreme weather conditions, they threaten ecosystems, human lives,

livelihoods and economies worldwide. Addressing this growing challenge requires urgent climate action, sustainable land management, stronger disaster preparedness and coordinated global efforts, especially as many poor and developing countries remain inadequately prepared to cope with the enormous scale of wildfires due to limited resources and infrastructure.

### DIGITAL WAR OF WORDS

**My visit to Sweden was marked by several important outcomes that will add new momentum to India-Sweden relations.**

**From elevating our ties to a Strategic Partnership, launching the Joint Innovation Partnership 2.0 and the India-Sweden Technology and Artificial Intelligence Corridor, to setting an ambitious goal of doubling bilateral trade in the next five years, the discussions were highly productive.**

**I thank the people of Sweden, the Government of Sweden and PM Ulf Kristersson for the warmth and friendship. ~ Narendra Modi, PM, India**



# Assam Plans Rare Earth Exploration Under Centre's Critical Minerals Mission

GUWAHATI

Assam has initiated steps towards exploring rare earth and critical mineral reserves in line with the Centre's strategic minerals policy framework, with Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma directing officials to begin exploration activities across the state.

The decision was taken during a high-level review meeting of the Mines and Minerals Department chaired by the chief minister on Saturday, as the state seeks to strengthen its role in India's emerging critical minerals ecosystem linked to advanced manufacturing and Industry 4.0 sectors.

Sarma said Assam possesses reserves of rare earth and other strategic minerals considered crucial for clean energy technologies, electronics, semiconductors and next-generation indus-



trial systems.

"Assam has known reserves of rare earth and other key minerals essential to Industry 4.0. I have asked my officials to begin exploration work in sync with Government of India policies," the chief minister said in a social media post after the meeting.

He also stated that ongoing mineral exploration activities in Assam had already attracted significant investor interest.

"We also reviewed the ongoing exploration of other minerals, some of which have already led to investment commitments of over Rs 50,000 crore," he added.

At the same time, the chief minister stressed that mining activities in the state must adhere to environmental safeguards and sustainable development principles.

"I have also emphasised that all mining operations must be carried out sustainably within the existing green framework," Sarma said.

The state government's renewed focus on critical minerals aligns with the Centre's broader strategy to strengthen India's domestic supply chain for strategic resources and reduce dependence on imports.

The emphasis on critical minerals was also reflected in the Union Budget 2025, where Finance Minister Nirmla Sitharaman proposed customs duty exemptions on capital goods used for processing critical minerals in a bid to encourage domestic value addition and industrial capacity building.

The issue had also figured prominently during the second North East Mining Ministers' Conclave held in June 2025, where Sarma highlighted

Assam's growing mining and industrial ambitions.

During the Advantage Assam 2.0 summit, the state signed 14 Memorandums of Understanding involving investment commitments worth more than Rs 46,000 crore from domestic and international investors.

The rare earth exploration initiative is also linked to the Centre's National Critical Mineral Mission launched in 2025, aimed at securing domestic supplies of strategic minerals required for sectors such as renewable energy, defence manufacturing, electric mobility, semiconductors and electronics.

Under the mission, the Geological Survey of India (GSI) has been tasked with carrying out 1,200 exploration projects across the country between 2024-25 and 2030-31 to identify critical mineral reserves.

## KNF Rejects Allegations in Disappearance of Six Naga Civilians, Terms Viral Poster 'Fabricated Propaganda'

IMPHAL

The Kuki National Front (KNF) has denied allegations linking the outfit to the disappearance of six Naga civilians on May 13, describing a viral social media poster accusing the organisation as "AI-generated propaganda" and "malicious disinformation".

In a statement issued on Monday, the KNF rejected what it called "baseless, malicious and factually void" content circulating online, alleging that the campaign was aimed at tarnishing the image of the organisation and targeting ST. Thangboi Kipgen, chairman of the United People's Front (UPF). The outfit claimed that the viral poster formed part of a coordinated smear campaign intended to inflame communal tensions during an already volatile situation in Manipur. It said the organisation "vehemently denies any involvement whatsoever" in the alleged disappearance of the six Naga civilians.

The KNF also condemned the circulation of what it termed unverified and inflammatory misinformation, alleging that certain vested interests were attempting to create confusion and deepen divisions among communities through digitally manipulated and AI-generated content.

Appealing to the public, civil society organisations and media institutions to exercise caution, the organisation urged people not to share or rely on "fabricated social media narratives" without verification. It warned that the spread of misinformation could further aggravate tensions on the ground. Reiterating its stated commitment to peace, democratic engagement and justice, the KNF expressed hope for a safe resolution to the ongoing crisis in Kangpokpi and Ukhrul districts. The group also reaffirmed its position as an organisation formed to safeguard the interests of the Kuki-Zo people and their ancestral land.

## Debabrata Saikia Dismisses BJP Joining Rumours, Calls It 'Political Conspiracy'



GUWAHATI

Assam Congress leader Debabrata Saikia on Monday dismissed rumours of his alleged move to join the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) or contest from the Nagaon Lok Sabha constituency, terming the claims "baseless" and part of a "political conspiracy".

In a statement, the senior Indian National Congress leader said he remains committed to the Congress party and there is no question of him leaving the organisation or contesting any by-election. Saikia alleged that attempts

were being made to sideline him from Assam politics but claimed that such efforts had failed.

"As the Leader of the Opposition in the Assam Assembly, I will continue to raise issues concerning the people of the state and fight for their interests," he said.

The Congress leader also expressed concern over what he described as threats to democratic institutions and criticised the functioning of the Election Commission.

Targeting the Assam government, Saikia alleged that prices of essential commodities had increased sharply after the elections, adding to the financial burden on common people.

He further accused the government of misusing public resources and prioritising the interests of corporate groups over public welfare.

Saikia asserted that both he and the Congress party would continue their political struggle in the interest of the people of Assam.

## Manipur Excise Employees Launch Indefinite Strike Over Pay Revision, Staff Shortage

IMPHAL

Employees of the Manipur Excise Department on Monday launched an indefinite cease-work strike, demanding implementation of long-pending service-related benefits, including revised pay scales and allowances on par with police personnel.

The agitation, organised under the banner of the All Manipur Excise Employees Welfare Association (AMEEWA), began at the department headquarters in Imphal.

Protesters displayed banners announcing the indefinite strike from May 18 and pressed for several pending demands, including implementation of the Revised Pay (ROP) 2016, extension of ration money benefits, 13th-month salary provisions, and provision of official communication equipment and vehicles.

The employees said excise personnel perform round-the-clock duties similar to law enforcement agencies and should therefore re-



ceive benefits equivalent to those provided to police personnel.

The association alleged that despite repeated appeals to the authorities, implementation of the revised pay structure for excise

employees has remained pending, leading to growing dissatisfaction within the department.

Speaking during the protest, the AMEWEA president said the cease-work strike would continue

until the government takes concrete steps to implement the revised pay structure with notional effect from January 1, 2024.

The association further demanded that excise personnel be granted the same service-related benefits enjoyed by police personnel, including ration money and 13 months' salary. Highlighting manpower shortages within the department, the association claimed that only 115 employees are currently serving against a sanctioned strength of 707 posts, leaving nearly 84 per cent of positions vacant. According to the employees' body, the severe shortage of staff has significantly increased the workload on existing personnel and affected departmental functioning.

Despite launching the indefinite agitation, the association expressed hope that the Manipur government would take prompt steps to address the pending demands and resolve the issue through dialogue.

## Assam Fuel Supply Stable, Public Asked Not to Panic Buy: Oil Ministry

GUWAHATI

The Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas on Monday assured that supplies of petrol, diesel and LPG remain normal across Assam and urged the public not to resort to panic buying amid concerns over fuel availability.

In an official statement, the ministry said the state-level coordinator for the oil industry in Assam, who also serves as the executive director and state head of Indian Oil Corporation, has confirmed that the availability of essential petroleum products remains stable and uninterrupted throughout the state.

The ministry stated that public sector oil marketing companies, including Indian Oil Corporation (IOCL), Bharat Petroleum (BPCL) and Hindustan Petroleum (HPCL),



are maintaining adequate fuel stocks at all supply points.

"The public is requested to remain assured and continue with normal consumption patterns and refrain from panic buying.

Consumers are advised to rely only on official communications from oil marketing companies for accurate and verified information regarding fuel availability," the statement said.

According to the ministry, the entire fuel supply chain, including terminals, depots and retail outlets, is functioning efficiently without any disruption. It added that fuel stocks are being continuously monitored and replenishment operations are progressing smoothly across Assam.

The ministry further stated that LPG supplies for domestic consumers continue to remain normal and are being prioritised to ensure uninterrupted delivery across the state.

"The situation is being closely monitored to ensure uninterrupted delivery to all consumers," the statement added.

Authorities also said oil companies are maintaining close coordination on logistics, stock movement and retail operations to ensure seamless fuel availability across the region.

## Over One Lakh 'Lakhpati Didis' Strengthening Tripura's Rural Economy: CM Manik Saha

AGARTALA

Chief Minister Manik Saha on Monday said women-led Self Help Groups (SHGs) have emerged as a major driver of Tripura's rural economy, with more than one lakh "lakhpati didis" contributing significantly to the state's Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP).

Addressing a programme organised by the Tripura Rural Livelihood Mission (TRLM) at Rabindra Bhavan in Agartala, the chief minister said around 4.95 lakh rural women are currently associated with 55,569 SHGs across the state and are steadily progressing towards financial self-reliance.

Highlighting the government's focus on women-led entrepreneurship, Saha said the Samridhhi 1.0 and Samridhhi 2.0 schemes had exceeded their original loan disbursement targets for SHGs.

"We had initially fixed a target of disbursing Rs 100 crore under Samridhhi 1.0, but the total amount eventually rose to Rs 188 crore. Similarly, under Samridhhi 2.0, against the target of Rs 150 crore, loans worth Rs 260 crore were sanctioned," he said.

The chief minister stated that SHGs are playing an increasingly important role in generating sustainable rural livelihoods and added that the state government has so far disbursed loans amounting to Rs 2,398 crore to women-led groups.

Referring to the growing confi-

dence of banks in SHGs, Saha said financial institutions that were initially reluctant to approve loans had now changed their perception due to the groups' strong repayment records.

"Initially, bankers were sceptical about clearing loan proposals, but now the doubt has been cleared with the overall NPA standing at just 1.84 per cent, which is quite low even compared to the corporate sector. Our didis have gained the faith of banks," he said.

The chief minister also praised the TRLM for expanding livelihood opportunities beyond agriculture into non-farm sectors, saying diversification was essential for sustaining the rural women's empowerment movement.

"The state has already produced 1,08,281 lakhpati didis, which is significantly contributing to the overall GSDP," Saha added. Emphasising entrepreneurship and skill development, the chief minister said the TRLM has signed an agreement with IIM Calcutta Innovation Park to support business development and market expansion for SHGs in Tripura.

Rural Development Department Secretary Abhishek Singh and TRLM Chief Executive Officer TK Chakma also addressed the programme and highlighted initiatives aimed at strengthening the socio-economic empowerment of rural women across the state.

## Barak Valley Cricket Gets Major Fillip as LDSA Secures Permanent ACA Affiliation

SILCHAR

In a significant boost to sports administration and cricket development in Barak Valley, the Lakhimpur District Sports Association (LDSA) has secured permanent affiliation with voting rights from the Assam Cricket Association (ACA). The recognition, conveyed through an official ACA notification issued on Monday, marks the culmination of nearly three decades of efforts to strengthen cricket infrastructure and sporting opportunities in the region. With the permanent affiliation, LDSA will now enjoy full voting rights within the ACA, enabling the association to participate in key decision-making processes and exercise all privileges granted to permanently affiliated members.

Expressing satisfaction over the development, Udharbond MLA and LDSA president Rajdeep Goala termed the achievement a "historic and memorable moment" for the association as well as sports enthusiasts across the Barak Valley.

"Today is truly a historic and proud day for the Lakhimpur District Sports Association and the sports-loving people of Barak Valley. After 28 years of continu-



ous struggle, dedication and commitment towards the promotion of sports, LDSA has finally secured permanent membership with voting rights from the ACA," Goala said.

He credited the milestone to the collective efforts and support of stakeholders, office bearers and well-wishers who stood by the association over the years. Goala expressed optimism that the affiliation would open new avenues for

infrastructure development, talent promotion and institutional representation for the region's sporting community. The MLA also thanked several key figures in cricket administration, including Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) secretary Devajit Saikia, ACA president Taranga Gogoi and other officials of the association for their support.

Highlighting future plans, Goala said LDSA has appealed to both the BCCI

and ACA for assistance in establishing a modern cricket stadium equipped with contemporary facilities in Cachar district. He noted that Barak Valley possesses the potential to emerge as a prominent sporting hub in the Northeast. The development is expected to significantly strengthen grassroots cricket administration and expand sporting opportunities for aspiring athletes across Lakhimpur and the wider Barak Valley region.

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## Indian markets resilient enough to absorb West Asia conflict shocks, says Sebi chief



MUMBAI

Volatility has shot up in the financial markets due to the ongoing West Asia conflict, but the Indian bourses have the capacity to "absorb different types of shocks", Sebi Chairman Tuhin Kanta Pandey said on Monday.

When there is a crisis in one part of the world, it also impacts the rest of the globe, Pandey told reporters here on the sidelines of the Regional Investors Seminar for Awareness.

"Due to the prevailing conflict in West Asia, the oil supply chain and its prices got affected in the rest of the world. All the economies have been affected by this and obviously, there are inflationary risks. Besides, spillover effect and second-order effect will also come in," he said.

"However, the advantages of a resilient Indian market are that it is able to absorb different types of shocks, and when these end, the market again resumes its normal trajectory," Pandey said.

He also admitted that there have been some foreign portfolio investment outflows since September 2024, but domestic investors have "retained their confidence". Asked how SEBI is addressing threats from AI tools, Pandey said, "Most of the recent concerns around such tools are related to cybersecurity. As you know, markets rely heavily on software systems, and if cybersecurity is threatened or vulnerabilities are found in the software, there is a risk of attacks. If such attacks are successful, they can pose a serious threat to market integrity."

"Therefore, we have to proactively ensure that all the software we deploy, including those provided by third-party vendors, is well protected. There has to be aggressive patch management and extensive use of conventional tools to identify vulnerabilities," the Sebi chief said.

Sebi is using mechanism to ensure that the market, market ecosystem, and intermediaries are protected from any cyber

risk, he asserted.

Pandey also said that 'influencers', who give financial and stock-related advice, must first register themselves with Sebi.

The market regulator has already removed 1.4 lakh such content from various social media platforms, he said.

"For creating awareness among people, Sebi has launched project 'Jagruk'. Under this, we are going to make our engagement and investor awareness 360 degree; multilingual, multi-agency and multimedia," Pandey said.

Addressing investors at the event, he said municipal bonds have been the cornerstone of city-level development, enabling urban local bodies (ULBs) to raise long-term funds for essential projects such as water supply, sanitation, transport and waste management.

"Odisha should look at municipal bonds immediately," he stated.

Pandey also said that Sebi will open its office in Bhubaneswar soon.

## Bengal govt to end aid for religion-based groups; 'Annapurna' scheme, free bus travel to benefit women



KOLKATA

Signalling a major policy shift, the West Bengal cabinet on Monday decided to discontinue religion-based financial assistance to imams and others, launch the 'Annapurna' scheme for women, and form two panels to probe corruption and crimes against women during the TMC rule.

The cabinet, chaired by Chief Minister Suwendu Adhikari, also approved free travel for women on government-run buses, the scrapping of the existing state OBC list, and the constitution of the Seventh State Pay Commission to revise state employees' salaries upward.

Announcing the state government's decisions, Women, Child, and Social Welfare Minister Agnimitra Paul said all decisions will take effect starting June 1. Later, Adhikari announced the formation of two commissions headed by retired judges of the Calcutta High Court to probe alleged institutional corruption and atrocities against women and girl children during the previous TMC regime.

The chief minister said the panels would also begin functioning starting June 1.

"The cabinet has approved the discontinuation of schemes based on religious categorisation. A notification on this will be issued," Paul said.

She, however, added that none of the existing scholarship schemes for students would be discontinued.

Following a Rs 500 hike in honorarium for religious leaders by the erstwhile Mamata Banerjee government in March this year, Imams of registered mosques in Bengal were granted a monthly stipend

of Rs 3,000, while muezins and purohits were provided Rs 2,000.

According to a notification from the previous TMC-led government, assistance to religious leaders, sanctioned under budgetary provisions of the Departments of Information and Cultural Affairs, and Minority Affairs and Madrasa Education, aimed to support their socio-economic standing.

Acting on the BJP's pre-poll promises of enhanced financial assistance for Bengal's women, the cabinet approved the 'Annapurna' scheme, which provides Rs 3,000 in monthly support.

In this image received on May 18, 2026, West Bengal CM Suwendu Adhikari chairs a cabinet meeting, at Nabanna in Howrah. Suwendu threatens probe against Mamata, Abhishek over RG Kar case, 'disproportionate assets' This scheme will replace the Mamata Banerjee government's existing Lakshmi Bhandar scheme, which offers Rs 1,500 in monetary assistance to women.

"Those currently receiving assistance under the previous government's Lakshmi Bhandar scheme will be automatically entitled to the Annapurna Yojana. There is no need to reapply for it. Money will be sent through direct bank transfer," Paul said.

The government would soon launch a web portal to facilitate fresh applications for the programme from those who had yet to receive the assistance, she added.

"Women who applied for citizenship under the CAA and those who approached the tribunals for inclusion of names in voter rolls will also be entitled to receive the Annapurna scheme benefit," the minister clarified.

Paul said the cabinet approved a pro-

posal allowing free travel for women on government-run buses starting June 1, but added there were no immediate plans to increase the fleet size.

Later, while announcing the twin panels, Adhikari said, "We took these decisions in the cabinet today. During the election period, Union Home Minister Amit Shah had declared a chargesheet against the previous state government. There were two commitments made in the larger public interest of the people of the state." Adhikari said that the panel to probe institutional corruption will be headed by retired Calcutta High Court judge Justice Biswajit Basu, with an ADG-rank IPS officer, Jayraman, as member secretary. In this image received on May 18, 2026, West Bengal CM Suwendu Adhikari chairs a cabinet meeting, at Nabanna in Howrah.

He said the panel would examine alleged irregularities in central and state welfare schemes, public construction works and service delivery systems.

"It will look into corruption, cut money, bribery, misappropriation of government funds and cases where common people have been cheated. Government officials, panchayat representatives, brokers, contractors, NGOs and cooperative bodies will all come under its ambit," Adhikari said. He said complaints could be filed by members of the public and agencies involved in public works, and recommendations are expected within 30 days of commencement of work.

"Based on their recommendations, FIRs will be registered, and action will be taken under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS). We will also try to recover misappropriated government funds," he said.

The other panel, which will investigate atrocities against women and girl children, will be chaired by retired judge Justice Samapti Chatterjee, with IPS officer Damayanti Sen as member secretary. "This commission will look into atrocities committed over the past several years in the state, particularly against women and children, including those from SC, ST and minority communities," Adhikari said.

He said the commission would operate a dedicated complaint system, including a portal, WhatsApp and email channels, and would also take up pending FIRs and general diary entries.

"The members will conduct field visits to police stations and districts, record statements and hold public hearings at the local level," he said.

Adhikari added that the commission would also examine pending recommendations of institutions including the National Human Rights Commission and other constitutional commissions, and could recommend reopening of cases, fresh FIRs, supplementary chargesheets and stronger prosecution measures where necessary.

Meanwhile, Paul said the new BJP government would cancel the existing OBC list of the state in accordance with a 2024 Calcutta High Court judgment.

"The cabinet has decided on a revision of the state list of the OBCs, in cancellation of such categorisation of classes in such list and percentage of reservation for OBCs in the services and posts under the Government of West Bengal, as per the judgment of a division bench of the Calcutta High Court on May 22, 2024," she said. The minister announced that the state will set up a panel to decide quota eligibility under the OBC category.

The state's OBC list controversy centres on the inclusion of 77 communities, 75 of which are Muslim, into the state's Other Backward Classes (OBC) list, a process initiated during the TMC regime.

The decision sparked major political and legal battles, with the Calcutta High Court striking down the notice and invalidating nearly 5 lakh caste certificates issued by the state since 2010.

On the constitution of the Seventh State Pay Commission for upward revision of salaries of its employees, Paul said the scope of pay hike would also extend to the staff of statutory entities like civic bodies, local bodies, education boards and those working in state-run education institutions. "The details of the commission's set-up will be duly notified," she said, without specifying its date of implementation.

In his pre-election campaigns, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had pledged that the new pay commission would be implemented within 45 days of the formation of the BJP government in Bengal.

She, however, confirmed that the issue of granting increased dearness allowance (DA) to state employees was not on the agenda of Monday's meeting.

## INTERNATIONAL

## China agrees to boost trade for US ag products such as beef and poultry following Trump-Xi summit

WASHINGTON

China has agreed to ramp up trade for US agricultural products such as beef and poultry, buying at an annualized rate of \$17 billion per year for 2026 and at that level for 2027 and 2028, the White House announced Sunday, two days after President Donald Trump returned from a high-stakes summit in Beijing where he sought to ease the impact on American farmers from the trade war he launched last year.

China would restore market access for US beef and resume imports of poultry from US states determined by the US Department of Agriculture to be free of the bird flu, the White House said. The deals are on top of China's soybean purchase commitments last year.

The agreements offer some hope to American farmers harmed by the trade war as they saw a major export market for soybeans and other products dry up. Farmers also are feeling new pressure from Trump administration policies — the war that the US and Israel launched against Iran has curtailed shipping through the Strait of Hormuz, a vital trade corridor that has restricted global fertilizer supplies and sent those prices soaring.

There was no immediate confirmation of the terms from Beijing.

China's Ministry of Commerce on Saturday said the two sides would "resolve or make substantial progress toward resolving certain non-tariff barriers and market access issues" regarding agricultural goods.

The US would "actively work" to address China's concerns regarding detention of its dairy products, seafood, the export of potted bonsai, and the recognition of Shandong province as a bird-flu-free zone, while the Chinese side will "likewise actively work" to address US concerns regarding the registration of beef processing facilities and the export of poultry meat from certain states to China,



a ministry spokesperson said.

The two sides also agreed to expand trade, including that of farm goods, through measures such as reciprocal tariff reductions on "a specific range of products," though the spokesperson did not specify the products.

China, recognizing the link between food security and national security, has diversified its sources of imported soybeans, beef and other farm goods, turning increasingly to Brazil, Argentina and other countries over the US.

Data from the US Department of Agriculture show China's imports of US agricultural goods peaked in 2022 with \$38 billion but fell to \$8 billion in 2025. These figures include nearly \$18 billion in soybean purchases in 2022 and \$3 billion in 2025.

It's not immediately clear how much more China would buy from American soybean farmers, who were hit especially hard in the trade war. China, traditionally the largest foreign buyer of American soybeans, stopped purchasing them altogether last year after Trump hiked tariffs on Chinese goods.

The latest agreement builds on a trade truce Trump reached with Chinese President Xi Jinping in October in which China agreed to resume buying US soybeans. The White House said then that

China committed to buying 12 million metric tons in the current marketing year and 25 million metric tons for each of the next three years.

According to the White House, hundreds of US beef plants, including those run by Tyson and Cargill, also will be able to export again to China, though it's not immediately clear how much beef American businesses will be selling to China. China let licenses for hundreds of US beef plants expire last year, and the import value for 2025 fell to less than \$500 million, according to USDA figures.

China's purchases of US beef had peaked at \$2.14 billion in 2022, the government data shows. The US export of poultry meats and products to China was \$286 million in 2025, down from more than \$1 billion in 2022. During the summit last week, Trump and Xi discussed ways to enhance economic cooperation, including expanding market access for American businesses in China and increasing Chinese investment into US industries, the White House had said. The two leaders agreed to set up separate boards of trade and investment — though offered few details on the proposals or how they would differ from existing trade dialogues.

The Board of Trade will allow the two governments to manage trade of

"non-sensitive goods," and the Board of Investments would provide a venue for the two sides to discuss investment-related issues, according to the White House.

China's Ministry of Commerce said the two bodies would address respective concerns regarding trade and investment. The Board of Trade, the ministry spokesperson said, would allow the two sides to discuss issues such as tariff reductions on specific products. "In principle, the two sides agreed to reduce tariffs on products of respective concern at equivalent scale," the spokesperson said.

Xi said last week that China's door of opportunity will open wider when he met with US business leaders joining Trump on the trip. Among those who traveled to Beijing was Brian Sikes, CEO of the agricultural giant Cargill.

Soybeans, which are used for livestock feed and biofuels in China, are among the top US agricultural exports. Soybean exports to China in the past had accounted for about half of US exports of agricultural goods to the Asian nation.

USDA data shows the US exported 10.9 million metric tons of soybeans to China as of May 7, putting China on track to fulfill its previous commitment by the end of the marketing year on Aug. 31. This is well below the 25 million to 30 million metric tons that China purchased in past years.

Before Trump's initial planned trip to Beijing in late March — which was postponed by the Iran war — the American Soybean Association urged him to prioritize soybeans in the trade talks with Xi.

Scott Metzger, president of the association, said Thursday the group would like to see "additional soybean purchases this marketing year, as well as continued progress toward fulfilling future purchase commitments."

"Greater certainty and consistency in the marketplace help provide farmers with the confidence they need as they make decisions for the year ahead," he said.

## Hantavirus-stricken cruise ship docks in the Netherlands



ROTTERDAM

The cruise ship hit by a deadly hantavirus outbreak has docked at the Dutch port of Rotterdam for disinfection, wrapping up a troubled journey that put international health authorities on alert.

The MV Hondius was carrying 25 crew members and two medical personnel as it reached Rotterdam on Monday morning, after all the passengers disembarked elsewhere.

An Associated Press journalist saw occupants wearing masks on the deck as the boat was escorted through the port by a tug boat and a Dutch police boat. Authorities say that the crew will enter immediate quarantine.

During the outbreak, three passengers who had been aboard the ship died, including a Dutch couple who health officials believe were the first exposed to the virus while visiting South America.

The MV Hondius has spent the past six days sailing from the Canary Islands, where the remaining passengers were escorted off the vessel by personnel in full-body protective gear and boarded flights to more than 20 countries to enter quarantine.

The outbreak on the ship has reached at least 11 cases, nine of which have been confirmed. Three passengers have died, including a Dutch couple who health officials believe were the first exposed to the virus while visiting South America.

The Public Health Agency of Canada said one of the four Canadians in isolation after leaving the ship had tested positive Sunday and it would share information on the case with the World Health Organization.

The vessel made the journey from Tenerife up the coast of Africa and Europe with 25 crew members and two medical personnel. According to the ship operator Oceanwide Expeditions, no one on board is experiencing any symptoms.

Crew members who are unable to return home will be quarantined in the Netherlands, the Dutch health ministry said last week. Some two dozen passengers and crew are already in quarantine in the Netherlands after arriving in the country on a series of flights over the previous two weeks.

Eighteen Americans are currently under observation at specialized healthcare facilities

in the United States designed to treat people with dangerous infectious diseases.

After everyone on board has disembarked, the ship will be decontaminated based on Dutch public health guidelines. "Personal protective measures are being taken to ensure that the cleaners do not need to quarantine after the cleaning," the health ministry said in a letter to the Dutch parliament last week.

Public health officials will inspect the vessel before it is allowed to sail again. The hantavirus outbreak aboard the MV Hondius is the first known case on a cruise ship.

The Dutch company that owns the cruise ship said it doesn't foresee any changes to its operations. It has an Arctic cruise setting sail from Keflavik, Iceland, on May 29.

France's Pasteur Institute said on Saturday it has fully sequenced the Andes virus detected in a French passenger from the MV Hondius cruise ship and found that it matched viruses already known in South America, with no evidence so far of new characteristics that would make it more transmissible or more dangerous.

## Blood, Language and Identity: The Untold Story of Assam's Bhasha Andolon

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S. BHATTACHARJEE

Language has often shaped the destiny of nations, communities and political movements. In Assam, language became the centre of one of the most emotionally charged and historically significant struggles in post-Independence India - the Bhasha Andolon or Language Movement. What began as a political demand over the choice of an official language eventually transformed into a mass uprising that exposed deep anxieties over identity, culture and belonging in the northeastern state.

The Bhasha Andolon of Assam primarily refers to two major socio-political movements in 1960 and 1961, driven by competing linguistic aspirations between Assamese-speaking and Bengali-speaking communities. The movement witnessed intense protests, civil disobedience, police repression and tragic bloodshed, culminating in the death of eleven language martyrs in Silchar on May 19, 1961.

More than six decades later, the echoes of the movement continue to influence Assam's politics, ethnic relations and debates surrounding identity and citizenship. The story of the Bhasha Andolon is therefore not merely about language policy; it is about the struggle for cultural survival in one of India's most diverse states.

Assam has historically been home to a remarkable mix of ethnicities, languages and cultures. Assamese speakers dominated much of the Brahmaputra Valley, while Bengali-speaking populations formed the majority in the Barak Valley districts of Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi. Alongside them lived numerous indigenous tribal communities such as the Bodos, Karbis, Dimasas and Mishings, each possessing distinct linguistic traditions.

This diversity, while culturally enriching, also created competing claims over political and administrative representation.

The roots of the language conflict date back to British colonial rule. In 1836, the British administration replaced Assamese with Bengali as the official language of Assam's courts and schools. Bengali-speaking clerks and administrators from Bengal Presidency were brought into Assam, sidelining Assamese intellectuals and local elites.

For Assamese society, this became a traumatic episode. Assamese scholars such as Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan and Hemchandra Barua launched campaigns to restore Assamese language and literature. After decades of protest, the British reinstated Assamese in 1873 as the language of administration in Assam.

However, memories of linguistic marginalisation remained deeply embedded in Assamese political consciousness. Many Assamese nationalists feared that their language and culture could once again be overshadowed by Bengali influence.

The Partition of India in 1947 dramatically altered Assam's demographic landscape. Large-scale migration from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) brought thousands of Bengali-speaking refugees into Assam, particularly into the Barak Valley and urban centres of the Brahmaputra Valley.

The migration intensified concerns among Assamese-speaking communities about demographic imbalance, land ownership and political representation. Assamese intellectuals increasingly argued that the indigenous identity of Assam was under threat.

At the same time, Bengali-speaking communities, especially in Cachar district, maintained strong cultural and linguistic ties with Bengali literature, education and administration. They viewed Bengali not merely as a language but as a marker of heritage and identity.

Thus, by the late 1950s, Assam was moving towards a major linguistic confrontation.

The demand for Assamese as the sole official language gathered momentum during the 1950s. Assamese literary bodies, student organisations and political leaders insisted that Assamese should become the primary language of administration and governance.

For many Assamese activists, language became inseparable from the concept of jati or nationality. They believed that without official recognition, Assamese identity itself would face gradual extinction.

Organisations such as the Assam Sahitya Sabha played an influential role in promoting

recognition, Assamese identity itself would face gradual extinction. Organisations such as the Assam Sahitya Sabha played an influential role in promoting

- Tarani Debnath
- Kumud Ranjan Das
- Birendra Sutradhar
- Sunil Sarkar
- Chandni Charan Sutradhar
- Kanailal Niyogi
- Satyendra Deb

Among them, Kamala Bhattacharjee became a powerful symbol of sacrifice and resistance, remembered as one of the first female language martyrs in independent India.

The killings shocked the nation and triggered massive outrage in the Barak Valley. Government Retreat and Bengali Recognition

The public anger following the Silchar firing forced the Assam government to reconsider its policy.

After months of pressure, the government amended its stance and allowed Bengali to be used as the official language in the Barak Valley districts for administrative and educational purposes.

This was seen as a major victory for the language movement.

The compromise effectively acknowledged Assam's multilingual reality. Assamese re-



Assamese linguistic nationalism. Public meetings and campaigns were organised across the Brahmaputra Valley demanding constitutional safeguards for Assamese language and culture.

The movement also drew strength from fears that Assamese speakers might become minorities in their own state due to migration and administrative dominance by outsiders.

However, these demands generated strong resistance in the Bengali-majority Barak Valley.

The political crisis reached a turning point in 1960 when the Assam government under Chief Minister Bimala Prasad Chaliha introduced legislation to declare Assamese as the sole official language of the state.

The proposal immediately sparked protests in Bengali-speaking areas. Leaders from the Barak Valley argued that the imposition of Assamese violated democratic principles and ignored the linguistic reality of southern Assam.

Bengali organisations, students, teachers and civil society groups organised rallies, petitions and strikes demanding equal recognition for Bengali in Bengali-majority districts.

Despite widespread opposition, the Assam Official Language Act was passed in October 1960. Assamese became the official language of the state administration.

The decision was celebrated across much of the Brahmaputra Valley as a historic victory for Assamese identity. But in the Barak Valley, it triggered fear, resentment and anger.

For Bengali speakers, the move symbolised cultural domination rather than administrative reform.

The Barak Valley Eruptions The resistance movement in the Barak Valley intensified in early 1961. Citizens formed action committees to organise peaceful democratic protests against the language policy.

One of the most influential organisations was the Cachar Gana Sangram Parishad, which coordinated demonstrations and civil disobedience campaigns across the region.

The movement rapidly transformed into a people's agitation. Students boycotted classes, traders shut down markets and ordinary residents joined rallies demanding recognition of Bengali as an official language in the Barak Valley.

The protesters adopted Gandhian methods such as satyagraha, picketing and rail blockades.

As tensions escalated, the government responded with arrests and restrictions. Yet the protests continued to grow.

May 19, 1961: The Day Assam Bleed The defining moment of the Bhasha Andolon came on May 19, 1961.

On that day, thousands of protesters gathered at the Silchar railway station to enforce a peaceful rail blockade. Demonstrators demanded that Bengali be allowed in official work, education and administration in the Barak Valley.

Eyewitness accounts suggest that the protesters were largely unarmed and peaceful.

However, the situation took a tragic turn when police opened fire on the crowd.

The firing lasted only minutes, but its impact would resonate across generations.

- Eleven protesters were killed:
- Kamala Bhattacharjee
  - Sachindra Chandra Pal
  - Hitesh Biswas
  - Sukamal Purkayastha

mained the official language of the state, while Bengali gained official recognition in Bengali-majority regions.

May 19 has since been commemorated annually as Bhasha Shahid Divas or Language Martyrs' Day across the Barak Valley.

Memorials, cultural events and public tributes continue to honour those who lost their lives in the movement.

The Movement's Political Legacy The Bhasha Andolon permanently altered Assam's political landscape.

One of the most enduring consequences was the emergence of a distinct political divide between the Brahmaputra Valley and the Barak Valley.

While Assamese nationalism strengthened in the Brahmaputra Valley, Bengali linguistic identity became more consolidated in southern Assam.

This divide continues to influence electoral politics, cultural discourse and regional aspira-

tions even today.

Influence on the Assam Movement The language movement also shaped future agitations in Assam.

The fear of demographic and cultural marginalisation later resurfaced during the Assam Movement (1979-1985), which focused on illegal immigration from Bangladesh.

Many scholars believe that the Bhasha Andolon laid the emotional and ideological foundation for later assertions of indigenous identity in Assam.

The movement highlighted the challenges of governance in multilingual states.

It raised critical questions: "Can one language represent a culturally diverse region?"

How should linguistic minorities be protected? "Where should the balance lie between regional identity and pluralism?"

These questions remain relevant across India even today.

Remembering the Language Martyrs In the Barak Valley, May 19 is observed with deep emotion and historical pride.

Schools, colleges, literary organisations and civil society groups organise processions, seminars and tribute ceremonies every year.

Silchar railway station, where the firing took place, has become a site of memory and resistance.

The movement also occupies an important place in Bengali linguistic history beyond Assam. It is often compared with the Bengali Language Movement of East Pakistan in 1952, where students were killed while demanding recognition for Bengali.

Both movements demonstrated how language can become a powerful symbol of identity and political rights.

Beyond Assamese and Bengali Although the Bhasha Andolon largely revolved around Assamese and Bengali speakers, Assam's linguistic reality is much broader.

The state contains dozens of tribal and indigenous languages, many of which continue to struggle for recognition and preservation. In recent decades, communities such as the Bodos have successfully demanded official recognition for their language and culture.

Thus, Assam's history repeatedly shows that language is deeply intertwined with questions of autonomy, dignity and political representation.

The Bhasha Andolon of Assam was not merely a battle over administrative language. It was a deeply emotional struggle over identity, memory and survival.

For Assamese speakers, the movement represented an effort to protect an indigenous language from perceived demographic and cultural threats. For Bengali speakers in the Barak Valley, it symbolised resistance against linguistic imposition and the defence of constitutional rights.

The bloodshed of May 19, 1961, remains one of the most painful chapters in Assam's modern history. Yet it also produced a crucial lesson: diversity cannot be governed through uniformity alone.

The eventual recognition of both Assamese and Bengali demonstrated the necessity of co-existence in a multilingual society.

Today, the Bhasha Andolon stands as a reminder that language is far more than a tool of communication. It is a repository of history, identity and collective memory - powerful enough to unite communities, inspire movements and, at times, change the course of history itself.

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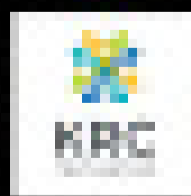


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