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PERSPECTIVE

The difference between like, love and in love, is the same as the difference between for now, for a while and forever.

Nagaland Launches Japanese Language Centre to Boost Overseas Employment Prospects

KOHIMA
Nagaland launched a Japanese Language Centre aimed at equipping young people with language skills required for overseas employment, particularly in Japan, as the state seeks to expand global career opportunities for its youth.

The centre was inaugurated by the Nagaland Skill and Entrepreneurship Development Mission (NSEDMD) under the Investment and Development Authority of Nagaland (IDAN) during the observance of World Youth Skills Day at the Capital Convention Centre in Kohima.Speaking at the event, Advisor for Higher Education and Technical Education Temjenmenba said the initiative would help young people gain proficiency in Japanese, enhancing their employability in Japan and other international job markets.

He urged the state's youth to focus on skill development and entrepreneurship to remain competitive in a rapidly evolving global economy. Emphasising the government's commitment to workforce development, he said NSEDMD has emerged as a key platform for delivering industry-oriented training programmes across Nagaland.Temjenmenba also noted that government employment alone cannot absorb the growing number of educated job seekers in the state and encouraged students and young professionals to explore opportunities in entrepreneurship and the private sector.Highlighting the mission's achievements, Additional Secretary and NSEDMD Project Manager at IDAN, Vineet Kumar, said skill development and entrepreneurship would play a crucial role in shaping Nagaland's future growth trajectory.According to Kumar, since its launch in October 2025, NSEDMD has trained more than 3,500 youths, while nearly 800 others are currently undergoing training in various skill-development programmes.

WHO SAID WHAT

Getting vaccinated saves lives. New data shows that global immunization coverage has moved forward in 2025. 85% or 110 million infants were immunized in 2025—nearly 1 million more infants than the previous year. Let's make sure children don't miss out living healthy and joyful lives. #VaccinesWork

~ World Health Organisation (WHO)

Northeast Adds 1.79 Lakh Hectares of Rubber Plantations Under Project INROAD

GUWAHATI

The Northeast has witnessed the fastest expansion of natural rubber cultivation in India in recent years, with 1.79 lakh hectares of new plantations established across the region under the Project INROAD initiative over the past five years.

Launched in 2021-22, the Indian Natural Rubber Operations for Assisted Development (INROAD) programme has facilitated the development of 1,79,376 hectares of new rubber plantations across 113 districts in the Northeast, bringing it close to its target of 2 lakh hectares.

Officials said the achievement represents the largest and quickest expansion of natural rubber cultivation undertaken in the country within such a short period.

The initiative is being implemented by the Rubber Board of India with financial support from leading tyre manufacturers Apollo Tyres,



CEAT, JK Tyre and MRF, making it a unique public-private partnership aimed at strengthening India's natural rubber

KRC TIMES
STAY ENRICHED

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Manipur Fuel Transporters Warn of Supply Disruption Over Alleged Extortion on NH-37

Manipur CM urged to stop NH-37 extortion as fuel transporters warn of shutdown



IMPHAL

Petroleum transporters and passenger vehicle operators in Manipur have given the state government until July 30 to address alleged extortion along National Highway-37, warning that fuel and LPG transportation could be suspended if the issue remains unresolved.

In a joint memorandum submitted to Chief Minister Yumnam Khemchand Singh on July 15, seven transport and dealers' associations, including the All Manipur Petroleum Products Transporters Association and the HPCL Dealers Association, raised concerns over what they described as escalating illegal collections along the Imphal-Jiribam route.

The associations alleged that fuel tanker operators are being forced to pay more than ₹7,000 in illegal levies for each round trip

despite travelling under the protection of CRPF security escorts. According to them, the amount collected has risen sharply over the years from around ₹200 per trip to several thousand rupees.

The memorandum claimed that tanker drivers travelling from Imphal to Jiribam are asked to pay ₹500 at Awangkhum, while additional collections are allegedly made during the return journey, including ₹5,000 at Oinamlong, ₹3,500 at Kambiron, and between ₹500 and ₹1,200 at locations such as Jiribam Parking, Nungba and Noney.

Transporters said freight rates are fixed by oil marketing companies, leaving them unable to recover the additional expenses arising from the alleged extortion.

The associations warned that if the government fails to dismantle the alleged extortion network or compensate transporters for the financial losses by July 30, they will

halt the movement of petroleum products, oil and lubricants (POL), and LPG along NH-37 from July 31.

Passenger vehicle operators have also voiced concerns over security along the highway, alleging that inadequate escort arrangements have left several vehicles travelling to Tamenglong, Nungba, Noney and Jiribam stranded at New Keithelmanbi.

They urged the government to provide dedicated security escorts for passenger vehicles instead of limiting protection to truck convoys, arguing that such a measure is necessary to ensure the safe and uninterrupted movement of commuters.

The transport bodies expressed hope that the state government would intervene promptly to address the issue and prevent any disruption in the supply of essential commodities, including fuel and cooking gas, to the state.

Governor Bhalla Unveils Durand Cup 2026 Trophies as Imphal Gears Up for Group D Matches



IMPHAL

Manipur Governor Ajay Kumar Bhalla on Wednesday unveiled the trophies of the 135th Durand Cup 2026 at a ceremony held at the City Convention Centre, marking the formal arrival of Asia's oldest football tournament in the state ahead of the Group D fixtures.

The event, organised jointly by the Indian Armed Forces and the Manipur government, featured the display of the tournament's three iconic trophies - the President's Cup, the Durand Cup and the Simla Trophy. The trophies are currently on a nationwide tour after being flagged off by President Droupadi Murmu at the Rashtrapati Bhavan Cultural Centre earlier this month.

Earlier in the day, a trophy procession was organised from Sendra in

Bishnupur district as part of the tournament's promotional campaign in Manipur.

Imphal is set to host the Group D matches of the Durand Cup at the Khuman Lampak Main Stadium from July 28 to August 12, bringing top-level domestic football action back to the state.

Addressing the gathering, Governor Bhalla said the Durand Cup represents more than a football competition, describing it as a symbol of history, resilience and national unity. Highlighting Manipur's strong football tradition, he expressed confidence that the tournament would inspire young athletes and provide aspiring footballers with a valuable platform to showcase their talent.He also lauded the Indian Armed Forces for bringing the prestigious tournament back to Manipur, stating that the initiative would help promote peace, strengthen social harmony and contribute to ongoing efforts to restore normalcy in the state.

Chief Minister Yumnam Khemchand Singh said football holds a special place in Manipur's sporting culture and thanked the Armed Forces for hosting the tournament in the state. Reaffirming the government's support for the event, he said the matches would not only enhance sports infrastructure but also generate economic opportunities and increase national exposure for local footballers.

The ceremony was attended by Chief Secretary Puneet Kumar Goel, Director General of Police Rajiv Singh, Security Advisor Kuldip Singh, Chief of Staff of the Eastern Command Lt Gen Gambhir Singh, General Officer Commanding Red Shield Division Maj Gen Shubhankar Basu, Inspector General Assam Rifles (South) Maj Gen Gaurav Sharma, and other senior civil, police and military officials.

Air India Express to Launch Direct Guwahati-Dubai, Abu Dhabi Flights in August

GUWAHATI

In a major boost to international air connectivity for Northeast India, Air India Express will begin direct non-stop flights from Guwahati to Dubai and Abu Dhabi in August, the Assam government announced on Wednesday.

The new services will provide the region with its first direct air links to the United Arab Emirates (UAE), eliminating the need for passengers to transit through metropolitan hubs such as Delhi, Kolkata or Mumbai.

According to the schedule released by the airline, direct flights between Guwahati and Dubai will commence on August 4, while the Guwahati-Abu Dhabi service will begin on August 7.The launch follows official confirmation from Air India Express regarding the introduction of the two international routes, which are expected to significantly reduce travel time for passengers travelling between Northeast India and the Gulf region. The direct services are expected to benefit tourists, business travellers, students and members of the Indian diaspora residing in the UAE. The Gulf region remains a key destination for employment, trade and commercial activities for people from Assam and other northeastern states.

To mark the launch, Air India Express has announced introductory fares for both routes. Tickets for the Guwahati-Dubai service will start at Rs 21,188, while fares for the Guwahati-Abu Dhabi route will be available from Rs 19,759. Officials said the new international connections are expected to strengthen tourism, trade and investment opportunities while enhancing people-to-people exchanges between Northeast India and the UAE. The services are also likely to improve business mobility and facilitate the movement of cargo between the two regions. The development is being viewed as a significant milestone in expanding Guwahati's role as an international aviation gateway for the Northeast. Passengers planning to travel on the inaugural flights have been advised to book tickets early to avail themselves of the introductory fares and secure seats on the new services.

‘No Means No’: NSHRC Chief Calls for Stronger Laws Against Stalking and Cyber Abuse

KOHIMA
Nagaland State Human Rights Commission (NSHRC) Chairman Justice Lanusungkum Jamir has called for stronger legal safeguards, institutional support mechanisms and greater public awareness to combat stalking and cyber stalking, describing them as serious violations of human dignity and personal freedom.

Addressing a state-level awareness programme on the prevention of stalking and cyber stalking on Tuesday, Justice Jamir said India has moved beyond treating stalking as a harmless social behaviour and now recognises it as a criminal offence capable of inflicting lasting psychological and emotional harm.The programme was organised by the National Commission for Women (NCW) in collaboration with the Nagaland State Commission for Women (NSCW).Referring to Section 78 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), Justice Jamir noted that the law criminalises both physical stalking and cyber stalking. However, he observed that the provision identifies the offender only as a man and classifies a first offence as bailable.

He argued that legal provisions should evolve to reflect the realities of digital-age harassment and provide equal protection to all individuals, regardless of gender.

“No means no” must be respected in every context,” Justice Jamir said, urging society to reject cultural attitudes that romanticise persistence or equate obsession with affection. Healthy relationships, he added, are founded on mutual respect, trust and consent.

Highlighting the growing challenges posed by technology, the NSHRC chairman warned that social media platforms, spyware and digital surveillance tools have made stalking easier and more pervasive. He said cyber stalking can take many forms, including repeated online harassment, identity theft, fake social media profiles, digital monitoring, threats and the unauthorised sharing of personal information.

While acknowledging that the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita and the Information Technology Act have strengthened the legal framework for addressing such offences, Justice Jamir said enforcement agencies continue to face challenges ranging from rapidly evolving technology and cross-border investigations to low digital literacy and the social stigma associated with reporting abuse.Describing privacy and the right to live free from fear as fundamental rights, he advised victims to preserve evidence, avoid engaging with perpetrators, block abusive accounts, report harmful content to online platforms and seek assistance from law enforcement agencies when necessary.Justice Jamir expressed hope that awareness initiatives would help young people better understand the dangers of stalking and cyber stalking and encourage safer online behaviour.

Earlier, Nagaland State Commission for Women Chairperson W. Ngingyeh Konyak said that although Nagaland continues to record one of the lowest rates of crimes against women in the country, cyber stalking and other forms of online harassment are emerging concerns.

Arunachal Pradesh Signs Pact for India’s First River Kinetic Energy Project

ITANAGAR

Arunachal Pradesh has signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Norwegian company Tidal Sail AS to establish India's first river kinetic energy demonstration project, marking a significant step towards advancing renewable energy technologies in the country.

The 500-kW pilot project will be implemented under the India-Norway Green Partnership through a collaboration between the Centre for Earth Sciences and Himalayan Studies (CESHS), Government of Arunachal Pradesh, and Tidal Sail AS.Supported by the Union Ministry of New and Renewable Energy (MNRE) and Innovation Norway, the initiative aims to demonstrate a technology capable of generating electricity directly from river currents without requiring large dams or extensive civil infrastructure.

Officials said the project offers an environmentally sustainable and cost-effective alternative for harnessing renewable energy, particularly in river-rich and remote

regions where conventional power infrastructure can be challenging to develop.Speaking at the signing ceremony, Arunachal Pradesh Minister for Science and Technology Dasanglu Pul said the partnership reflects a shared commitment to innovation, sustainability and international cooperation in the clean energy sector.She noted that Arunachal Pradesh possesses vast renewable energy resources and expressed confidence that the project would contribute to strengthening the state's energy security while ensuring the responsible and sustainable use of natural resources.The minister said the initiative could open new opportunities for deploying advanced renewable energy technologies in remote and ecologically sensitive areas, helping communities gain access to reliable and clean power.

Norwegian Ambassador to India May-Elin Stener also addressed the event, highlighting the growing cooperation between India and Norway in the field of green energy and sustainable development.



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INDO-PACIFIC ARC

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visits to Indonesia, Australia and New Zealand should not be viewed as routine bilateral engagements undertaken in succession. Together, they represent a broader strategic effort to consolidate India's presence across the Indo-Pacific and to translate New Delhi's evolving maritime vision into a coherent framework of partnerships stretching from the western Indian Ocean to the Pacific.

Coming on the heels of the Prime Minister's visits to Mauritius and Seychelles, the tour underscores a significant shift in India's strategic thinking. The Indo-Pacific is increasingly being treated not as a collection of disconnected regions but as a single strategic theatre where maritime security, trade routes, critical mineral supply chains, technological cooperation and geopolitical influence intersect. In this emerging landscape, India appears determined to position itself as a central player capable of shaping regional stability while preserving its strategic autonomy.

The geography of the current outreach is particularly significant. Mauritius and Seychelles reinforced India's engagement in the western Indian Ocean, a region critical to its maritime security interests. Indonesia, Australia and New Zealand extend that engagement eastward, completing a strategic arc that connects the Indian Ocean with Southeast Asia and the Pacific. This approach reflects the practical implementation of India's Act East Policy and the broader MAHASAGAR vision - Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions - which seeks to promote cooperation and stability across the maritime domain.

At the heart of this strategy lies Indonesia, arguably one of India's most important partners in Southeast Asia. Its location astride the Strait of Malacca gives it enormous strategic significance. The narrow waterway remains one of the busiest maritime corridors in the world, carrying a substantial portion of global trade and energy shipments. For India, whose economic future is closely linked to secure sea lanes, maintaining strong ties with Indonesia is not merely desirable but essential.

The relationship has steadily expanded since the establishment of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2018. Cooperation now spans maritime security, defence, connectivity, trade and cultural exchanges. India's interest in Sabang, situated near the entrance of the Malacca Strait, reflects a growing recognition that maritime domain awareness and secure navigation routes are central to national security. At a time when concerns over piracy, illegal fishing and broader maritime competition continue to grow, collaboration with Indonesia provides India with an important strategic foothold in Southeast Asia. Economic considerations further reinforce the partnership. Indonesia is India's largest trading partner within ASEAN and an increasingly important source of critical minerals, particularly nickel. As global competition intensifies over resources essential for electric vehicles, renewable energy and advanced manufacturing, securing diversified and reliable supply chains has become a strategic imperative. Cooperation in mining, processing and value-added manufacturing can help India reduce vulnerabilities while supporting its ambitions in emerging industries. Defence cooperation also deserves close attention. Discussions surrounding the possible export of the BrahMos supersonic cruise missile to Indonesia carry significance beyond defence commerce. Such an agreement would strengthen India's credentials as a defence exporter while deepening strategic trust with a key maritime nation. It would also signal India's growing willingness to contribute to regional security through partnerships that enhance deterrence and capacity-building. If Indonesia serves as the gateway to Southeast Asia, Australia has emerged as one of India's most consequential strategic partners in the wider Indo-Pacific. Relations between the two countries have undergone a remarkable transformation over the past decade, culminating in the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership established in 2020. Today, the India-Australia relationship extends well beyond traditional diplomacy. Cooperation encompasses critical minerals, cybersecurity, advanced technologies, education, maritime security and supply-chain resilience. Defence engagement has expanded steadily, supported by regular high-level exchanges and growing interoperability between the two countries' armed forces. While both nations remain active participants in the Quad, their bilateral relationship has acquired a momentum and depth that stand independently of broader multilateral frameworks. Australia's significance to India is amplified by its abundant reserves of critical minerals such as lithium and rare earth elements, resources that are increasingly central to the global energy transition and technological innovation. As India seeks to reduce dependence on concentrated supply sources, stronger cooperation with Australia can contribute significantly to long-term economic security. New Zealand, though often receiving less strategic attention than its larger neighbour, completes India's outreach into the Pacific. The Prime Minister's visit carries historical importance as the first by an Indian leader in four decades. More importantly, it reflects a recognition that the Pacific region is becoming increasingly relevant to global geopolitics and economic competition. Bilateral ties have gained momentum following New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon's engagement with India and the growing interest of both countries in expanding cooperation. Trade, education, agriculture, technology and maritime governance provide substantial opportunities for collaboration. The large Indian diaspora in New Zealand also offers a valuable bridge that can strengthen economic and cultural ties. Taken together, India's engagements with Indonesia, Australia and New Zealand reveal the contours of a distinct Indo-Pacific strategy. Unlike traditional alliance structures that define international politics through blocs and rivalries, India continues to pursue a model based on flexible and issue-specific partnerships. This approach allows New Delhi to deepen cooperation across multiple domains without compromising its strategic independence. Each of the three countries contributes a unique dimension to India's regional vision. Indonesia anchors engagement with ASEAN and the strategically vital Malacca Strait. Australia strengthens cooperation in critical minerals, technology and maritime security. New Zealand broadens India's presence in the Pacific and reinforces its engagement with emerging regional priorities. Collectively, these partnerships create a more comprehensive and balanced Indo-Pacific architecture.

Yet diplomacy alone cannot guarantee success. The true test of these engagements will lie in implementation. Political goodwill generated by summit meetings must be translated into concrete outcomes. Trade agreements, investment flows, defence cooperation, technology partnerships and supply-chain initiatives require sustained follow-through. Without institutional mechanisms and consistent execution, strategic aspirations risk remaining largely symbolic.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

ON THE GRAND ROAD OF PURI



SMTDROUPADI MURMU

Many prayers and hymns dedicated to Shree Jagannatha have been there in my memory since childhood. I felt happy singing the bhajans of Mahaprabhu Jagannatha while studying in school and college. I felt very close to Mahaprabhu. I do not sing the bhajans these days. But I do remember Mahaprabhu and hum his bhajans everyday. I always feel the presence of Mahaprabhu near me. He supports me in difficult times. To this day, I hum the song composed by Bhakta Kabi Madhusudan Rao which reads: 'The Mahaprabhu is with me day and night; with this remembrance, I shall always worship Him with all my heart'.

By the time I reached an age when I could somewhat understand worldly things, I had come to realise the greatness of Mahaprabhu Jagannatha. At home, there were frequent discussions about Mahaprabhu Jagannatha. Such discussions often took place in our village too. When I studied at the village school, the prayer 'Ahe Nila Shaila' written by Bhakta Salbeg was regularly recited. Our teacher used to tell us a lot about Mahaprabhu Jagannatha. There is a huge temple in Puri, and no other temple is as magnificent as that! In the temple, Mahaprabhu Shree Jagannatha is worshipped along with his sister Subhadra and elder brother Balabhadra. Mahaprabhu Jagannatha has dark colour and round eyes. Subhadra's complexion is yellow and Balabhadra is white like a moonlit flower. Once you see the deities, you can never forget them. Our teacher also used to say, Jagannatha is the 'Mahaprabhu', his prasad is 'Mahaprasada', His temple is the 'Bada Deula' or Big Temple, His path is the 'Bada Danda', that is, Grand Road, and His sea is the 'Mahodadhi' or the Great Ocean. Puroshottam Kshetra, Puri is far from my native village, Uparbeda in Mayurbhanj district. How would I get an opportunity to visit Puri? As I grew up, I went to Bhubaneswar and got myself enrolled as a student in Unit-2 Girls High School. I started staying in the hostel there. Then I got a chance to visit Puri, Bhubaneswar, and Konark. The memory of my first darshan of Mahaprabhu Jagannatha is still vivid in my memory. What an impressive temple, such grand deities! Can these ever be forgotten?

Can anyone forget the Rathayatra of Mahaprabhu Jagannatha? Thirteen festivals are said to be celebrated during the twelve months of a year in Shree-Kshetra. But the splendour of the Rathayatra is unique. Devotees throng the temple all through the year to have darshan of Mahaprabhu. But once a year, Mahaprabhu Himself leaves the temple and proceeds to the Gundichatemple along the Vishal Path, giving darshan to His devotees. On three magnificent chariots, the three Deities, accompanied by Chakraraja Sudarshana, visit the Gundichatemple. They stay there for

seven days and then return. This grand festival of Mahaprabhu is incomparable.

Since my childhood, I have been a devotee of Mahaprabhu Jagannatha. He has always been my most revered Deity. He governs the ups and downs of my life. He is the fountainhead of my joys and sorrows. I have endured many hardships in my life. And Mahaprabhu has always pulled me out of all those troubles. I am His daughter, after all.

When my candidature for the post of the President of India was announced, I reverentially remembered the name of Mahaprabhu. I prayed to the Mahaprabhu, 'You are taking me to such lofty heights. I implore You to guide me at every step and always be with me.' He listened to my prayer.

He always responds to my prayers. The festival of Rathayatra was going to be celebrated when I had to stay in Delhi as a candidate for the post of the President. So, it was not possible for me to go to Puri. Early morning, on the day of Rathayatra, I went to Shree Jagannatha Temple at Hauz Khas, Delhi, and had the darshan of Mahaprabhu. My heart was filled with joy. He showered His blessings upon me. Full of confidence, I filed my nomination paper. I participated in the election campaign with great enthusiasm. I was praying to Mahaprabhu Jagannath, on my way to the Central Hall of Parliament for taking oath as the President on 25th July 2022. With His blessings, the ceremony went off very well. At the time of my inaugural address as President, it felt as if He was right there with me.

However, my heart longed to go to Puri to have the darshan of Mahaprabhu. Days went by, but I could not go to Puri. It occurred to me; how can anyone get His darshan unless He grants it! I silently prayed Him, 'If I have done anything wrong, forgive me, Mahaprabhu! But kindly call me to Puri, grant me Your darshan.' He is the Mahaprabhu of 'Bhaav' or emotions.

How could He not understand my emotions? Soon, a tour to Puri was scheduled. The date was November 10, 2022. After arriving at Puri, the arcade proceeded towards the Shree Mandir. As the arcade reached Puri's Bada Danda, an extraordinary feeling overwhelmed me. The Bada Danda belongs to Shree Jagannatha. Is there any protocol required here? Puri is famous as Kshetra-Raj, the King of all the places of pilgrimage. Mahaprabhu is the God of Gods. Without any further thoughts, I got my car stopped. When my car stopped, all the cars following mine also came to a halt. Before anyone could comprehend what was happening, I had begun walking barefoot on the Bada Danda. The Shree Mandir was about two kilometers away. Keeping my eyes focused on the temple's Neel-Chakra and the sacred Patit Paawan Dhwa-jon the Shikhar, I kept walking ahead.

As I walked, I also kept greeting the children, women, the

young and the elderly gathered on both sides of the road. My attention was on Mahaprabhu. The moment I reached near Sinh-Dwaar, the Lion-Gate of the temple, I could not stay still. By then, I had forgotten myself. Lying prostrate in the dust of the Bada Danda, the sacred road, I offered my humble Pranam to Mahaprabhu. Then I entered the temple. Upon reaching the Garbh-Griha and having darshan of the four deities, I was overwhelmed with divine bliss. Mahaprabhu is the protector of the universe. He is the saviour of those forsaken by

DIGITAL WAR OF WORDS

Urban centres can amplify the growth of a State's economy. Gurgaon, Noida, Navi Mumbai, and Hyderabad have driven remarkable economic transformation for their states. With the Guwahati Satellite City, we aim to create a similar growth engine for Assam. ~ Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma, CM, Assam

everyone. He is always there to alleviate the sorrows of the people of the entire world. That is why the lids of His round eyes never blink. For Him, there is no distinction between high and low. In His eyes all are equal and equality of all is His mantra. Blessed with His compassion, I have devoted myself to the service of every section of the society. Looking at Mahaprabhu Jagannatha, the one with the rounded eyes, I folded my hands in reverence and prayed, 'May Your blessings forever sustain my spirit of dedication to the service of the people, O Mahabahu! Provide your kind protection to our country the entire world, O Kripandih. Saying this, I found myself immersed in Bhakti-Bhav.



Guwahati Groundwater Turns Semi-Critical as Orunodoi Coverage Tops 39.5 Lakh Assam Targets 8,457 MW Power Capacity, 1 Lakh Jobs Through Satellite Cities: Himanta Sarma

GUWAHATI
The Assam government informed the Legislative Assembly that groundwater resources in Guwahati have been classified as “semi-critical”, while the rest of the state continues to remain in the “safe” category, according to the Dynamic Ground Water Resources of Assam, 2025 report prepared by the Central Ground Water Board.The disclosure was made during Question Hour on the seventh day of the Budget Session, during which ministers also presented updates on maternal health indicators, welfare schemes, budget utilisation and environmental conservation efforts.

Replying to a question by AGP MLA Diptimayee Choudhury, Public Health Engineering Minister Krishnendu Paul said Assam currently extracts 293 billion cubic metres (BCM) of groundwater annually.

The minister further informed the House that arsenic contamination has been identified in 4,536 habitations across the state, while fluoride contamination has been detected in 306 habitations out of Assam's total 88,419 habitations. He said the government has undertaken measures to address water quality issues arising from both contaminants.On the health sector, Health and Family Welfare Minister Ashok Singhal stated that Assam's Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR) stands at 84 deaths per 1,00,000 live births, citing data from the Sample Registration Survey (SRS) 2022-24.Responding to a query from Congress MLA Abdur Rahim Ahmed, Singhal said the state government is implementing multiple interventions aimed at reducing maternal mortality and morbidity. These include the Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY), Janani Shishu Suraksha Karyakram (JSSK), wage compensation support for pregnant women in tea garden areas, maternal death review and surveillance mechanisms, the Surakshit Matritva Aashwasan (SUMAN) programme

and comprehensive abortion care services.

On welfare initiatives, Finance Minister Jayanta Mallabaruah informed the Assembly that 39,51,968 beneficiaries had been covered under Orunodoi 3.0 as of March 2026. Replying to a question from AIUDF MLA Mazibur Rahman, the minister said the beneficiary database is continuously updated through additions and deletions based on fresh applications, complaints and verification processes.

He noted that the flagship welfare scheme has expanded significantly over the years, growing from 20 lakh beneficiaries under Orunodoi 1.0 to 27 lakh under Orunodoi 2.0 and now more than 39 lakh beneficiaries under Orunodoi 3.0.

Mallabaruah also highlighted that the monthly financial assistance under the scheme has been increased from Rs 830 to Rs 1,000 and subsequently to Rs 1,250. Any future enhancement, he said, would depend on the

state's fiscal position and the scope of further expansion of the programme.Addressing concerns over budget utilisation, the Finance Minister said the Finance Department does not have information on why several government departments failed to fully utilise their sanctioned allocations between the financial years 2021-22 and 2024-25.

Responding to a starred question from Congress MLA Dr Asif Md Nazar, he said department-wise details comparing approved allocations and actual expenditure had been placed before the House. Information regarding unspent funds for 2025-26 is not yet available as accounts are awaiting finalisation by the Office of the Principal Accountant General (A&E), Assam.

Since expenditure decisions are made by individual departments, the Finance Department does not maintain records on the specific reasons behind unutilised allocations, he added.Meanwhile, Soil Conservation

Minister Ashwini Ray Sarkar informed the Assembly that the department has undertaken plantation activities over more than 5,800 hectares across Assam between 2016 and 2026.Replying to BJP MLA Chakradhar Gogoi, the minister also stated that 202 posts remain vacant in the Soil Conservation Department and would be filled after receiving the necessary approval from the state government.The updates provided during the Budget Session highlighted the government's focus on groundwater management, maternal healthcare, social welfare expansion and environmental conservation, while also drawing attention to challenges related to budget utilisation and staffing in key departments.

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Wednesday outlined an ambitious development roadmap for the state, announcing major initiatives in power generation, healthcare, employment and transport infrastructure while replying to the discussion on the 2026-27 Budget in the Legislative Assembly.Among the key announcements was a proposal to establish a medical college in Mankachar within the next five years, a move aimed at strengthening healthcare infrastructure in western Assam and improving access to medical education and specialised healthcare services in the region.



Joint Forces Dismantle Two Militant Camps, Recover Arms Cache After KCP Cadre Arrest

IMPHAL
Central and state security forces have dismantled two temporary militant camps in Manipur's Imphal West and Jiribam districts, recovering a large cache of arms, ammunition and military equipment following the arrest of a cadre linked to the KCP-MC (Progressive), officials said on Thursday.

The operation began on Wednesday with the arrest of Ngathem Bhimojit Singh (38), alias Bhimo, an alleged active member of the proscribed outfit and a resident of Khurai Thangjam Leikai in Imphal East district.

Based on intelligence obtained during his interrogation, joint security teams launched coordinated search operations at multiple locations across the state.

During a raid at Ishok Mamang Leikai near Loktak Lake in Imphal West district, security personnel uncovered a concealed militant hideout. The operation led to the recovery of four modified bolt-action single-barrel rifles, a modified .303 rifle fitted with a magazine, an M2 carbine equipped with a telescopic sight and magazine, a 9 mm pistol with a magazine, and 26 live rounds of various calibres.

In a follow-up operation in the forested area near Mongbung village in Jiribam district, security forces located another temporary militant camp. The team seized a Pump gun, two country-made pistols, four country-made 12-bore single-barrel breech-loading (SBBL) guns, two hand grenades, three 51 mm mortar shells, 331 rounds of assorted live ammunition and 17 firearm magazines.

Security personnel also recovered military-style equipment, including bulletproof jacket covers, jungle boots and camouflage trousers from the site.

NSCN-IM Alleges Ceasefire Violations Amid Intensified Security Operations in Manipur

IMPHAL
The National Socialist Council of Nagalim-Isak-Muivah (NSCN-IM) has accused Indian security forces of violating ceasefire ground rules and harassing civilians during intensified counter-insurgency operations in parts of Manipur's Ukhrul district.

In a statement, the Naga insurgent group condemned what it described as the “ongoing harassment” of civilians in and around TM Kasom village and Makuliongdi, alleging that security forces had repeatedly breached the mutually agreed Ceasefire Ground Rules. The NSCN-IM claimed that recent operations involved unauthorized raids and door-to-door searches conducted without judicial warrants. It further alleged that four civilians had been abducted and that residential areas had been subjected to heavy militarisation.According to the group, such actions undermine the credibility of the ongoing Indo-Naga peace process. It said civilians caught in conflict situations deserve protection

rather than persecution and alleged that peaceful villages had been transformed into zones of fear due to repeated military operations.The organisation reminded the Government of India that the Ceasefire Ground Rules are based on a bilateral agreement and asserted that unilateral actions weaken mutual trust. It called on New Delhi to investigate the alleged violations, ensure strict adherence to the ceasefire agreement, and permit independent and international human rights monitoring in the affected areas.Reaffirming its commitment to a negotiated settlement, the NSCN-IM said the Naga people continue to seek a lasting and honourable political solution through dialogue.The allegations come amid heightened security operations in the region. According to a Defence statement, the Assam Rifles, in coordination with the Indian Army, Border Security Force (BSF) and Manipur Police, conducted a joint search and sanitation operation in the TM Kasom area of Ukhrul district on July 14.

Civil Society Groups Urge Manipur Governor to Restore Essential Supplies to Moreh

IMPHAL
Representatives of several civil society organisations have appealed to Manipur Governor Ajay Kumar Bhalla to take urgent measures to restore the supply of essential goods and services to Moreh, citing growing shortages caused by prolonged economic blockades in the border town.A delegation comprising members of the Tamil Sangam, Gorkha Sena and Manipuri Muslim Council submitted a memorandum to the Governor at Raj Bhavan on Tuesday, highlighting the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Moreh along the Indo-Myanmar border.The delegation stated that continuing disruptions to supply routes have led to shortages of medicines and essential commodities, limited access to healthcare services, and a sharp increase in the prices of basic goods. The memorandum also pointed to an acute shortage of medical professionals in the town. According to the civil society groups, the situation has worsened as competing blockades imposed by different



organisations continue to affect the movement of goods and people across parts of the state.The memorandum noted that an indefinite economic blockade imposed by the United Naga Council (UNC), supported by the Co-ordinating Committee on Manipur Integrity (COCOMI), has disrupted supplies to Kuki-Zo-dominated areas following the abduction and killing of six Naga civilians.In response, Kuki civil society organisations launched counter-blockades along National Highway-2, affecting the movement of essential commodities to Naga- and

Meitei-inhabited areas. The Foot-hills Naga Coordinating Committee (FNCC) has also imposed restrictions on the movement of Kuki-Zo people between Churachandpur and Kangpokpi, further impacting transportation and supply chains.

The delegation told the Governor that the prolonged blockades, coupled with restrictions on movement, have resulted in severe shortages of food and medicines. They also expressed concern over the plight of students, many of whom have been stranded due to the disruptions, leading to the

closure of several school hostels in affected areas.

Seeking immediate intervention, the organisations urged the Governor to ensure the restoration of supply lines and facilitate the delivery of essential services to residents of Moreh and other affected regions.

The memorandum comes amid ongoing efforts by both the state and central governments to ease tensions and restore normalcy in Manipur. Chief Minister Yumnam Khemchand Singh has held discussions with the United Naga Council regarding the lifting of the blockade, while Kuki-Zo apex bodies have separately met officials of the Union Home Ministry and the Intelligence Bureau in New Delhi to seek security guarantees and humanitarian relief.

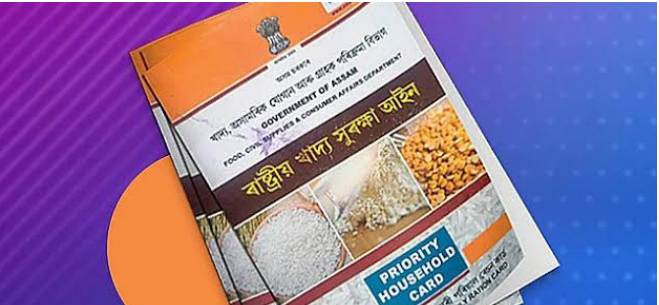
The appeal underscores growing concerns over the impact of the continuing blockades on civilians, particularly in vulnerable border areas where access to healthcare, education and basic necessities has become increasingly difficult.

Assam Sets July 31 Deadline for Ration Card Verification Under Anna Seva Abhiyan

GUWAHATI
Assam Food, Public Distribution and Consumer Affairs Minister Kaushik Rai has directed officials to complete the ongoing ration card verification drive across the state by July 31, aiming to ensure that benefits under the Anna Seva Abhiyan reach only eligible beneficiaries.

Chairing a state-level review and interactive meeting in Guwahati on Wednesday, Rai instructed officials to use Aadhaar-based verification and e-KYC processes to identify ration card holders who have not collected free rice for six months or longer.

The minister said cases involving beneficiaries who obtained ration cards but have not availed themselves of free rice for at least six months should be thoroughly examined. According to him, the exercise will help remove inactive



beneficiaries from the system and create opportunities for genuinely needy families to secure ration cards and access benefits under the Public Distribution System (PDS).

Rai also set targets for issuing ration cards to individuals suffering from critical illnesses and other deserving categories, urging officials to work with dedication to ensure timely coverage.

During the meeting, the min-

ister highlighted Assam's implementation of the SMART Public Distribution System (SMART PDS), stating that the initiative had strengthened transparency and improved public confidence in the department. He credited officials, employees and Fair Price Shop (FPS) dealers for the successful rollout of the system.

Reviewing paddy procurement operations, Rai directed officials

to establish committees for every procurement centre by the first week of August. The committees will be headed by local MLAs, with other members appointed in accordance with government guidelines. He stressed that the additional state incentive provided above the Minimum Support Price (MSP) must reach only genuine farmers.

The minister further instructed authorities to ensure that commissions due to Fair Price Shop dealers are disbursed by the 20th of every month. He also ordered a review of inactive fair price shops and called for departmental action wherever necessary.

With the state preparing to resume the distribution of pulses and sugar from August, Rai asked officials to complete all logistical and administrative arrangements to ensure smooth implementation of the programme.

KSU Protests Alleged Unauthorised Temple at Shillong CBI Office, Sets Seven-Day Deadline

SHILLONG
The Khasi Students' Union (KSU) Shillong Mihngi Circle has staged a protest at the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) office in Shillong over the alleged construction of an unauthorised temple within the office premises, demanding its removal within seven days.

The protest was held on July 14 and was led by KSU Central Executive Committee Assistant Organising Secretary Jeremia Poththmi. During the demonstration, union members locked the temple structure and submitted a memorandum to the Deputy Inspector General of the CBI, seeking immediate action on the issue.

According to the KSU, the structure was allegedly constructed on government land without the necessary authorisation. The union claimed that discussions with CBI officials during the protest did not result in any concrete assurance regarding the matter, prompting members to lock the temple.

The student body said it had raised objections to the alleged construction on several occasions in the past and was earlier assured that no religious

structure would be built within the CBI office compound.

However, the KSU alleged that construction activities resumed recently and that a subsequent inspection by its members found the temple nearing completion.

Expressing concern over what it described as the unauthorised use of government premises, the union maintained that central government office compounds should not accommodate religious structures built without proper approval.

The KSU has issued a seven-day ultimatum to the authorities to remove the structure, warning that it would intensify its agitation through democratic means if no action is taken within the stipulated period.

The organisation also urged the CBI and other concerned authorities to address the issue promptly and ensure compliance with applicable rules governing the use of government land and office premises.

There was no immediate response from the CBI regarding the allegations or the demands raised by the student body at the time of filing this report.

Meghalaya Entrepreneur Alleges Theft at Delhi Pineapple Festival, Urges Swift Action

SHILLONG/NEW DELHI
A Meghalaya-based entrepreneur has alleged that her bag containing cash, identity documents and other valuables was stolen during the fourth Meghalaya Pineapple Festival at Dilli Haat in New Delhi and has called on the Delhi Police and the Meghalaya government to ensure a prompt investigation.

Roshni Kharshiing, founder of Rush Pineapple Jam, said the alleged theft occurred on the evening of July 11 while she was managing her stall during the three-day festival organised to promote Meghalaya's agricultural products.

In a video message, Kharshiing described the festival as an important opportunity for her business and said it was her first visit to the national capital to showcase her products. She noted that the event witnessed a large turnout, particularly on the second day.

According to Kharshiing, her bag went missing between 8.15 pm and 8.45 pm. She claimed it contained her Aadhaar card, voter identity card, PAN card, office identity card, documents belonging to her husband and cash estimated at between Rs 20,000 and Rs



30,000.

She alleged that two men were involved in the incident and claimed that one of them repeatedly attempted to draw her away from the stall by saying that someone in the crowd wanted to meet her.

Kharshiing said she declined the request and told the individual that anyone wishing to speak with her could visit the stall directly. Shortly afterwards, she discovered that her

bag was missing.

The entrepreneur said officials from Meghalaya's Department of Food Processing assisted her in lodging a complaint at the Dilli Haat police post. She further claimed that CCTV footage was reviewed on the same night and that she later identified what she believed to be important leads from the recordings.

However, she expressed frustration over what she described as a lack of

progress in the investigation.

Claiming that she had repeatedly contacted authorities for updates, Kharshiing said she was yet to receive any direct communication from the Delhi Police regarding developments in the case.

She also raised concerns over security arrangements at the government-supported event, saying the incident could affect the confidence of entrepreneurs participating in future promotional programmes.

Kharshiing appealed to the Meghalaya government to intervene and ensure that the matter is pursued seriously. She also urged members of the public to share her video message to help draw attention to the incident.

The entrepreneur further claimed that at least two other participants at the festival had also reported losing belongings during the event.

The fourth edition of the Meghalaya Pineapple Festival, organised by the state's Department of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare, concluded on July 12. The event recorded the sale of approximately 30 metric tonnes of fresh pineapples, nearly double the 15.4 metric tonnes sold during the 2025 edition.

Officials said the festival also facilitated new retail partnerships, including agreements with Flipkart and NCDEX e Markets Limited, aimed at expanding market access for Meghalaya's agricultural products and strengthening opportunities for farmers and entrepreneurs from the state.

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The plural term for “nieces and nephews” is “niblings.”

‘If I eat, what message will it send?’: Sonam Wangchuk refuses to end fast, calls on people to join July 20 march

NEW DELHI

Activist Sonam Wangchuk has refused to end his indefinite hunger strike, despite repeated appeals from political leaders, supporters and legal interventions, saying doing so without any response from the government would send the wrong message.

“If I eat, what message will go? The message to the government will be that there is no need for accountability. Protesters sit and leave,” Wangchuk said, questioning what would change if he ended his fast.

In a video message released late Wednesday, the 18th day of his hunger strike, Wangchuk said he had received widespread appeals to call off the protest.

“Have received thousands of messages asking me to break my fast. Many senior politicians have come to me and spoken to me with love and concern,” he said, adding that some people had even approached the court seeking directions to make him eat.

Addressing concerns about his health, Wangchuk said medical examinations had not indicated any immediate danger.

“My condition is not such that I will die in two-four days. Many medical tests have been conducted and the results are quite normal for an 18-day fast. An ECG was also done and it is not bad. I can continue for many more days,” he said. “Yes, there is weakness and my muscles are getting weak, but my heart and core are still fine,” he added.

Climate activist Sonam Wangchuk being attended by a medical professional as Cockroach Janata Party (CJP) founder Abhijeet Dipke looks on during a protest by CJP demanding Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan’s resignation over alleged irregularities in the NEET examination, at Jantar Mantar, in New Delhi.

Instead of urging him to end his fast, Wangchuk appealed to supporters to participate in large numbers in the Cockroach Janta Party’s proposed “Chalo

Sansad” march on July 20 to send a strong message to the government.

“I request all schools, colleges and universities to observe July 20 as a day of experiential education under the National Education Policy. Students will get to witness and participate in a real lesson in political science and democracy,” he said.

He also appealed to people to register for the march through the campaign’s website or missed-call initiative.

“Come in thousands on July 20. Together, we will hand over this issue to the Parliament. Then I will believe that it has gone into the right hands,” Wangchuk said.

The Cockroach Janta Party has been protesting at Jantar Mantar, demanding the resignation of Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan over alleged irregularities in the NEET examination. The party has also called for a “Chalo Sansad” march on July 20, the opening day of the Monsoon Session of Parliament.

Day after ED summons family, TMC’s Madan Mitra joins rebel camp; Mamata rallies behind Abhishek



KOLKATA

Senior Trinamool Congress (TMC) MLA Madan Mitra on Wednesday joined the rebel camp led by Leader of Opposition Ritabrata Banerjee, dealing another political setback to the Mamata Banerjee-led faction, even as he insisted that he remained a member of the party.

The veteran Kamarhati MLA announced his resignation from all national and state organisational committees of the Mamata Banerjee-aligned “Kalighat TMC”. He also stepped down as the party’s chief whip in the West Bengal Assembly with immediate effect.

“I have only changed my room, not my house. I am very much in the TMC,” Mitra told reporters after meeting Ritabrata Banerjee in his chamber in the Assembly.

Dressed in a white kurta and wearing his trademark dark sunglasses, Mitra sat beside the rebel leader before declaring that he would no longer hold any organisational responsibility under the Mamata Banerjee-led faction while continuing as a Trinamool Congress MLA.

“I am resigning from all national and

state committees of the Kalighat TMC. I am also stepping down as chief whip. But I remain a Trinamool MLA,” he said.

Mitra’s switch is the most significant defection to the rebel camp since the organisational split within the TMC became public and is expected to deepen the crisis confronting the Mamata Banerjee faction.

One of the Trinamool Congress’ most recognisable mass leaders and a long-time trusted lieutenant of Mamata Banerjee, Mitra had in recent months publicly expressed differences with sections of the party leadership, while repeatedly asserting that he had no intention of leaving the party.

His decision to align with the Ritabrata Banerjee camp gives the rebels their highest-profile political face so far and is likely to strengthen their claim that discontent within the TMC extends beyond a handful of dissident legislators.

The Ritabrata Banerjee camp has, over the past few months, steadily challenged Mamata Banerjee’s leadership, claiming to represent the “real” Trinamool Congress. The rebels have announced a parallel organisational structure and claimed control of the

party headquarters, claims that have been rejected by the Mamata Banerjee faction.

Speculation over Mitra’s move had intensified on Tuesday night after he visited the Entally residence of rebel MLA Sandipan Saha.

Although Saha was away at the time, Mitra held a lengthy discussion with the legislator’s father and former MLA Swarnakamal Saha. After returning home, Sandipan Saha spoke to Mitra over the phone, during which the senior legislator expressed his desire to meet him. Assembly sources had indicated that the two would meet on Wednesday, fuelling speculation over Mitra’s political future.

The political development came a day after the Enforcement Directorate summoned Mitra’s wife and two sons in connection with the alleged municipal recruitment scam.

While neither Mitra nor the rebel camp linked the summons to Wednesday’s developments, the timing added another layer to the political speculation surrounding his move.

The latest crossover comes as the power struggle within the TMC intensifies, with both camps staking claim to the party’s political legacy, organisation and support base.

Meanwhile, Mamata has reiterated her support for her nephew Abhishek Banerjee amid the growing rebellion within the Trinamool Congress, Banerjee also on Wednesday apologised to the people “on behalf of the traitors” and asserted that neither she nor her family had ever compromised for political survival.

In one of her strongest public defences of Abhishek Banerjee since the split in the party, Mamata said he had been made an “excuse” to target the TMC despite repeated summons issued to him and his family members. She praised him for continuing the political battle instead of seeking “relief” through compromise.

“Abhishek Banerjee has been turned into an excuse. His family members were summoned. Had he wanted, he could have got relief. But he did not run away from the battlefield.

The way he has continued to fight,

all his flaws have been forgiven,” the former chief minister said while addressing party workers during a Facebook Live.

Her remarks come as several senior leaders who have left the Mamata Banerjee camp in recent weeks have accused Abhishek Banerjee of running the party in an authoritarian manner and fostering a culture of intimidation.

Targeting the defectors, Mamata Banerjee said, “I apologise before the people on behalf of the traitors. I have not sold my ‘baibek’ (conscience) for political survival.”

She alleged that she and her family had faced sustained political persecution because they had refused to compromise.

“Had I compromised, we would not have faced so much torture. Those who have compromised have many bags and luggage of their own,” she said, in an apparent swipe at leaders who have switched allegiance.

Claiming that the BJP was using investigative agencies and the police to engineer defections, Mamata Banerjee alleged that several leaders had crossed over out of fear.

“We still have 18 MPs in the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha. Those Parliamentarians who have joined the ‘setting company’ have done so because they are afraid of the police,” she claimed. In an apparent reference to the BJP, she said leaders leaving the TMC were entering the saffron party’s “washing machine” as well as the BJP-backed rebel camp.

Referring to senior MLA Madan Mitra’s decision to join the rebel camp earlier in the day, she said, “The person (Madan Mitra) who left today had yesterday told us that he and his family had received summons. We understood then that he might switch camps. Those who have a setting are joining the BJP’s washing machine.”

Without naming other leaders, Mamata Banerjee alleged that those facing investigations were choosing political convenience over conviction.

Asserting that the defections would not weaken her resolve, she said she was prepared to rebuild the Trinamool Congress from scratch if necessary.

INTERNATIONAL

Over 500 feared dead in two suspected shipwrecks off Myanmar: UN



GENEVA

The United Nations warned Thursday that more than 500 people were feared dead following reports of two large shipwrecks off Myanmar since late June.

The UN’s International Organization for Migration and its refugee agency UNHCR voiced alarm in a joint statement at reports “that two boats carrying more than 500 people may have capsized off the coast of Myanmar in recent days”.

Preliminary information indicated that the two vessels in question departed from war-torn Myanmar’s Rakhine State in late

June, with mainly members of the country’s mostly Muslim Rohingya minority onboard, the statement said. Some had reportedly travelled from the huge camps in Bangladesh’s Cox’s Bazar, where more than a million Rohingya refugees who have fled from Rakhine live in squalid conditions. The statement said that one boat, believed to have been carrying around 250 people, lost contact shortly after departure.

A second boat, reportedly carrying some 280 people, is meanwhile believed to have sunk off Myanmar’s Ayeyarwady coast on July 8. “While the incidents and

casualty figures have yet to be officially confirmed, UNHCR and IOM are gravely concerned by the potentially devastating loss of life,” the statement said. The UN agencies highlighted that the journeys “took place outside the regular sailing season, when maritime conditions are typically more hazardous”. “Recent torrential rain and flooding across the region have further increased the risks associated with such sea movements.”

The statement cautioned that “if verified, this tragedy would add to the nearly 300 people reported to be missing or to have lost their lives in the Andaman Sea and Bay

of Bengal so far this year, including Rohingya refugees and Bangladeshi nationals”.

The Rohingya undertake perilous sea journeys every year in search of better living conditions, travelling aboard rickety boats often operated by trafficking networks. According to UNHCR, nearly 900 Rohingya refugees were reported missing or dead at sea in the northern Indian Ocean last year alone – out of more than 6,500 who had attempted such perilous sea crossings. Thursday’s statement stressed that the latest reported tragedies “underscore the devastating impact of protracted conflict and displacement, as well as the continued lack of sustainable solutions for Rohingya communities”. “Escalating conflict and a worsening humanitarian situation in Myanmar, along with limited assistance and opportunities in refugee camps in Bangladesh, contribute to increasing numbers of people attempting perilous sea journeys in search of safety and protection,” they pointed out. “The reported incidents also highlight the persistent risks posed by smuggling and trafficking networks, which continue to exploit the desperation of people seeking safety,” they added.

IOM and UNHCR called for “enhanced search and rescue efforts, access to asylum and protection, and actions against smuggling and trafficking networks”.

The agencies hailed Bangladesh for its “remarkable generosity in hosting Rohingya refugees for many years”, but stressed the need for “sustained international support” for the refugees and host communities, as well as “greater efforts to address the underlying drivers of forced displacement”.

British leader Starmer faces his last question session in Parliament before leaving office next week



LONDON

British Prime Minister Keir Starmer will answer questions from lawmakers in the House of Commons for the last time Wednesday before he leaves office next week.

At noon, Starmer will bid farewell to the boisterous weekly Prime Minister’s Questions sessions where he has traded barbs with opposition politicians and defended his government’s record. Then, on Monday, he will step down after just two years in office, handing over power to a new Labour Party leader, Andy Burnham.

Britain’s parliamentary democracy allows governing parties to change leaders, and thus prime ministers, without the need for a general election. The

next national election does not have to be held until 2029.

Starmer was elected in a landslide in July 2024, but is quitting after two years in office marred by missteps and judgment errors that eroded his standing with his party and the public.

He struggled to deliver promised economic growth, repair tattered public services and ease the cost of living. And he was hamstrung by repeated missteps, including his decision to appoint Peter Mandelson, a scandal-tarnished friend of Jeffrey Epstein, as U.K. ambassador to the United States.

After Labour was hammered in May’s local elections, he gave in to mounting pressure from the party and announced he would step down. Burnham, the

former mayor of Greater Manchester, is the only candidate in the contest to replace him and will be announced as the new Labour leader on Friday.

On Monday, Starmer will go to Buckingham Palace and announce his resignation as prime minister to King Charles III, who will then ask Burnham to take over.

At Prime Minister’s Questions, Starmer will likely tout his government’s domestic policy achievements, including stronger protections for renters, a higher minimum wage and a law designed to stop official cover-ups after tragedies. He’ll also likely touch on his role on the world stage supporting Ukraine in its war against Russia and restoring relations between Britain and its European Union neighbors after Brexit.

On Tuesday, he attended Bastille Day celebrations in Paris with French President Emmanuel Macron, who awarded him the Legion of Honor in recognition of his work with France on European security.

Back in London, Starmer held a reception in the garden of the prime minister’s 10 Downing St. residence to thank people who had campaigned for accountability from the authorities after losing loved ones to violence.

“I leave on Monday with good grace,” he told them. “I’m very pleased I’ve had the privilege of being prime minister. I’m pleased to have delivered on the promises that are made to many people in this garden. And I’ll make this last promise, which is I will stand with you and walk with you, as long as I’ve got breath in my body.”

Global Peace Index 2026: Rising Conflicts, AI Warfare and the Shrinking Space for Peace

The world is becoming a less peaceful place. That is the stark conclusion of the Global Peace Index (GPI) 2026, which paints a troubling picture of a planet increasingly defined by armed conflict, geopolitical rivalry, mass displacement, and rapidly evolving military technologies. The latest report suggests that peace is no longer merely under strain—it is steadily retreating across large parts of the globe.

Published annually by the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP), the Global Peace Index has become one of the most widely cited assessments of global stability and security. The 2026 edition marks the twentieth year of the index and arrives at a moment when wars, civil conflicts, and international tensions are reshaping political and economic realities across continents.

The findings reveal not only a decline in peacefulness but also a widening gap between relatively stable nations and those trapped in cycles of violence. The report highlights how traditional conflicts, regional rivalries, illicit economies, and emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence are combining to create a more volatile international environment.

Measuring Peace in an Uncertain World

The Global Peace Index evaluates 163 independent states and territories, covering nearly 99.7 percent of the world's population. Rather than defining peace simply as the absence of war, the index views it as a condition characterised by social safety, low levels of internal and external conflict, and restrained militarisation.

Countries are assessed through 23 qualitative and quantitative indicators, grouped into three broad categories:

1. Societal Safety and Security
2. Ongoing Domestic and International Conflict
3. Militarisation

The indicators include homicide rates, terrorism, political instability, violent crime, demonstrations, refugee flows, military expenditure, arms imports and exports, conflict deaths, and relations with neighbouring states.

A lower score indicates a more peaceful country, while a higher score reflects greater levels of conflict, instability, and militarisation.

Iceland Remains the World's Most Peaceful Nation

For the nineteenth consecutive year, Iceland has retained its position as the world's most peaceful country with a score of 1.161.

It is followed by:

1. Iceland – 1.161
2. New Zealand – 1.343
3. Switzerland – 1.363
4. Austria
5. Singapore

These countries continue to benefit from strong institutions, low crime rates, political stability, and limited involvement in external conflicts.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, the least peaceful countries are:

- Russia (163rd)
- Sudan (162nd)
- Democratic Republic of the Congo (161st)
- Ukraine
- Israel

The rankings reflect the devastating consequences of ongoing wars, political instability, humanitarian crises, and large-scale militarisation.

India Slips Further in the Rankings

India's position in the 2026 index reflects the broader deterioration in peace across South Asia. India is ranked 127th out of 163 countries, recording a score of 2.409. The country fell three places compared to the previous year and registered a deterioration of approximately 2.9 percent in its overall score.

Within South Asia, India ranks only above Pakistan and Afghanistan, placing it fifth among the region's seven countries.

The report attributes India's decline primarily to factors linked to conflict and security concerns. These include:

- Internal conflict intensity
- Political instability and domestic unrest
- Tensions with neighbouring countries
- Military confrontations and border disputes
- The impact of the India-Pakistan military exchange in May 2025

While the report does not state that each of these indicators worsened individually, it identifies them as the principal contributors to India's overall decline in peacefulness.

The findings underline how regional security dynamics continue to shape national peace outcomes, even for countries with growing economic and geopolitical influence.

South Asia: One of the World's Least Peaceful Regions

The report identifies South Asia as the second least peaceful region globally, experiencing the largest regional deterioration during the past year.

The region's average peacefulness score worsened by 2.3 percent, with the Ongoing Conflict domain deteriorating by 7.1 percent.

Persistent tensions between India and Pakistan, instability in Afghanistan, political uncertainty in Bangladesh, and ongoing security challenges across the region have contributed to this decline.

The findings reinforce the reality that South Asia remains one of the most conflict-prone regions in the world despite its rapid economic growth and demographic advantages.

A World Experiencing Continuous Decline

Perhaps the most alarming finding of the report is the persistence of global deterioration.

Global peacefulness declined by 0.7 percent in 2025, marking:

- The 12th consecutive annual deterioration
- The 15th decline in the past 18 years

Of the 163 countries assessed:

- 99 countries became less peaceful
- 62 countries improved
- 2 countries remained unchanged

Since the index was first



launched in 2008, a total of 119 countries have experienced declines in peacefulness.

This trend suggests that instability is no longer confined to traditional conflict zones. Instead, it has become a widespread global phenomenon affecting developed and developing nations alike.

Conflict Is Driving the Decline

The report identifies armed conflict as the primary factor behind the worsening global peace landscape.

Since 2008:

- The Ongoing Conflict domain has deteriorated by 18.5 percent
- Societal Safety and Security has worsened by 3.2 percent

Although militarisation has shown gradual improvement over the long term, that trend has reversed sharply since 2022.

Many countries, particularly in Europe, are dramatically increasing defence budgets in response to geopolitical uncertainty, the Russia-Ukraine war, and broader security concerns.

Military spending, weapons procurement, and force modernisation programmes have accelerated across multiple regions.

Peace Inequality Is Growing

One of the report's most striking observations is the emergence of what it describes as "peace inequality."

Since 2008:

- The 25 least peaceful countries have deteriorated by 18.9 percent
- The 25 most peaceful countries have deteriorated by only 0.3 percent

In other words, the world's most stable nations have largely preserved their peace, while fragile states have become significantly more violent and unstable.

This widening divide has profound implications for global development, migration, and security.

The Highest Number of Conflicts Since World War II

The report records 61 active state-based conflicts in 2024, the highest number since the end of the Second World War.

Internationalised civil wars—conflicts involving external powers supporting domestic actors—have increased by more than 175 percent since 2010.

The number of countries involved in external conflicts has also risen dramatically:

- 59 countries in 2008
- 103 countries in 2026

The findings indicate that modern conflicts increasingly transcend national borders, drawing in regional and global actors.

Wars that begin as local disputes often evolve into complex geopolitical struggles involving multiple states and non-state groups.

Human Costs Continue to Rise

The humanitarian consequences of violence remain staggering.

The report estimates that more than 181,000 people died from internal conflicts during 2025, driven largely by wars in:

- Sudan
- Ukraine
- Democratic Republic of the Congo
- Myanmar
- Other conflict zones

Twenty countries recorded more than 1,000 conflict-related deaths during the year.

Forced displacement has also reached historic levels.

Globally, there were approximately 117 million refugees and internally displaced persons in 2025, meaning roughly one in every 67 people on Earth had been forced from their homes.

The scale of displacement highlights how conflict affects far more people than those directly involved in fighting.

The Economic Cost of Violence

Violence is not only a humanitarian tragedy—it is also an enormous economic burden.

The Institute for Economics and Peace estimates that the global economic impact of violence reached US\$21.8 trillion in 2025.

This represents:

- 10.5 percent of global GDP
- Approximately US\$2,657 per person
- A 3.2 percent increase over the previous year

The costs include:

- Military expenditure
- Internal security spending
- Property destruction
- Policing and judicial systems
- Medical treatment
- Lost productivity
- Reduced investment
- Psychological trauma

Military spending alone accounted for US\$9.5 trillion, representing 43 percent of the total economic impact.

When internal security expenditures are included, the share rises to 73 percent.

By comparison, spending on peacebuilding and peacekeeping amounted to just US\$49.2 billion, or roughly 0.5 percent of global military expenditure.

The imbalance underscores how governments continue to invest far more heavily in preparing for conflict than preventing it.

How Modern Conflicts Spread

The report identifies nine pathways through which violence spreads across borders.

These mechanisms fall into three broad categories:

- Material Flows
 - Refugees
 - Weapons
 - Illicit financial networks
- Relational Connections
 - Ethnic ties across borders
 - External state sponsorship
 - Ideological and extremist networks
- Structural Conditions
 - Weak governance
 - Historical conflicts
 - Fragile institutions

The report argues that conflict contagion is not inevitable. Rather, it depends on whether neighbouring countries possess the resilience and institutional capacity to absorb external shocks.

The Horn of Africa provides a vivid example, where conflicts in Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea, and South Sudan have become interconnected through refugee flows, smuggling networks, and geopolitical competition.

The Rise of AI-Powered Warfare

One of the most important sections of the report focuses on the growing role of artificial intelligence in warfare.

AI is transforming military operations by accelerating:

- Surveillance
- Intelligence gathering
- Target identification
- Logistics
- Drone operations
- Battlefield decision-making

The scale of this transformation is extraordinary.

Between 2018 and 2025:

- Drone strike incidents increased 115-fold
- 565 armed groups conducted at least one drone attack

AI-assisted military systems have dramatically shortened the time required to identify and engage targets.

Where missile targeting in the 1990s often required many hours or even a full day, some modern autonomous systems can complete the process in mere seconds.

This shift effectively introduces warfare conducted at machine speed.

The Risks of Automated Conflict

The report warns that the greatest danger lies in the erosion of meaningful human control over lethal decisions.

Potential risks include:

- Civilian casualties caused by faulty algorithms
- Biased or inaccurate data
- Automated escalation during crises
- AI-enabled cyber warfare
- Large-scale disinformation campaigns
- Proliferation of autonomous weapons

among non-state actors

Particularly concerning are scenarios involving nuclear powers.

In simulations cited by the report, advanced AI models frequently displayed escalation-oriented behaviour:

- 95 percent included nuclear signalling
- 76 percent involved strategic nuclear threats

These findings highlight the possibility that AI systems could intensify rather than de-escalate future crises if not properly governed.

Can AI Become a Tool for Peace?

Despite the risks, the report does not portray AI solely as a threat.

Artificial intelligence also offers significant opportunities for peacebuilding and humanitarian work.

Potential applications include:

- Conflict prediction and early warning systems
- Mediation and translation
- Monitoring ceasefires
- Detecting atrocities through satellite imagery
- Humanitarian aid coordination
- Demining operations
- Post-conflict reconstruction

One notable example cited in the report involves Yale University's Humanitarian Research Lab, which used satellite imagery and advanced analytical tools to identify approximately 19,500 Ukrainian children transferred to facilities in Russia and Belarus.

The case demonstrates how AI can enhance accountability and support humanitarian protection.

A World at a Crossroads

The Global Peace Index 2026 presents a sobering assessment of the contemporary world. Wars are multiplying, geopolitical rivalries are intensifying, military spending is soaring, and technological advances are making conflict faster and potentially more destructive.

At the same time, investment in peacebuilding remains comparatively negligible.

The report's central message is clear: peace cannot be taken for granted. Without stronger institutions, greater international cooperation, responsible governance of emerging technologies, and sustained investment in conflict prevention, the trends documented in the 2026 index are likely to deepen.

As the world enters an era increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence, strategic competition, and interconnected crises, the challenge is no longer simply ending wars. It is ensuring that humanity retains the capacity to choose peace over conflict in an age when technology can make violence more efficient than ever before.

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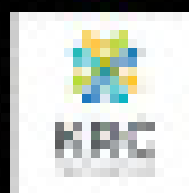


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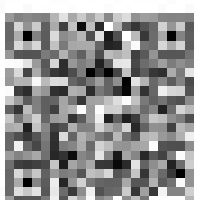


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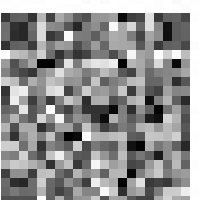


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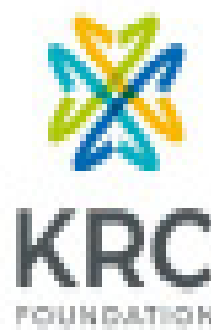
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