



## 400 appointment letters handed over to NOKs of terror victims till date: LG Sinha

>> Vows to reopen pending cases for justice >> Reaffirms support to all terror victims' families >> Hands over 49 appointment letters to sufferers' families, employees' kin



REHAN QAYOOM MIR

Srinagar, Mar 15: Asserting that over 400 appointment letters have been handed over to Next of Kin (NOKs) of

terror victims till date, Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha on Sunday said that pending cases will be reopened to hold perpetrators accountable. While handing over the

### Baramulla's Gulzar: LG Sinha honored my brother's memory

'For years, our pain was invisible'

REHAN QAYOOM MIR

Srinagar, Mar 15: For Gulzar Ahmad, nothing has been the same since 1992. That year, terrorism took his beloved brother, leaving Gulzar and his family to navigate a life filled with fear, loss and

### Never thought anyone would recognize us, says elderly Kupwara woman

>> 'LG Sahab proved justice can arrive'

REHAN QAYOOM MIR

Srinagar, Mar 15: Decades of grief, uncertainty and waiting came to an emotional end today for Raja Begum, an elderly woman from North Kashmir's Kupwara District, whose fam-



ily members were killed in terrorist

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### Anantnag family thanks LG Sinha

>> 'Door to hope opened for us after decades'

REHAN QAYOOM MIR

Srinagar, Mar 15: After years of uncertainty and loss, Ashiq Hussain Naik and his family of Anantnag finally saw a ray of hope today



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Dal Lake shrouded in moody clouds as upper areas of Jammu and Kashmir receive fresh snowfall, while rains lashed plains on Sunday

Pic: Jahangir Shah (KNO/KJ)

## Centre stands with J&K: Athawale on post-Art 370 progress

>> Hails increased investment, improved infrastructure, govt initiatives in UT

KNO DESK

Jammu, Mar 15: Asserting that Jammu and Kashmir has seen significant progress since the abrogation of Article 370, Union Minister Ramdas Athawale on Sunday said that enhanced infrastructure has improved mobility and boosted economic activities in the region.

Addressing a news conference here, Athawale, according to the news agency-Kashmir News Observer (KNO) said, "Centre stands



with J&K that has seen significant progress since the abrogation of Article 370 in 2019." He stated that enhanced infrastructure

has improved mobility and boosted economic activities in the region. "Rail connectivity, with better facilities has also expanded, including the introduction of the Vande Bharat Express. The Ministry of Railways continues to work actively on strengthening the railway network," he added.

Athawale said that development in Jammu and Kashmir has accelerated after the abrogation of Article 370. "Increased

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# Tulip Festival 2026

## Tulip Garden, Srinagar

by

### Jenab Omar Abdullah

Hon'ble Chief Minister, J&K

Department of Floriculture,  
Gardens and Parks, J&K

March 16, 2026

DIPK-11919/25 DATED: 15-03-2026

## CS takes stock of key land records digitization initiatives

'We have to take every step based on rules. Let us put in concerted efforts to weed out illegal mutations and purify revenue records'

KT NEWS DESK

JAMMU, MARCH 15: Chief Secretary, Atal Dulloo on Sunday chaired a comprehensive review meeting on the Digital India Land Records Modernisation Programme (DILRMP), Survey of Villages and Mapping with Improved Technology in Village Areas (SVAMITVA), Unique Land Parcel Identification Number (ULPIN) and National Geospatial Knowledge-based Land Survey of Urban Habitations (NAKSHA) here.

The meeting, as per an official statement, was attended by Additional Chief Secretary, Shaleen Kabra; Secretary Revenue Department, Kumar Rajeev Ranjan; Divisional Commissioners of Jammu and Kashmir divisions; and Deputy Commissioners who joined through video conferencing from their respective District Headquarters, and other concerned officers.

Speaking on the occasion, the Chief Secretary underscored the transformative potential of these land digitisation initiatives, drawing a parallel with some of India's most successful digital revolutions. "These initiatives are going to revolutionise governance just like the success of UPI and other ambitious programmes like Aarogya, we are witnessing a technological revolution and Jammu and Kashmir must be an active and leading part of it," he observed.

Emphasising the direct public benefit of the ongoing digitisation drive, he noted that a great number of public grievances pertain to land-related issues and these will be resolved as the digitisation process reaches completion. "This is a great service to the masses. It will bring immense convenience to the public and usher in new arenas for development and governance," the Chief Secretary said.

Speaking on the occasion the



**"This is a great service to the masses. It will bring immense convenience to the public and usher in new arenas for development and governance," CS Atal Dulloo**

Additional Chief Secretary (Financial Commissioner, Revenue) Shaleen Kabra, highlighted the transformative potential of land records digitisation, describing it as a major step towards transparent, efficient and citizen-centric governance. He emphasized that the initiative will significantly improve accessibility, accuracy and reliability of land records, thereby reducing disputes and enhancing public trust in the revenue administration.

Stressing the importance of maintaining high standards, he underscored the need for rigorous quality checks at every stage of the process to ensure that the

digitised records remain error-free and authentic. He called upon the concerned revenue officers down the line to exercise due diligence and accountability so that the digitisation exercise results in a robust, reliable and future-ready land records management system.

Presenting the progress made under DILRMP, the Administrative Secretary, Revenue, Kumar Rajeev Ranjan apprised the meeting that 98 percent of Khasras across the Union Territory have been digitised and approved, with 97 percent of villages completing the first-level freeing process.

Additionally he gave out that in

over 5,401 grievance camps have been organised at the village level for public reading of Jamabandis, during which over 52,000 non-quasi judicial and more than 5,700 quasi judicial grievances have been recorded and are being addressed. Final freeing of the updated Jamabandis 2026 has been targeted for completion by 31st March this year.

Regarding ULPIN or Bhu-Aadhar, the meeting was apprised that over 20.56 lakh Unique Land Parcel Identification Numbers have been generated for 3,320 villages so far. Under the digitisation of cadastral maps, 6,518 out of 6,857 villages, accounting for 95.2 percent, have been geo-referenced.

Moreover it was divulged 7.28 crore revenue documents including Jamabandis, Mutations and Girdawari records have been scanned and uploaded on the Land Records Information System (LRIS). The NAKSHA programme for creation of land records in urban habitations is also progressing, with aerial survey, ORI generation and ground truthing completed for Bishnah.

The Chief Secretary

acknowledged the significant ground covered but maintained that the remaining targets are well within reach. "We have covered a lot of ground and progressed greatly. We have just so much more to finish, but the targets are achievable," he said, adding that many states are already leading in these endeavours and J&K must keep pace.

He gave several specific directions for resolution of deadlocks and tough situations being encountered during the digitisation process. He called for strict adherence to rules at every step, cautioning officers to avoid complications and focus on weeding out illegal mutations. "We have to take every step based on rules. Let us put in concerted efforts to weed out illegal mutations and purify revenue records," he directed.

The Chief Secretary asked the Divisional Commissioners to personally monitor progress under each component and actively guide the Deputy Commissioners for effective on-ground implementation. Specific timeline-based targets were assigned to all districts for completion of pending milestones.

## Food Safety Department conducts market inspection in Shopian



KT NEWS DESK

SHOPIAN, MARCH 15: In anticipation of the auspicious festival of Eid-ul-Fitr, the Food Safety Department Shopian carried out a comprehensive market inspection across the localities of Killora, Krawora, and Traperpora within the jurisdiction of Shopian District Sunday.

The inspection drive, as per an official statement, was undertaken with the primary objective of ensuring strict adherence to food safety standards and safeguarding public health during the heightened commercial activity associated with the upcoming festive celebrations.

During the inspection, special focus was laid on establishments dealing with commonly consumed food items, including bread makers,

mutton shops, bakery units, and vegetable vendors.

The inspection team conducted a thorough scrutiny of food handling practices, storage conditions, and the quality of food items being offered for sale.

During the course of the inspection, certain expired snack items were found in the possession of some Food Business Operators (FBOs).

In order to prevent any potential risk to consumer health, the expired food articles were immediately seized and destroyed on the spot.

Furthermore, three Food Business Operators were found to be in violation of the stipulated food safety regulations. Consequently, they were penalized under Section 69 of the Food Safety and Standards Act (FSS Act).

## Dr Farooq, Omar Abdullah condole demise of Peerzada Qutub Ud Din Maqdoomi

KT NEWS DESK

Srinagar, 15 Mar: The Jammu and Kashmir National Conference President Dr Farooq Abdullah and Vice President & CM Omar Abdullah have expressed deep sorrow over the demise of Pirzada Qutub Ud Din Maqdoomi, Masabdar of the revered Ziyarat Mehboob-ul-Aalam Sheikh Hamza Maqdoomi (RA).

In their condolence message, the duo, as per a party statement issued on Sunday, described the deceased as a respected religious figure who devoted his life to the service of the revered shrine and the

spiritual guidance of devotees.

They extended their heartfelt sympathies to the bereaved family, particularly to his son Pirzada Shabbir Ahmad Maqdoomi, and prayed for strength and patience for the family to bear the irreparable loss.

The duo also prayed for eternal peace to the departed soul and for solace to the bereaved family in this difficult time.

Among others Party General Secretary Ali Muhammad Sagar, and Chief Spokesperson Tanvir Sadiq have also extended profound sympathies and condolences to the bereaved household.

## QRT Kupwara seizes 144 MTs of Nallah muck

KT NEWS DESK

KUPWARA, MARCH 15: Acting on specific information, a Quick Response Team (QRT) headed by the District Mineral Officer Kupwara, Mumtaz Ahmad Shah conducted a raid Sunday at Girhetti and seized 144 metric tons of Nallah muck that had been illegally stocked near a marriage hall in Goose area.

The QRT, as per an official

statement, comprised Naib Tehsildar Headquarter Kupwara, a police party from Bazar Police, and members of the Mining Squad. During the operation, the team also identified individuals allegedly involved in illegal mining activities at the site. The seized material was subsequently handed over to the Bazar Police for further legal action.

It is pertinent to mention that the Quick Response Team,

the first of its kind in the Kashmir province, was earlier constituted by the Deputy Commissioner Kupwara, Shrikant Suse. The initiative aims to strengthen enforcement against illegal mining in the district.

The activities of the QRT have been widely appreciated across the district for their proactive role in curbing the menace of illegal mining and protecting natural resources.

## Gender Equality: KU holds 2-day national workshop on intergenerational action



KT NEWS DESK

Srinagar Mar 15: The Centre for Women's Studies and Research (CWSR), University of Kashmir (KU), organised a two-day national workshop on "Give to Gain: Intergenerational Action for Gender Equality" at the Main Campus to deliberate on collaborative approaches for advancing gender equality through shared learning and engagement across generations.

The workshop, as per KU statement issued on Sunday, aimed to bring together academicians,

researchers and students to reflect on the importance of intergenerational dialogue, knowledge sharing and collective action in addressing contemporary gender challenges.

Speaking at the inaugural session, Vice-Chancellor KU, Prof. Nilofar Khan, highlighted the importance of inclusive dialogue in strengthening gender justice initiatives.

"Gender equality requires sustained engagement across generations, where experience, new ideas and collective commitment come together to

build more inclusive and equitable social spaces," she said, adding that universities must serve as platforms for critical discussion and collaborative action on issues of gender and social justice.

Dean, College Development Council KU, Prof. Aneesa Shafi, said that it is important to utilise the potential of each generation and create meaningful networks that can translate ideas into actionable solutions for achieving gender equality.

In her keynote address, Prof. Pamela Singla, Department of Social Work, University of Delhi, spoke about the role of intergenerational engagement in strengthening feminist scholarship and practice, emphasizing the need for collaborative frameworks that address evolving gender concerns in society.

## DC Poonch reviews progress of work on Eklavya Model Residential School



KT NEWS DESK

POONCH, MARCH 15: Deputy Commissioner Poonch, Ashok Kumar Sharma, chaired a meeting to review the progress of work on Eklavya Model Residential School (EMRS) being constructed at an estimated cost of Rs 1594.99 lakh at Behra Mendhar. The meeting, as per an official statement, was attended by SDM Mendhar, Executive Engineer PWD Mendhar, Executive Engineer PWD Poonch, Chief Planning Officer, Principal EMRS Behra Mendhar, AEE PWD Mendhar and the concerned Junior Engineer (JE).

During the meeting, the progress of various components of the project was reviewed in detail. It was informed that out of 15 components of the building project, 8 components have been completed and handed over, while work on the remaining 7 components is in

progress. The Deputy Commissioner directed the PWD authorities to expedite the pace of work and ensure completion of the remaining components at the earliest. He further instructed the Principal EMRS and Executive Engineer PWD to submit a detailed estimate of the remaining works of the project.

The DC also emphasized the need to include infrastructure development works such as construction of the compound wall, approach road, internal paths, finishing of the remaining building components and other allied works to ensure the timely completion of the prestigious educational project. The Deputy Commissioner stressed that the project holds significant importance for providing quality residential education facilities to tribal students of the region. He directed all concerned departments to work in coordination for its early completion.

## Social Forestry Department Budgam celebrates Chinar Day

KT NEWS DESK

BUDGAM, MARCH 15: Social Forestry Department Budgam Sunday celebrated Chinar Day with great enthusiasm across the district by organizing plantation drives and awareness activities to mark the occasion. The day, as per an official statement, was observed with the aim of promoting environmental awareness and encouraging the conservation of the iconic Chinar tree, which holds great ecological and cultural significance in Kashmir.

As part of the celebrations, saplings of the majestic Chinar tree were planted at prominent locations, including SIDCO Budgam and NIFT Budgam, in order to enhance green cover and promote environmental sustainability in the district.

The plantation drive was carried out in a coordinated manner with the active involvement of officials and employees of the Social Forestry Department along with representatives from various institutions and stakeholders.

The events were headed by the Range Forest Officer, Social Forestry Range Budgam, who highlighted the importance of preserving the Chinar tree and urged participants to contribute actively towards environmental protection and afforestation initiatives. He emphasized that the Chinar tree is not only a symbol of Kashmir's natural heritage but also plays an important role in maintaining ecological balance.

## LG Sinha hands over job letter to wife of constable



KT NEWS DESK

Srinagar, Mar 15: Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha on Sunday handed over the appointment letter, on compassionate ground, to Shabeena Bashir, wife of Constable (Photographer) Javid Mansoor Rather, of Crime Branch J&K Police, who was martyred in Nowgam's accidental blast.

The Lieutenant Governor assured all possible assistance and support from the Administration to the bereaved family.

## MLAs, CM's Advisor, MEAK call on LG Sinha



KT NEWS DESK

Srinagar, Mar 15: Tanvir Sadiq, Member of Legislative Assembly from Zadibal called on Lieutenant Governor Shri Manoj Sinha on Sunday. He was accompanied by Ali Mohammad Dar, Member of Legislative Assembly, Chadoora; Javaid Riyaz Bedar, Member of Legislative Assembly, Pattan and Hilal Akbar Lone, Member of Legislative Assembly, Sonawari.

Nasir Aslam Wani, Advisor to the Chief Minister, UT of Jammu Kashmir also called on Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha on Sunday. A delegation of All Minority Employees Association Kashmir (MEAK) led by its President Shri Sanjay Koul also called on Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha.

## Snowfall in J&K upper reaches, rains lash plains

■ Key roads closed ■ Erratic weather till Mar-20 ■ Travel advisory issued

SAJID RAINA

Srinagar, Mar 15: Upper reaches of Jammu and Kashmir received a fresh snowfall, while rains lashed the plains on Sunday leading to the closure of some key roads, officials said.

According to the details available, snowfall was recorded in areas including Peer Ki Gali, Sinthan Top, Gulmarg, Doodhpathri, Gurez Valley, Sadhna Top, and along the Sonamarg-Zojila axis.

"Due to slippery roads, the Gurez-Bandipora road and the Mughal Road, which connects the Kashmir Valley with the Pir Panjal region, have been closed to vehicular traffic," an official said.

Meanwhile, vehicular movement on the Srinagar-Kargil highway was suspended again on Sunday after fresh snowfall at Zojila Pass rendered the road unsafe for travel, he added.

Authorities had earlier allowed limited traffic movement from Sonamarg towards Kargil after the highway was temporarily reopened following a 6-day closure caused by heavy snowfall and accumulation of snow along the Zojila stretch.

Officials said snow clearance operations were carried out by the Border Roads Organisation after improvement in weather conditions to restore connectivity on the strategic route.

Following the clearance, traffic authorities permitted nearly 300 vehicles, including passenger vehicles and carriers transporting vegetables and other essential supplies, to move from Sonamarg towards Kargil on Sunday morning, they said.

However, fresh snowfall at the high-altitude pass soon made road conditions unsafe, forcing authorities to suspend



Pic: Jahangir Shah (KNO/KT)

vehicular movement again as a precautionary measure.

Officials said further decisions regarding the resumption of traffic would be taken after assessing the weather conditions and road safety along the Zojila axis.

Several places in the Kashmir division and a few areas in the Jammu division received rainfall during the day, a MeT official said.

Erratic weather conditions are expected to continue across the Union Territory until March 20, he added.

The MeT has forecast intermittent light to moderate rain and snowfall in higher reaches at many places until the forenoon of March 16. On March 17, the weather is likely to remain partly cloudy, with brief spells of light rain or snowfall at isolated higher-altitude locations.

From March 18 to 20, generally cloudy conditions are expected, with intermittent light to moderate rain

or snowfall at many places, mainly during night and morning hours. The department has predicted generally dry weather from March 21 to 23, while skies are expected to remain generally cloudy with light rain or snowfall in higher reaches at scattered locations on March 24 and 25.

The MeT has advised travellers and transporters, particularly those moving through higher reaches and key mountain passes, to plan their journeys accordingly.

It also warned of thunderstorms and gusty winds reaching speeds of 40-50 kmph at a few places during March 15-16 and again between March 18 and 20.

Farmers have been advised to suspend farm operations from March 15 to 20 due to expected adverse weather conditions.

Officials said residents and commuters should exercise caution, particularly in high-altitude areas, and avoid unnecessary travel on slippery or snow-bound roads—(KNO)

## Fresh snowfall cheers Gulmarg visitors

WARIS FAYAZ

Srinagar, Mar 15: Fresh snowfall was witnessed in the famous ski resort of Gulmarg on Sunday, bringing cheer to tourists and the concerned stakeholders.

Visitors said the fresh snowfall added a charm to hill station and made their trip memorable. Several tourists expressed happiness over witnessing snowfall during their visit.

"It is a very nice experience. We thank God that we got a chance to witness snowfall again. It made

our trip memorable," said a group of tourists visiting the resort.

Hoteliers, guides and other tourism stakeholders also welcomed the snowfall. They said that the fresh snowfall could help them to attract more visitors to the destination in the coming days.

Officials from the India Meteorological Department said that it was expecting a change in weather pattern following a series of western disturbances that are affecting the region.

Continued on [www.kashmirthunder.in](http://www.kashmirthunder.in)

## Four major roads closed

UMAISAR GULL GANIE

Srinagar, Mar 16: Four major roads connecting different parts of Jammu and Kashmir were closed on Sunday following a fresh snowfall in the higher reaches, officials said. Officials said that vehicular movement was suspended on the Mughal Road following the fresh snowfall at Pir Ki Gali and Dubijan in the Pir Panjal range.

Officials also said that the traffic movement was also halted on the Bandipora-Gurez Road following the fresh snowfall at Razzdan Pass.

The Srinagar-Sonamarg-Gumari (SSG) road also remained closed due to fresh snowfall along the Zoji La axis. It also said that the fresh snowfall also led to temporary closure of Kishtwar-Sinthan-Anantnag road.

Continued on [www.kashmirthunder.in](http://www.kashmirthunder.in)

## Dy CM lays foundation stones for multiple road projects

KT NEWS DESK

Rajouri, Mar 15: Reaffirming commitment towards strengthening road connectivity and seamless accessibility for the people, Deputy Chief Minister Surinder Choudhary on Sunday laid the foundation stones for several road projects in Nowshera Constituency of Rajouri district.

During his day-long visit, the Deputy Chief Minister held an extensive public outreach programmes in the Nowshera area to listen to public grievances and developmental concerns.

He laid the foundation stone for construction and maintenance of the link road from Auto Stand Kheri to Masjid Potha East in Block Seri of Rajouri district under the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY). The project, spanning 4.0 kilometre, has been sanctioned at an estimated cost of 927.62 lakh and is expected to significantly improve the connectivity and facilitate smoother movement for the local population.

On the occasion, the Deputy Chief Minister also laid foundation stones for two additional road projects including "Dwaka to High



School Moh Potha" and "Gania to Patli (Link Road)" aimed at strengthening the rural road infrastructure and enhancing access to essential services in the region.

Following the foundation stone laying ceremonies, the Deputy Chief Minister held public outreach programmes where he interacted with the local residents and listened to their grievances and suggestions regarding development works.

Key issues raised by the public included construction of a road from Mangal Devi to Shamshan Ghat, forest clearance for developmental projects, scarcity of drinking water,

establishment of a library at Panchayat Gagrote, construction of a community hall at Gania, development of a mini sports stadium near Gania School and dilapidated condition of the road from Chowki to Langhar.

Addressing the gathering, the Deputy Chief Minister reiterated the government's commitment towards accelerating development works and ensuring that basic amenities reach every corner of the region. He assured the public that the issues raised during the outreach programmes would be taken up with the concerned departments for prompt redressal.

He also directed the officers to prepare development plans in consultation

with the local population so that projects reflect the genuine needs and priorities of the people.

Later, the Deputy Chief Minister undertook local visits and engagements in Nowshera, interacting with the residents and reviewing developmental requirements of the area.

Among others present on the occasion were ADC Nowshera Pritam Lal Thapa, DFO Nowshera Shweta Deonia, SE PWD (R&B) Devi Dayal, DDE Mohd Nawaz Choudhary, ACD Auqil Naveed, ALC Pradyot Gupta, EXEN PWD (R&B) Sarwar Mehmood, besides other district and sectoral officers and a large number of local residents.

## Dr Farooq, CM Omar extend Shab-e-Qadr, Sheikh-ul-Alam (RA) Urs greetings

KT NEWS DESK

Srinagar, Mar 15: The Jammu and Kashmir National Conference President Dr Farooq Abdullah and Vice President and CM Omar Abdullah have extended warm greetings to the people of Jammu and Kashmir on the auspicious occasions of Shab-e-Qadr and the annual Urs of the revered Patron saint of Kashmir Hazrat AlAMDAR-e-Kashmir, Sheikh-ul-Alam, Sheikh-Nur Ud Din Noorani (RA), affectionately known as Nund Resh (RA).

In his message, Dr Farooq said that Shab-e-Qadr, one of the holiest nights in Islam, symbolizes reflection, compassion, humility and devotion to Almighty Allah. He prayed that the blessed occasion would bring peace, prosperity and harmony to the people of Jammu and Kashmir.

"Shab-e-Qadr is a night of immense spiritual significance, reminding us of the power of prayer, forgiveness and



compassion. On this sacred occasion, I pray for peace, prosperity and unity among the people and for lasting stability in Jammu and Kashmir," he said. Referring to the Urs of Sheikh-ul-Alam (RA), Dr Farooq said that the



teachings and poetry of the great saint continue to guide society towards the values of humility, justice, tolerance and spiritual awakening.

Continued on [www.kashmirthunder.in](http://www.kashmirthunder.in)

## Pakistani infiltrator killed in Uri gunfight

WARIS FAYAZ

Srinagar, Mar 15: A terrorist was killed in an anti-infiltration operation along the Line of Control in Uri sector in North Kashmir's Baramulla district on Sunday.

An official said that the operation was launched during the intervening night of March 14-15, following specific intelligence shared by Jammu and Kashmir Police about a possible infiltration bid in the Buchhar area of Uri.

He said, acting on the intelligence, Army troops and police

laid a joint ambush in the area.

"During the operation, alert troops noticed suspicious movement of a terrorist inside dense vegetation. The ambush party readjusted its position and challenged the terrorist, who opened indiscriminate fire, triggering a brief exchange of gunfire," the official said. "In the encounter, one Pakistani terrorist was killed and security forces recovered warlike stores, including an AK rifle, pistols and a large quantity of ammunition," the official added—(KNO)

EDITORIAL

## Eid Mutton Crisis: Who's To Blame?

As Eid draws near, mutton prices touching Rs 800 per kilogram in Kashmir is outright exploitation, and the public's fury is completely justified. But beneath this anger lies a deeper question: why do the authorities seem helpless to act? The answer reveals a regulatory vacuum that has left consumers completely exposed. The real cause of this crisis is not simply greedy traders. It is a legal gap. In June 2023, the Government of India barred Jammu and Kashmir from controlling mutton prices by revoking the Jammu and Kashmir Mutton (Licensing and Control) Order of 1973. This 50-year-old

rule had empowered the Food and Consumer Affairs Department to fix prices and license traders. It was declared no longer valid after the Food Safety and Standards Act came into force in 2006. The High Court later confirmed that the old order had ceased to exist, leaving the market without any price control mechanism. Since then, consumers have been left at the mercy of supply and demand—a cruel situation in a place where mutton is not a luxury but a cultural necessity. The government's silence on filling this legal gap has created a vacuum where profiteering thrives. As mutton dealers themselves point out,

authorities cannot scrap the regulatory framework and then blame traders when prices shoot up. The absence of any pre-Ramadan or pre-Eid meeting between officials and traders this year, for the first time in decades, shows a complete breakdown of even basic oversight. Adding to this failure is the unresolved problem of livestock transportation. The solution requires urgent action on multiple fronts. First, the government must immediately frame new rules under the existing legal framework to restore price regulation. If the 1973 order is dead, a new order must replace

it. Second, the government must take up the matter with the Punjab authorities to stop the harassment of livestock transporters. Third, even without formal price control, enforcement teams must crack down on hoarding and black marketing under essential commodities laws. Finally, the minister concerned must break his silence and show a visible presence in the markets. Eid's joy should not be stolen by regulatory failure. The public's anger is justified. The government must protect consumers from exploitation.

# US Attempting To Pass The Buck To Its Gulf Allies

## The US has always benefited from and even stirred up the rivalry between Iran and the Arab Gulf states

DR. DANIA KOLEILAT KHATIB

US Sen. Lindsey Graham, talking as if he were the commander in chief, on Monday issued a veiled threat to Arab Gulf states, urging them to attack Iran. He said there would be "consequences" if they did not do so. Despite the very aggressive and provocative Iranian actions, the Gulf Cooperation Council states know they have no dog in this fight. They want to stay out of this war and they are right to do so.

The US is attempting the strategy of buck passing. It wants its allies to bear the brunt of fighting Iran while it incurs minimal costs. The US is trying to push the Gulf into America's war of choice, to which the GCC states did not agree and were not even consulted.

Washington is adopting various methods to involve these states. To start with, Trump keeps falsely announcing that Arab states are joining the fight. The administration airs misleading footage of missiles being launched at Iran from land in order to give the impression they have been fired from Arab countries. In addition, Israel has been raising false flags. It reportedly claimed the UAE was responsible for an attack on a desalination plant in Iran, only for Abu Dhabi to immediately refute the accusation.

The US has always benefited from and even stirred up the rivalry between Iran and the Arab Gulf states. Before the revolution of 1979, both sides of the Gulf were allies of the US. America balanced out the two rivals. After the shah fell and was replaced by a regime hostile to the US, the latter's relevance increased. Iran has long sought to negotiate with Washington to alleviate sanctions, while flexing its muscles with its Arab neighbors. At the same time, the Gulf states used the US' military strength and influence to shield themselves from Iranian threats.

The ongoing Iranian strikes on the Gulf states that have opposed the war and lobbied the US not to go to war with Iran are in no way morally or legally justifiable. These states are understandably furious and feel betrayed. However, this is a moment where pragmatism should trump pride. The end of the war is in the best interest of the Gulf.



One should also take into consideration that war with a neighbor is different from war with a faraway power. Today, the US can retrieve its military assets and the war would be finished. Iran would not go to the other side of the globe to fight the US. However, war with a next-door neighbor is far more complicated and more difficult to contain. We must remember the Iran-Iraq war. That was supposed to last three weeks but it lasted eight years.

The issue is not only about shifting the cost of the war to the Gulf states. There is also the issue of the relevance of the US. If Gulf states

go to war, they will need more and more support from the US — such as arms transfers and support at the UN — especially if it is a prolonged conflict. This would also make sure the Gulf states were driven away from Russia and China. Both countries have condemned the US-Israeli attack and expressed support for Iran. Russian President Vladimir Putin declared his "unwavering support" for the new supreme leader and stated that he would remain Iran's "reliable partner."

The most important issue is that of legitimacy. This is a very unpopular war in the

US. People are linking it to the Epstein files, calling it "Operation Epstein Fury" instead of "Epic Fury" and blaming Israel for pushing the US into this war. This is where the Trump administration needs a scapegoat. It does not want to tarnish the image of Israel.

Graham said in an interview that the US would not go to the Middle East to fight alone. Of course, he cannot tell his people in South Carolina to go to war for Israel. If the GCC states are involved, then he can always say the US is going to protect its interests in

the Gulf. However, if the Gulf says this war is unnecessary, people like Graham will have difficulty providing any rationale for this military campaign. Arab involvement would give them legitimacy.

Even those who are against the war do not dare blame Israel. They blame the Gulf states. Rachel Maddow, a supposedly "liberal" anchor, claimed Trump is waging this war on their behalf.

When the Gulf states see this, they realize the US' grand scheme is to scapegoat them. So, they have doubled down on their neutral position. They know that the cost of attacking Iran would be much higher than only taking a defensive position.

Sheikh Hamad bin Jassem Al-Thani, the former prime minister of Qatar, tweeted that the Gulf countries should not join the fight. Between the lines, he warned the GCC states of the trap set for them by the US and Benjamin Netanyahu. Those two do not realize or may-be do not care that they are heading toward a global crisis and they are dragging everyone down with them. The war needs to end for the sake of the whole world.

The Gulf states should be pragmatic. Despite Iran's despicable acts, they need to deal with them through de-escalation. There is the Beijing Agreement of March 2023 between Saudi Arabia and Iran. That agreement should be evoked. The Gulf states should keep channels of communication with Iran open and use all diplomatic avenues to sideline themselves in this fight. The Arab Gulf being neutral will make sure the conflict is constrained and the region does not descend into all-out war. Otherwise, not only the region but the entire globe will sleepwalk toward a crisis that could lead to a third world war.

Dr. Dania Koleilat Khatib is a specialist in US-Arab relations with a focus on lobbying. She is co-founder of the Research Center for Cooperation and Peace Building, a Lebanese nongovernmental organization focused on Track II.

Disclaimer: Views expressed by the writer are her own and do not necessarily reflect Arab News' point of view

# When Writing Becomes Detached From Thought

## Is AI making Plato's old suspicion about writing feel new again?

JOHN NOSTA

There is an old argument about writing that suddenly feels less old than it should. In fact, I think it's surprisingly relevant.

In Plato's Phaedrus, Socrates tells the story of Theuth. He's the Egyptian figure credited with inventing writing. Theuth offers it as a gift, a powerful tool that will aid in memory and make people wiser. But King Thamus isn't persuaded. Writing, he says, will not deepen wisdom at all. It will weaken memory by moving knowledge outside the mind, and it will leave people with the appearance of understanding rather than the real thing.

I've often referred to this as culturally interesting, but rather exaggerated. Writing didn't destroy thought. It became one of its great vessels of expression. It preserved human thought from religion to science. And in that context, it gave human thought the power to travel across centuries. If anything, writing seemed to prove Socrates wrong.

But that may be changing. Writing hasn't failed, but the conditions around it, particularly AI and LLMs, have radically changed it. And this demands a closer look.

The written word once carried a human trace. Writing is more than words on a page. It reflects effort and the difficult mechanics of human thought such as judgment, revision, and struggle. Behind the words is a mind trying to work something out. Writing has what I would call a biography behind it. It comes from somewhere and it belongs to someone. That gives the written word a kind of



authority that is not only literary, but psychological. It feels connected to a person. That connection is detaching.

Large language models can write. The prose is often smooth and the structure is darn convincing. And when language can be generated that easily and at that scale, writing begins to lose some of what made it feel substantial in the first place.

It no longer reliably signals the labor of thought.

This is a critical shift. The issue here isn't just that machines can write, but that writing itself starts to feel detached from the human

struggle and friction that give it substance and worth.

When Fluency Begins to Feel Vacant

I believe that many people sense this already, even if they wouldn't describe it in exactly these terms. More and more contemporary writing feels oddly empty. It isn't necessarily false, and it isn't always bad, but it often seems more orchestrated or contrived than writing once did, as though the words are in place while something has gone missing.

What once felt like the "imperfectly imperfect" construct of thought can now feel more

like a polished product with a shiny yet superficial reflection. That subtle loss matters, because it changes how writing is experienced and what we believe it represents.

This is where Plato's anxiety becomes newly interesting. Socrates feared that writing would create the appearance of wisdom without its substance. For centuries, that did not quite happen because writing still carried the trace or essence of a writer. Even static text pointed back to a living mind.

But now, we're entering a world where the written word can quickly circulate with very little evidence that anyone truly struggled to construct it. This warning wasn't correct in the ancient world, but may be becoming correct in ours.

Why Speech May Begin to Matter Again

Now, if writing loses some of its old authority, we may begin looking elsewhere for signs of genuine thought, and one obvious place to look is human speech. In many ways it is messier than writing—less structured and more spontaneous. Even so, speech still carries a presence that feel harder to manufacture in the same way.

A live voice can be challenged, and in that challenge it can be subject to interrogation. And if those qualities begin to matter more, then something larger may shift with them. Authority or validation may begin moving away from the written record and back toward live performance, toward what can be spoken and defended in the moment. That would be more than a literary change, it would be a cultural one.

There's something attractive to me about that possibility because it restores a sense of

immediacy, of a mind visibly at work. But we need to point out the danger as well. Presence isn't truth, and a charismatic speaker can mislead us just as easily as an LLM can generate polished prose. The return of speech wouldn't solve the problem but relocate it. Still, the movement itself tells us something important—it suggests that writing—from term paper to court brief—no longer feels like enough.

Plato's Warning, Revised

So, I don't think Socrates was right about writing—it didn't make us shallow. It became one of the great achievements of civilization because it preserved thought and gave human reflection a durable, almost timeless form.

But his warning is beginning to sound relevant for reasons he could never have imagined. The written word earned its authority because it preserved ideas. But also because it seemed to carry the trace of a person behind them. That authority is now being weakened by AI that can generate language without the lived experience or the cognitive burden that once stood behind the words.

That may be why so much of today's posts and prose feel strangely vacant. Language has become easier to separate from the human mind that once gave it both substance and meaning. Socrates feared that writing would give us the appearance of wisdom without the discipline of truly knowing. In our age of large language models, that no longer sounds like an ancient complaint. It sounds like a warning.

John Nosta is an innovation theorist and founder of Nostalab

Source: Psychology Today

# Metro Rail: A Catalyst For Sustainable Urban Growth And Financial Resilience

## Key Takeaways

- India's metro network expanded from 248 km in 2014 to 1,095 km by 2025.
- Metro coverage grew from just 5 cities in 2014 to 26 cities in 2025.
- Annual metro budget rose from 5,798 crore in 2013-14 to 29,550 crore in 2025-26.
- PMEAC study finds metro access improves household loan repayment discipline and reduces financial stress.

## Press Information Bureau

Over the past eleven years, India has witnessed a remarkable expansion of its metro rail network, making it one of the largest in the world. From just a handful of operational lines in a few cities, the network has grown to cover more than twenty urban centres, crossing the milestone of 1,000 kilometres of metro network. This expansion has transformed the way people travel in cities, offering faster, cleaner, and more reliable journeys while also easing congestion on roads.

Metro rail today stands as a symbol of progress and modern living. By reducing dependence on private vehicles, it lowers household transport costs and contributes to a healthier environment. More than just a mode of travel, metro investments have become engines of growth - supporting jobs, improving access to education and healthcare and enhancing the overall well-being of families across India's rapidly growing cities.

Metro Rail Expansion in India: Scale and Coverage

India's metro journey is defined not only by its scale, but also by the transformative technologies and innovations that are reshaping urban mobility. From high-speed regional trains and underwater tunnels to eco-friendly water metros, the country has pioneered solutions that blend safety, sustainability and modern engineering. With world-class signalling, smart ticketing, driverless operations and energy-efficient practices, these systems are setting new benchmarks for faster, greener and safer transport.

India's Expanding Metro Footprint: From a limited presence in a few cities, metro has now expanded into a nationwide network which is among the largest in the world.

Widespread Coverage: Metro services today operate in major cities such as Delhi & NCR, Mumbai, Bengaluru, Kolkata, Hyderabad, Chennai, Lucknow, Pune, Ahmedabad and many others.

Operational Scale: About 1,095 km of metro rail lines (including 55 km of the Delhi-Meerut RRTS) are now functional across 26 cities.

Global Standing: India has become the third-largest operational metro network in the world reflecting its commitment to modern urban transport.

Growth since 2014: The operational metro/RRTS network has expanded from 248 km in 2014 to 1,095 km in 2025.

Government push: Since 2014, 38 metro rail projects covering 1,051 km have been



sanctioned with an estimated cost of 3.44 lakh crore.

City expansion: Metro services have grown from just 5 cities in 2014 to 26 cities in 2025, bringing world-class mobility closer to citizens across India.

Landmark achievements & innovations: India's metro journey has not only been about expansion but also about pioneering innovations in urban transport. In recent years, the country has achieved several firsts that showcase its technological strength and commitment to sustainable and eco-friendly mobility.

Namo Bharat Train  
India's first state-of-the-art semi high-speed Nam Bharat regional train was operationalised in October 2023.

It operates at a speed of 160 km/h with a design speed of 180 km/h.

The train has been deployed on the Delhi-Meerut corridor, marking a new era in fast and modern regional connectivity.

Underwater Metro  
In 2024, India achieved a historic milestone with the launch of its first underwater metro tunnel in Kolkata, connecting Esplanade to Howrah Maidan beneath the Hooghly River.

This engineering marvel stands as a proud symbol of India's advancing technological capabilities and infrastructural strength.

Water Metro  
In April 2023, Kochi, Kerala became the first city in India to introduce a Water Metro.

The system connects 10 islands using electric-hybrid boats, offering seamless, eco-friendly transport and setting a benchmark for sustainable urban mobility.

Smart Solutions for Safer, Greener and Faster Metros: India's metro and Nam

o Bharat Regional Rapid Transit System (RRTS) projects have witnessed remarkable progress, bringing in world-class technologies that strengthen safety, boost efficiency and advance sustainability.

European Train Control System (ETCS): For the first time in the world, Nam Bharat trains on the Delhi-Meerut RRTS corridor are using a Hybrid level-III radio-based signalling system on Long Term Evolution (LTE) backbone. This advanced technology makes train operations smarter and safer giving passengers a new level of security and confidence in their journey.

Platform Screen Doors (PSD): Developed jointly by BEL and NCRTC to improve safety and reduce accidents, Platform Screen Doors (PSDs) keep platforms safe by opening only when trains stop correctly, preventing accidents and trespassing.

National Common Mobility Card (NCMC): "One Nation-One Card" functional in 11 metro projects and 11 bus corporations, enabling seamless travel; included in PM-eBus Sewa guidelines.

QR Ticketing: Mobile app-based QR system for easy digital ticket booking.

Unmanned Train Operations (UTO): Driverless trains running on Delhi Metro's Pink and Magenta Lines, improving efficiency.

Indigenous ATS (i-ATS): India's first locally developed Automatic Train Supervision system, implemented on Delhi Metro's Red Line by DMRC and BEL.

Energy Efficiency: Metros use regenerative braking and install solar panels, saving power and reducing carbon emissions for sustainable operations.

Infrastructure Spending and Integration with National Plans  
India's infrastructure investment has

risen sharply with the Union Budget 2024-25 allocating a record 11.21 lakh crore for capital expenditure equivalent to 3.1% of GDP. Aligned with this investment push, the annual metro budget for 2025-26 stands at 29,550 crore in comparison to the 5,798 crore allocated in 2013-14, demonstrating how enhanced spending is driving the rapid expansion of metro networks nationwide.

Metro projects are being embedded within the PM GatiShakti National Master Plan to ensure seamless integration with metro projects, while the Network Planning Group (NPG) also regularly reviews metro rail and aviation projects together reinforcing their role in integrated transport planning.

The National Infrastructure Pipeline (NIP) has prioritized metro corridors as critical urban assets, aligning them with India's long-term growth vision.

India now has the world's third-largest metro network reflecting how sustained infrastructure investment is strengthening urban mobility and ease of living.

PMEAC Findings on Metro Rail's Impact on Urban Households

Recently, in January 2026, the study titled Golden Decade of Infrastructure Development in India with Special Reference to Metro Rail Network was prepared by Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister (EAC-PM). It highlights how India's rapid infrastructure expansion supported by the PM GatiShakti plan is strengthening India's metro rail systems and positioning them among the world's leading networks. Drawing on official data and comparative analysis across cities, the study underscores the wider economic and social benefits of

metro development, from financial stability to sustainable urban growth.

Key Outcomes: The study shows that India's infrastructure expansion, especially metro rail, is delivering benefits beyond mobility by reshaping household finances and reducing reliance on private vehicles. Rising capital investment and sustainable transit systems are strengthening economic resilience, positioning metro rail as a cornerstone of national development.

Improved household financial discipline: Metro connectivity reduces transport costs, which lowers loan repayment delays and increases early repayment of home loans.

City-specific impacts:  
In Hyderabad, missed payments on home loans have fallen by 1.7%, while early repayments have risen by 1.8%.

In Bengaluru, loan repayment delays decline by 2.4%, whereas early home loan repayments rise by 3.5%.

In Delhi, missed payments drop by 4.42%, with early repayments of mortgages up by 1.38%.

Reduced reliance on private vehicles: Vehicle registration data shows fewer new two-wheelers and entry-level cars in metro-served areas, confirming a shift away from costly private transport.

Lower household indebtedness: With reduced recurring transport expenses, households carry lighter debt burdens and manage liquidity more effectively.

Contribution to financial stability: Improved repayment behaviour and fewer defaults strengthen the overall financial system.

Broader infrastructure gains: Rising capital expenditure on infrastructure creates strong growth multipliers, supports productivity, enhances sustainability, and boosts long-term economic competitiveness.

Environmental sustainability: Adoption of regenerative braking, solar panels and green metro stations reduces emissions and supports India's climate goals.

Study Insight: The study reflects that India's decade of infrastructure expansion, especially metro rail growth, is not only transforming urban mobility but also strengthening household finances and reducing debt stress. By lowering transport costs, metros are improving loan repayment behaviour and supporting financial stability. Rising capital expenditure and sustainable practices further position infrastructure as a key driver of long-term economic growth and resilience.

Conclusion:  
India's metro expansion over the past decade reflects a strong commitment to modern, inclusive urban development. The EAC-PM study confirms that metro infrastructure not only improves mobility but also strengthens household finances and supports long-term economic stability. With rising capital investment and integrated planning, metro systems are becoming key drivers of sustainable growth. This progress marks a significant step toward a more connected and resilient India.

# The Iran War Could Trigger A Global Food Crisis

While media coverage of Iran's closure of the Strait of Hormuz has focused on oil prices, the implications for global food supplies are no less alarming. A prolonged closure could disrupt agriculture worldwide and place more than 100 million people at risk of a humanitarian catastrophe.

BRAM GOVAERTS AND SHARON BURKE

Since the start of the US-Israeli campaign against Iran, only a handful of the 100 vessels that once transited the Strait of Hormuz each day have managed to pass through. Now, with Iran reportedly laying sea mines in the narrow waterway, the possibility of its closure lasting days - or even months - is no longer hypothetical.

Fire and thick smoke erupting from the Shahran oil depot in Tehran, Iran, on March 8, 2026, after US and Israeli attacks, with damaged fuel tankers and vehicles visible in the foreground.

Shockwaves are already coursing through global energy markets, but the most immediate and dangerous consequences of a prolonged closure may show up at the dinner table, not the gas pump. The Strait of Hormuz, after all, is not just a shipping lane for oil tankers; it is a critical artery of the global food system. Key food staples - including wheat, corn, rice, soybeans, sugar, and animal feed - travel through the Strait on their way to the Gulf countries, and farmers around the world depend on the fertilizers and fuel that flow out of it.

The Gulf states, which rely heavily on imported food, are particularly vulnerable. To secure grain, rice, animal feed, and cooking oil, they depend on open waterways and a constant flow of international shipments.

As the COVID-19 pandemic showed, supply-chain fragility is not just a wartime problem. Over the past few years, many Gulf countries have taken steps to strengthen their food systems, expanding strategic reserves and investing

in domestic production. They have also explored alternative shipping routes, with some cargo moving overland or through ports that bypass the Strait of Hormuz, such as Saudi Arabia's Jeddah Islamic Port on the Red Sea.

These measures have improved resilience, but they cannot fully compensate for a prolonged blockade of the Persian Gulf. Roughly 70% of the food consumed in Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq moves through the Strait of Hormuz. With a combined population of about 100 million, replacing disrupted imports in these countries would require moving approximately 191.3 million pounds of food into the region every single day, according to data from FAOSTAT.

Supplying the Gulf under a blockade would therefore require an unprecedented humanitarian operation, possibly through contested airspace. For comparison, the United Nations World Food Programme delivered an average of just 15 million pounds of food per day to 81 million people in 71 countries in 2024.

A full blockade would hurt Iran just as much as its Arab neighbors. Disruptions to maritime trade would squeeze the country from both ends, restricting energy exports while driving up the cost of imported staples such as wheat, rice, animal feed, and vegetable oil. For many Iranians, basic necessities, from bread to rent, have already become unaffordable, fueling the mass protests that swept the country earlier this year.

Historically, food-price spikes and shortages have been major drivers of political instability. In 2008, rising energy and fertilizer costs, combined with extreme weather and persistent policy failures, nearly doubled the price of

staple crops, sparking food riots in dozens of countries. A few years later, in 2010 and 2011, a historic drought and heatwave in Russia slashed grain harvests and pushed the global food prices to record highs, setting the stage for the Arab Spring.

More recently, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 drove up global grain, fertilizer, and fuel prices, contributing to a sharp rise in food insecurity. With the global food system under growing strain from climate shocks and the lingering effects of the pandemic, it is hardly surprising that the world faces the largest surge in violent conflicts since the end of World War II.

The impact of further disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz would extend far beyond the Gulf. Farmers around the world, from South Asia to Sub-Saharan Africa - and even in Europe and the United States - depend on stable supplies of fertilizer and fuel. Natural gas is a key ingredient in nitrogen fertilizer, a cornerstone of modern agriculture that has helped crop yields reach historic highs. An estimated 30-40% of the world's traded nitrogen fertilizers pass through the Strait.

When fertilizer and fuel become more expensive, farmers adjust by applying less fertilizer or planting fewer acres. As a result, yields decline, and the effects ripple through the entire food system. From farmers and truckers to food processors, the supply chain passes along higher costs until they reach households' grocery bills.

While disruptions to food, fuel, and fertilizer shipments could drive up prices within weeks or months, another resource could be at risk within days: water. If the conflict contaminates the Gulf's waters or disables desalination

plants, the consequences would be catastrophic.

The risk is already acute. Last week, both Bahrain and Iran - which is itself experiencing severe water shortages - reported that desalination plants had been attacked. If deliberate, such strikes would be considered war crimes under international law, as destroying or contaminating these facilities would immediately threaten millions of lives. While Ukraine has demonstrated that critical infrastructure can be repaired under fire, desalination systems are highly complex, and there are few quick alternatives.

For decades, international security efforts in the Middle East have focused on preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Yet the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, whether through sea mines or sustained military conflict, could inflict civilian harm on a similar scale by disrupting global food and energy systems, as well as triggering a regional water crisis. All parties to the conflict, along with the broader international community, must do everything possible to prevent such an outcome.

At the same time, this episode should serve as a warning: the global food system is dangerously vulnerable. Policymakers must act to shore it up before the next shock pushes millions more people toward a humanitarian cliff.

Bram Govaerts is Director General of CIMMYT. Sharon Burke is Chief Engagement Officer at CIMMYT and a former US Assistant Secretary of Defense for Operational Energy.

Source: Project Syndicate

## EC announces polls schedule: Single phase in Assam, Kerala, Puducherry, TN; 2 phases in Bengal

PTI

New Delhi, Mar 15: Assembly elections in Assam, Kerala and Puducherry will be held on a single day on April 9, in Tamil Nadu on April 23 and in two phases in West Bengal on April 23 and 29, while votes will be counted for all polls on May 4, the Election Commission announced on Sunday.

Compared to eight voting days spread across almost a month in 2021, there will be three polling days in a 20-day period in these elections, which will see the BJP trying to retain power in Assam, while it will be pitted against ruling parties in West Bengal, Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Puducherry is governed by NDA partner All India NR Congress.

A total of 17.4 crore voters are eligible to vote in the elections to five assemblies with 824 constituencies, Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar said at a press conference here.

"Voting for all seats in Assam will be held on April 9. Voting in West Bengal will take place in two phases on April 23 and April 29. The voting for all seats in Kerala and Puducherry will take place on April 9, while all Tamil Nadu seats will go to polls on April 23," said Kumar, who was flanked by the two Election Commissioners -- Sukhbir Singh Sandhu and Vivek Joshi.

The model code of conduct has come into effect immediately with the announcement of the poll schedule.

Tamil Nadu, West Bengal and Kerala are currently ruled by opposition DMK, Trinamool Congress and Left Front,



respectively.

There are 234 assembly seats in Tamil Nadu where DMK leader M K Stalin has been the chief minister since 2021.

West Bengal has a total of 294 assembly seats with TMC leader Mamata Banerjee in power since 2011. Kerala has 140 seats and Left leader Pinarayi Vijayan has been the chief minister since 2016, leading the Left Democratic Front (LDF) government.

In Assam, there are 126 assembly seats, and the BJP has been in power in the Northeastern state since 2016. Himanta Biswa Sarma has been the chief minister since 2021.

Puducherry Chief Minister N Rangasamy has been in power since 2021. The UT has a total of 30 seats where polling will take place. CEC Kumar said the

elections must be free of violence or inducement and warned that the EC will take strong action against any violation.

Asked about the announcement made by the West Bengal chief minister, barely minutes ahead of the scheduled announcement of the assembly polls, about the clearance of DA arrears of its employees and a hike in honorarium of purohitis and muezzins, Kumar said whatever has happened has happened but the model code of conduct comes into effect immediately and no such announcements could be made henceforth.

For Assam, Kerala and Puducherry, the notification for the elections will be issued on March 16, and the last date for filing nominations is March 23. Scrutiny of nominations will

take place on March 24 and the last date for the withdrawal of candidatures is March 26.

For Tamil Nadu, the notification for the polls will be issued on March 30 and the last date for filing nominations is April 6. The date for the scrutiny of nominations is April 7 and the last date for the withdrawal of candidatures is April 9.

In the first phase elections in West Bengal, notifications will be issued on March 30, while for the second phase on April 2. The last date for filing nominations for the first phase is April 6 and for the second phase is April 9.

The scrutiny of nominations for the first phase elections in West Bengal will take place on April 7 and for the second phase on April 10. The last date for the withdrawal of candidatures for

the first phase is April 9 and for the second phase is April 13.

In West Bengal, polling will be held in 152 assembly constituencies in the first phase and in 142 seats in the second phase.

CEC Kumar said presiding officers at all polling booths will upload voter turnout data every two hours and immediately after voting ends.

"The Election Commission will ensure greater transparency in the counting of votes and announcement of results. Election Commission has asked all enforcement agencies to ensure elections are impartial and violence-free," he said.

Opposition parties had raised questions on the voter turnout data after the last few assembly elections.

The term of the assembly will come to an end in West Bengal on May 7, in Tamil Nadu on May 10, in Assam on May 20, in Kerala on May 23, and in Puducherry on June 15. There are 6.4 crore voters in West Bengal, 5.67 crore in Tamil Nadu, 2.7 crore in Kerala, 2.5 crore in Assam and 9.44 lakh in Puducherry.

There will be 2,18,807 polling stations in all four states and one UT -- of which 31,486 booths are in Assam, 30,471 in Kerala, 75,032 in Tamil Nadu, 80,719 in West Bengal and 1,099 in Puducherry.

A total of 25 lakh election officials will be deployed, out of which 15 lakh are polling personnel, 49,000 micro observers for polling, 1,444 observers, 40,000 counting officials, 21,000 sector officers and 15,000 micro observers for counting.

## As BJP eyes Bengal breakthrough, key leaders it banks on in 2026 polls



PTI

Kolkata, Mar 15: From securing just about 4 per cent vote share in the 2011 assembly elections to emerging as the principal opposition with over 38 per cent vote share in 2021, the BJP has significantly expanded its political footprint in West Bengal. The party at present has 12 Lok Sabha MPs and more than 65 MLAs in the state.

As the BJP prepares for the upcoming assembly elections in its bid to challenge the ruling TMC, several leaders are expected to play key roles in shaping its campaign. Some of the prominent faces of the party who are likely to fight the elections are as follows.

Suvendu Adhikari: Leader of the Opposition in the assembly, Suvendu Adhikari remains one of the BJP's most prominent leaders in the state and is expected to play a central role in the upcoming elections.

A former TMC leader who joined the BJP ahead of the 2021 polls, Adhikari gained national attention after defeating Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee in Nandigram, one of the most closely watched contests of that election.

Hailing from the politically influential Adhikari family of Purba Medinipur, he commands a formidable organisational network across the coastal districts and the 'Jungle Mahal' belt.

Adhikari, known for his assertive campaign style, has been at the forefront of the BJP's efforts to expand its footprint in south Bengal.

Within the BJP, he is widely regarded as one of the trusted lieutenants of Union Home Minister Amit Shah, the party's principal strategist, when it comes to Bengal politics.

As the state heads into another

fiercely fought election, Adhikari is expected to spearhead the BJP's campaign, training his guns on issues such as corruption, governance failures and law-and-order concerns.

For the BJP cadre, his political weight, grassroots networks and combative rhetoric make him the party's principal field commander.

Dilip Ghosh: Former state BJP president Dilip Ghosh is regarded as one of the leaders who played a major role in expanding the party's organisational base in West Bengal.

A former RSS pracharak, Ghosh led the BJP's growth phase in the state between 2015 and 2021, which culminated in the party winning 18 Lok Sabha seats in 2019. He was elected MP from Medinipur in that election.

His political trajectory, however, saw challenges after the 2024 Lok Sabha polls, when he lost after being shifted from Medinipur to Bardhaman-Durgapur. He had also publicly expressed differences over organisational decisions under then-president Sukanta Majumdar, highlighting internal issues within the state unit.

The strains became more visible when Ghosh attended the inauguration of the Jagannath temple in Digha, with his newly-wedded wife, at the invitation of Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee. The episode drew criticism from sections of the party's leadership.

After Samik Bhattacharya was appointed state BJP president in 2025, leaders such as Ghosh, who had been on the sidelines over the last few years, started gaining prominence once again.

BJP leaders continue to view his organisational experience and grassroots connect as important as the party prepares to take on the assembly elections.

## Env ministry endorses names of 10-member expert committee set up to define Aravalli hills

PTI

New Delhi, Mar 15: The Union Environment Ministry has told the Supreme Court that it has no objection with the Central Empowered Committee's proposed 10-member high-powered expert committee which has been tasked to come up with a uniform definition for the Aravalli hills and ranges.

In an affidavit filed before the top court, the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change has endorsed the names suggested for the high-powered expert committee comprising in-service and retired bureaucrats associated

with the Forest Survey of India (FSI), Geological Survey of India (GSI) and Survey of India, along with academicians.

"The MoEFCC respectfully submits that it has no objection if this court as the aforesaid suggested names for the constitution of the proposed High Powered Committee. It is further submitted that the Ministry does not have any additional names to propose at this stage for inclusion in the said committee," the affidavit said.

The committee is proposed to be headed by Kanchan Devi, the current director general of the Indian Council of Forestry Research & Education.

The MoEF, in its affidavit, said the aspects relating to the Aravalli Hills and Ranges require a comprehensive and analytical examination, including stakeholder consultation, by a group of domain experts in the relevant fields.

The CEC in its report to the apex court said Devi, a 1991 Indian Forest Service officer from the Madhya Pradesh cadre, has over three decades of experience in forestry education and research, wildlife and forest policy, and institutional leadership.

The other members include Subhash Ashutosh, former director general of FSI,

### CONTD. FROM FRONT PAGE

400

letters were also handed over to 22 NoKs of deceased government employees, under Jammu & Kashmir Rehabilitation Assistance Scheme-2022 and SRO 43.

Paying homage to the civilian martyrs, the Lieutenant Governor said that for decades, NoKs of our poor and vulnerable brothers and sisters, felled by terrorists' bullets, had clung to the hope of redress. He said the campaign launched from Baramulla last year has provided these families with support, courage, and renewed self-belief.

"Our campaign to deliver justice to terror victims' families has restored their tomorrow. We have succeeded in dispelling the shadow of injustice and ushering a new dawn of justice at doorsteps of terror victims' families. To date, around 400 NoKs have received employment and will continue relentlessly until we reach the very last family still awaiting justice," the Lieutenant Governor said.

He said that it is not merely an administrative exercise of signing papers, shuffling files, or filling posts but a profound commitment to justice. "My aim throughout this process is to ensure that no terror-affected family slipped into the cracks of neglect, fading from public and official gaze. I view these appointment letters as true justice- and today's event stands as its living testament," the Lieutenant Governor said.

He said that under the guidance of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, important steps were taken over the past five to six years with a singular, overarching goal to forge a Jammu Kashmir undefined by the pains of its past, but brimming with self-confidence.

"In August 2020, I had set this vision to develop a Jammu Kashmir that measures its strength by the heights of its dreams, and to build a system rooted in social justice, dignity, and equal opportunity," he said.

The Lieutenant Governor directed the Principal Secretary Home to conduct a comprehensive review of the cases pertaining to property encroachment of victims of terrorism.

"I have repeatedly affirmed that lands or homes forcibly seized from terror-affected families will be liberated and returned, and cases yet to undergo investigation will receive impartial, transparent probes," he said.

The Lieutenant Governor highlighted that the administration is committed to the rehabilitation of those left scarred by terror.

"There are many victims of terrorism who have lost their eyesight or are living with severe disabilities. We will chalk out a robust framework for their rehabilitation. The administration has also outlined a timeline for providing essential housing and other support to the victims of terrorism," he said.

The Lieutenant Governor called upon people to preserve the unity and foil the efforts of separatist elements.

"Adhering to the Prime Minister's mantra of 'Zero Tolerance towards Terrorism', the administration, Police and Security forces are taking decisive action to dismantle terror networks," he said, adding, "We must remain vigilant against divisive elements attempting to divide us along sectarian lines. We are Indians; our collective duty is the peace and progress of our nation. Officials and citizens must also work together to strengthen faith in our government institutions."

Principal Secretary Home, Chandraker Bharti; Principal Secretary to Lieutenant Governor, Dr Mandeep K. Bhandari; Commissioner Secretary, General Administration Department, M Raju; IGP Kashmir, VK Birdi; Deputy Commissioner Srinagar, Akshay Labroo; Dr GV Sundeep Chakravarthy, SSP Srinagar; Chairman, Save Youth Save Future Foundation, Wajahat Farooq Bhat and other members of the Foundation, senior officials, members of various social organisations and family members of victims of terrorism were present. (KNO)

### Baramulla's

unanswered questions. Today, standing at Lok Bhavan Auditorium, holding an appointment letter handed by Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha, Gulzar felt something he had not experienced in decades.

Speaking to the news agency—Kashmir News Observer (KNO) after the appointment ceremony, Gulzar said he lost his brother to terrorism over thirty years ago. "For years, our pain was invisible. We watched governments come and go and everyone promised support, but nothing came. We were left alone with our grief," he said.

He paused, looking at the letter in his hands and said, this is more than a job. This is my brother's memory being honored. This is a message that our suffering is seen, our sacrifices matter and we are not forgotten.

Gulzar said on the decades of waiting and loss, "I walked through life carrying the weight of his absence. Every day was a reminder of what we lost and how the world moved on without acknowledging it. Today, for the first time, I feel that someone truly sees us, hears us and cares about our pain."

He added, this is not just my family's story. This is the story of every family who lost someone to terror and waited for decades for justice. Today, it feels like someone finally acknowledges our grief. That is priceless. (KNO)

### Never thought

violence years ago. Standing at Lok Bhavan Auditorium, she received an appointment letter handed over by Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha, a gesture she described as "long-awaited

justice and recognition." "We survived while our loved ones were taken from us," she said, while talking to the news agency—Kashmir News Observer (KNO). "For years, nobody asked about our suffering. We lived with fear, loss and unanswered questions. Today, for the first time, we feel seen," the woman added.

Reflecting on the significance of the appointment letter, she added, it is not just a job. It is an acknowledgment of decades of pain. It feels like our grief matters, our family's sacrifice is remembered and our voice is heard.

"We never thought anyone would recognize us after so many years," she said, adding "LG Sahab has shown that even after decades, justice can arrive. We welcome it with open hearts."

"The ceremony is a reminder that even after years of waiting, survivors of terrorism and their families can reclaim dignity, hope and justice," she added. (KNO)

### Anantnag

as Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha handed him an appointment letter under the Compassionate Appointment Rules at Lok Bhavan Auditorium.

The gesture recognizes the family's long struggle and gives them a chance to rebuild their lives with dignity. The family said that for decades they felt invisible and forgotten and that receiving this letter is more than a job and it is a message that their pain and sacrifices are acknowledged.

"For years, nobody asked about us. We felt invisible, abandoned and unheard," Ashiq told the news agency—Kashmir News Observer (KNO), his voice quivering as he spoke on the sidelines after receiving the appointment letter.

"We went from office to office, hoping someone would listen. We knocked on doors, wrote letters and yet our pain was ignored. Today, our story finally matters."

Holding the appointment letter close, Ashiq described it as "more than just employment."

He reflected on the emotional toll of the long wait: "There were nights we didn't know how to face tomorrow. We lost trust in a system that seemed to forget us. Today, receiving this letter feels like someone finally saw us, heard us and respected our struggle."

"This letter is not just a piece of paper," he added. "It carries the weight of our dreams, our grief and our patience. It says to us: your pain matters, your struggle is recognized, your family is not forgotten."

Recalling the moment he shook hands with the LG, Ashiq said: "He looked in our eyes and that simple gesture gave us courage. We felt that the government cares, that someone is walking with us on this path to rebuild our lives." (KNO)

### Centre stands

investment, improved infrastructure and government initiatives have contributed to greater employment opportunities and faster development in the region," he said.

He informed that as of March 2026, 24 lakh 37 thousand bank accounts have been opened in the Union Territory under Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana, with a fund allocation of 1754.25 crore rupees released from 2014-26, enabling greater financial inclusion. "In addition, 12 lakh 79 thousand gas connections have been allotted in under Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana Yojana to improve access to clean cooking fuel. He also informed that 25 lakh nine thousand loans, with an allocation of 54267.91 crore rupees have been provided to beneficiaries under Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana from 2015-26," the Union Minister said, adding, "As many as 35000 houses costing Rs 586 crore have been constructed in J&K under Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (Urban) from 2016-26 to provide housing for all. Under Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana, 3638 crore rupees have been provided from 2018-26, benefiting 19 lakh 73 thousand people. Around 94 lakh rupees have been released for 13 old age homes in Jammu and Kashmir from 2023-25."

Highlighting India's economic progress, Athawale stated that the country has moved from being the 10th largest economy to the 4th largest in the world, and is expected to soon become the third largest economy.

He noted that initiatives aimed at strengthening domestic manufacturing, including the Make in India initiative, and continued support for Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) have contributed to increased production and exports.

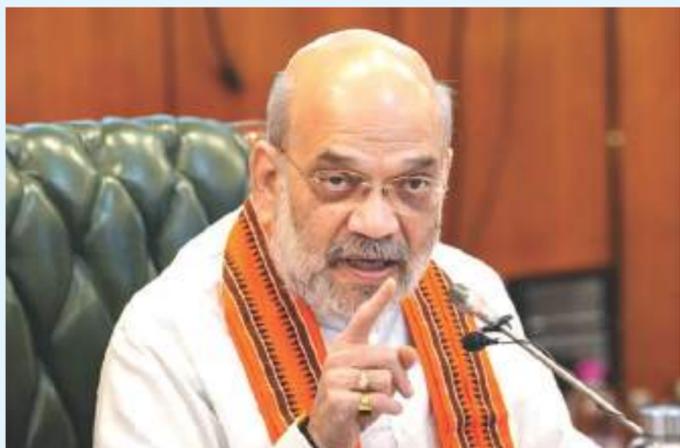
Athawale stated that the government will initiate a caste-based census to better understand the socio-economic conditions of different communities. He noted that the Scheduled Caste population constitutes approximately 16.6 per cent of the country's population.

The Minister highlighted that persons with disabilities (Divyangjan) in Jammu and Kashmir are now receiving reservation benefits following the abrogation of Article 370, thereby ensuring greater access to opportunities and social justice.

Athawale reiterated the Government's commitment to inclusive development, social justice and economic progress, while ensuring that the benefits of government initiatives reach all sections of society.

Responding to queries regarding global developments, he stated that fuel supply could be impacted due to the ongoing conflict involving US-Israel and Iran. However, he assured that the government has adequate fuel stock available, and is taking necessary steps to ensure uninterrupted supply. (KNO)

## Confident that BJP will form govt in Assam with largest ever mandate: Amit Shah



**The Election Commission conducted Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls in some states, but the Congress protested against the exercise, he claimed. "The Congress legalised, formalised and normalised infiltration, but the BJP will remove each one of them from the electoral rolls. Rahul Babu can rest assured that not only their (infiltrators') names will be removed from the electoral rolls, but they will also be driven out," Shah said.**

PTI

Guwahati, Mar 15: Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Sunday said he is confident that the BJP will return to power in Assam under the leadership of Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma with the "largest ever mandate".

Addressing the youth convention of the Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha (BJYM) here, Shah urged the people to give another mandate to the BJP and assured them that "every infiltrator will be sent out of India".

"The Congress gave shelter to infiltrators, but the BJP government is determined to identify each one of them and drive them out of the country," he said.

The Election Commission conducted Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls in some states, but the Congress protested against the exercise, he claimed. "The

Congress legalised, formalised and normalised infiltration, but the BJP will remove each one of them from the electoral rolls. Rahul Babu can rest assured that not only their (infiltrators') names will be removed from the electoral rolls, but they will also be driven out," Shah said.

During the Congress rule, Assam was "known for violence", and several youths were killed, Shah claimed.

"The Congress did nothing for the youth, but its leaders were only concerned about the benefits of their families, he added.

Shah alleged that the grand old party believes in "corruption, polarisation by promoting infiltrators and looking after the interests of their own children", and claimed that the BJP's focus has been on "development, driving out infiltrators and ensuring that the interests of the children of poor people are taken care of".

## 'Cong pocketed Rs 150 cr per annum from Assam healthcare budget during 15 yrs of rule'

PTI

Guwahati, Mar 15: Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Sunday alleged that the Congress, during its previous 15 years of rule in Assam, "pocketed" Rs 150 crore per annum from the state healthcare budget.

Inaugurating and laying the foundation stone for healthcare projects worth Rs 2,092 crore in Assam, Shah said the BJP works for affordable healthcare for all sections of society and lauded Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma for bringing the state's medical facilities at par with states like Gujarat, Maharashtra and Karnataka.

"Assam's healthcare was in shambles 10 years ago as Congress worked only for the financial health of its leaders' families," he said.

Attacking Congress leader Rahul Gandhi, he said that no Indian supports his acts of "defaming" the country in his bid to oppose the BJP and Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

He lambasted the Congress for its "shirtless" protest at the recent AI summit in New Delhi and Gandhi for having 'chai-pakora' on the stairs of Parliament House.

"We were also in the opposition and staged protests against the government, but there

is a right platform for it," he said.

"Parliament is a sacred seat of democracy. Its stairs should not be used for even dharanas. And Rahul Gandhi was having 'chai-pakora' there. Doesn't he know where to have his breakfast?" asked the Union minister.

Shah inaugurated the Rs 675-crore Pragjyotishpur Medical College and Hospital in Guwahati, at a programme held on its premises.

He also virtually inaugurated two cancer centres at Golaghat and Tinsukia, both under Assam Cancer Care Foundation (ACCF), constructed at a cost of Rs 135 crore each.

Shah virtually laid the foundation stone for super-specialty hospitals at Diphu Medical College and Hospital (Rs 220 crore), Jorhat Medical College and Hospital (Rs 310 crore), and Barpeta Medical College and Hospital (Rs 284 crore).

The foundation stone for a Rs 218-crore Swasthya Bhawan in Guwahati, and the Abhayapuri District Hospital (Rs 115 crore) were also laid by the Union home minister.

Shah arrived here on Saturday evening on a two-day visit to Assam, his fourth visit to the northeastern state in four months.

## Judicial system must work like hospitals, with same spirit of service: CJI



PTI

Mandi (HP), Mar 15: Chief Justice of India Justice Surya Prakash Singh on Sunday stated that judicial complexes should operate with the same spirit of service as hospitals, as people come to courts with hope seeking relief and justice.

While addressing a legal literacy camp after laying the foundation stone for the Mandi Judicial Court Complex, the Chief Justice emphasised that with increasing facilities comes a greater responsibility for the judicial system.

He highlighted that while discussions often focus on fundamental rights, fundamental duties are also a crucial part of the Constitution and should be upheld. He urged the organisation of similar programs at the grassroots level to raise awareness about these fundamental duties.

The Mandi Judicial Court Complex, set to be constructed for Rs 152 crore, will span 9.6 hectares of land and consist of four blocks, providing improved facilities for judges, lawyers, and the public.

Chief Minister Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu, who attended the event, stated that it is the government's commitment to ensure access to justice and

rights for every citizen in the state. He mentioned that the government is working toward inclusive development and social justice in line with the Constitution's spirit.

Sukhu informed that the government has resolved about 5.5 lakh pending cases through Lok Adalats. He said that through education, healthcare, social security and transparent administration, the government is ensuring that every citizen gets equal opportunities and that the roots of democracy become stronger.

The chief minister reiterated several initiatives taken by his government, including adopting 6,000 orphaned children as "Children of the State," raising the legal marriage age for girls to 21 years, and granting equal rights to daughters regarding ancestral property up to 150 bighas.

Chief Justice of Himachal Pradesh High Court, Justice Gurmeet Singh Sandhawalia, remarked that the discussions of the day stem from collective efforts to ensure that justice reaches every individual. He noted that justice extends beyond courtroom settings; it also involves awareness of rights, access to legal aid, and the provision of timely assistance.

## Left confident of revival in Bengal: D Raja

PTI

Ranchi, Mar 15: CPI national general secretary D Raja on Sunday asserted that the Left is confident of revival in West Bengal in the upcoming assembly elections and it would emerge as a force to be reckoned with that would shape the political discourse of the state.

Raja's statement came hours before

the scheduled announcement of poll dates for four states and one Union territory by the Election Commission.

"Everyone knows that West Bengal will be a very tough fight. But the Left is very confident. The Left will see a revival and will emerge as a force to be reckoned with that would shape the political discourse of the state," Raja told reporters at Ranchi's Birsamunda Airport.

## India-EU ties in focus as Jaishankar starts 2-day visit to Brussels

PTI

New Delhi, Mar 15: External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar on Sunday kick-started a two-day visit to Brussels for talks with his counterparts from member states of 27-nation European Union.

It is the first high-level visit from India to Brussels headquartered EU after the two sides firmed up a landmark Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in January.

The external affairs ministry said Jaishankar is travelling to the capital of Belgium at the invitation of EU High Representative and Vice President Kaja Kallas to interact with foreign ministers of the 27 member states of the bloc at its Foreign Affairs Council Meeting. "During the visit, the external affairs minister will also hold meetings with the leadership of the



European Union, and his counterparts from Belgium and other EU member states," the ministry said.

"The visit of the external affairs minister coming soon after the historic 16th India-EU summit is expected to further deepen India's strategic partnership with the European Union," it said in a brief statement.

India and the EU sealed the free trade agreement

-- billed as the "mother of all deals" -- following the summit meeting between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the top EU leadership on January 27.

As Jaishankar visit to Brussels is taking place amid the Iran-US conflict, the two sides are expected to deliberate on dealing with its consequences, especially on the flow of energy.

## LPG bookings fall to 77 lakh; no fuel shortages

Online bookings rise after govt campaign

PTI

New Delhi, Mar 15: LPG refill bookings have declined to about 77 lakh from 88.8 lakh earlier, indicating some easing of panic buying, even as the government said there is no shortage of petrol, diesel or cooking gas, and supplies remain stable despite the West Asia conflict.

In a daily update on the impact of the West Asia situation, the government said the share of online LPG bookings has risen

to about 87 per cent from 84 per cent, attributing the increase to a campaign by oil marketing companies promoting digital booking and discouraging people from queuing up at LPG dealerships for panic purchases.

All domestic "refineries are operating at high capacity and maintaining adequate crude oil inventories," the update said. "The country remains self-sufficient in the production of petrol and diesel, requiring no imports of the fuels to meet domestic demand."

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## Movies Watchlist

Monday, 16 March

**DHURANDHAR (A)**  
HINDI - 02:40 PM

**O'ROMEO (A)**  
HINDI - 11:00 AM, 06:45 PM

TICKETS AT: [www.bookmyshow.com](http://www.bookmyshow.com) | [www.inoxmovies.com](http://www.inoxmovies.com)  
Paytm, Inox App, or Directly from the booking counter at the cinema.

**CALL 95416 13868**  
FOR ASSISTANCE WITH TICKETS

## As other Iran-allied groups are engaging in Mideast war, Yemen's Houthis hold back

AP  
Cairo, Mar 15: Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi rebels have so far remained on the sidelines as the Iran war widens across the Middle East, raising questions about why — and when the battle-hardened group might join the fight.



Iran has retaliated against the United States and Israel with missiles and drones, targeting American military bases and other locations in Gulf Arab countries, disrupting trade routes, choking fuel supplies and threatening regional air traffic.

Iran's new supreme leader, Ayatollah Mojtaba Khamenei, suggested on Thursday in his first written statement since succeeding his father, who was killed in the war's opening salvo, that Iran may open up new fronts in the conflict — a sign, analysts say, the Houthis may get involved soon.

Until now, the Houthis have been reluctant to fight, fearing assassinations of their leaders, internal divisions in Yemen and uncertainties over weapons supplies, the experts said.

But that may change as Iran seeks to increase pressure on global oil supply routes through potential attacks by the Houthis, who have had previous success targeting oil facilities in the region, the analysts said.

Iran has asserted its influence across the Middle East through its proxy forces in Gaza, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen's Houthis. Some of its closest allies have

already joined the conflict, with Hezbollah resuming strikes on Israel within two days of the attack on Iran — and just 15 months after the last Israel-Hezbollah war ended in a November 2024 ceasefire. Militias linked to the Islamic Resistance in Iraq have claimed drone strikes on U.S. bases in Iraq.

Meanwhile, the Houthis have only held protests and issued declarations condemning the Iran war, in contrast to the waves of missile and drone attacks they launched on Israel and shipping in the Red Sea after the Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas attacks on Israel sparked the war in the Gaza Strip.

Here's a look at the Houthis' military capabilities and where they stand in the conflict.

Houthi ties to Iran  
Armed by Iran, the Houthis seized most of Yemen's north and its capital, Sanaa, in 2014, pushing the country's internationally

recognized government into exile. A Saudi-led coalition backing Yemen's government entered the conflict the following year, and the Houthis have since fought a long-running but largely stalemated civil war in Yemen.

While the Houthis share some political and religious ties with Iran, they follow a different doctrine of Shiite Islam and are independent of Iran's supreme leader, unlike the Lebanese militant Hezbollah group and several Iran-backed Iraqi militias.

Still, they are key to Iran's regional influence and the current war is unlikely to weaken that, according to Ahmed Nagi, a senior Yemen analyst at the International Crisis Group think tank.

"From Tehran's perspective, the Houthis have proven themselves to be a capable and effective front, able to generate real pressure," Nagi said.

He said the Houthi leaders'

decision to distance themselves from the conflict is a calculated choice that has been fully coordinated with the Iranians.

Two Houthi members of the group's media and political offices told The Associated Press that the rebels' weapons stockpile is running low after its attacks during the Israel-Hamas war. The Iran war has further impeded the flow of weapons, said the officials, speaking on condition of anonymity because they weren't authorized to talk to the media.

Still, the group has a large stockpile of drones, said another official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the weapons issue, about which he is well-informed.

Nagi said the Houthis appear to be building up their forces by recruiting more fighters, relying on local weapons production and sending reinforcements to Yemen's western coastline on the Red Sea, signaling they are preparing for escalation.

"The decision is not about unwillingness to intervene, but about timing," Nagi said. "Iran's broader strategy seems to be to avoid throwing all its cards on the table at once, instead using its partners and capabilities gradually as the confrontation evolves."

The Houthis are likely to step in if the conflict widens, Nagi added, or if they perceive an existential threat to Iran, such as significant deterioration in military capabilities.

## US-China trade talks open in Paris, paving the way for Trump-Xi summit

AP  
Beijing, Mar 15: Representatives from Beijing and Washington began their economic and trade talks in Paris on Sunday, Chinese official news agency Xinhua reported.



The meetings, led by U.S. Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent and Chinese Vice Premier He Lifeng, are expected to pave the way for U.S. President Donald Trump's state visit to Beijing to meet Chinese leader Xi Jinping in about two weeks. The White House has said that Trump will travel to China from March 31 to April 2, though Beijing has not officially confirmed it.

Bessent said on Thursday that his team will continue to deliver results that put

America's farmers, workers and businesses first. China's commerce ministry said Friday the two sides are set to discuss "trade and economic issues of mutual concern."

Trump's visit to China will be the first for a U.S. president since he went in his first

term in 2017. It will come five months after the two leaders met in the South Korean city of Busan and agreed to a one-year truce in a trade war that temporarily saw tit-for-tat tariffs soar to triple digits before the two sides climbed

## Russia is supplying Iran with Shahed drones, Zelensky says

REUTERS  
Kyiv, Mar 15: Russia is supplying Iran with Shahed drones to use against the US and Israel, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky told CNN in an interview excerpt aired on Saturday.

Zelensky told CNN's Fareed Zakaria that it is "100 percent facts" that Iran has used Russian-made Shaheds to attack US bases.

Shahed drones have been linked to other attacks on countries in the region, although their manufacturers are not always clear. Iran pioneered the Shahed drone, a much

cheaper alternative to expensive missiles. They first saw mass use in Russia's invasion of Ukraine, where thousands of them have been launched by Russian forces since fall 2022, according to the Ukrainians.

Although Iran initially provided the drones, Russia now manufactures its own Shaheds. The armed forces of other countries have since adopted Shahed-type drones, including the US military, which has said they are part of the current campaign against Iran.

Iran pioneered the Shahed drone, a much cheaper alternative to expensive missiles.

## South Africa bowls out New Zealand for 91, wins 1st T20 by 7 wickets

AP  
Mount Maunganui (New Zealand), Mar 15: A South Africa team with four players on debut rolled World Cup finalist New Zealand for 91 in 14.3 overs and went on to win the first Twenty20 international Sunday by seven wickets.



Opener Connor Esterhuizen anchored the South Africa reply with an unbeaten 45 from 48 balls as the Proteas won with 20 balls to spare. He was supported by Dian Forrester, also on debut, who stayed with him for more than six overs and was 16 not out at the end.

Esterhuizen finished the chase with a six off Kyle Jamieson from the fourth ball of the 17th over.

New Zealand's spinners helped to make a fight of it and captain Mitchell Santner finished with 1-8 from his four overs on a turning pitch at Bay Oval.

"I think all the plans paid off and the execution was top-notch from our bowlers," South Africa captain Keshav Maharaj said. "It was a young bowling line-up, but whatever we asked them to do, they stood up."

"It was a little nervy towards the end but it showed the maturity in Connor and Dian in the way they played to take it over the line."

New Zealand had eight players missing from its World Cup squad, including its top-six batters

from the team that lost the final against India by 96 runs and beat South Africa by nine wickets in the semifinals.

After choosing to bat first, New Zealand lost five wickets in the powerplay, couldn't recover and stumbled to its 10th-lowest score in T20 internationals, its second-lowest against South Africa.

Gerald Coetzee dismissed New Zealand openers Devon Conway and Tom Latham within the first three overs, finishing with 2-14, then Ottneil Baartman took 2-22 to help complete the ruin of the New Zealand top order.

Baartman dismissed Tim Robinson and Nick Kelly, on debut, before the run-out of Bevon Jacobs left New Zealand on 36-5.

Nqobani Mokoena ran through New Zealand's lower order, taking 3-26 to stifle any hope of a late resurgence. A 26-run partnership between Jimmy Neesham (26) and

Mitchell Santner (15) was the best New Zealand could manage.

Neesham fell to Mokoena and captain Santner to his South Africa counterpart Maharaj, who took 2-25.

"It was quite cool making my debut in the first game and I went out there to enjoy it," said Mokoena, 19, who was Player of the Match. "The first two overs didn't really go my way and I thought I wasn't going to get any wickets. But I just stuck to my plans and thank God it paid off."

New Zealand plays so often overseas that it's possible they can no longer judge their home conditions. The pitch at Bay Oval looked docile at a glance, but the South African seamers found both seam and swing in the warm early evening conditions.

There was even a little turn for the spinners later. All of the New Zealanders struggled with their timing.

## Indian crude tanker sails out of UAE's Fujairah safely

PTI  
New Delhi, Mar 15: An Indian-flagged crude tanker sailed out safely from the UAE's Fujairah after loading oil, despite an attack on the oil terminal, as the government on Sunday said it is closely monitoring the situation in West Asia while ensuring stable fuel supplies and maritime safety.

The vessel, Jag Laadki, carrying about 80,800 tonnes of Murban crude oil, departed Fujairah at 1030 hrs IST and is bound for India, with all crew members safe, the government said in an update on preparedness measures.

Jag Laadki is the fourth Indian-flagged vessel to have come out of the war zone

unharmd. Besides, the safe passage being an important milestone for Indian diplomacy, the cargo they are carrying is considered critical as shipping constraints in the Strait of Hormuz have impacted India's energy supplies.

"On March 14, 2026, while the Indian-flag vessel Jag Laadki was loading crude oil at the Fujairah Single Point Mooring, the Fujairah oil terminal was attacked. The vessel sailed safely from Fujairah at 1030 hrs IST today (Sunday) carrying about 80,800 tonnes of Murban crude oil and is bound for India," the update said.

"The vessel and all Indian seafarers onboard are safe."

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

# رمضان المبارك

1447 H / 2026 CE

تاریخ	رمضان المبارک	اعتتام سحری	وقت افطار
06	16	05:31 AM	06:34 PM
07	17	05:30 AM	06:34 PM
08	18	05:28 AM	06:35 PM
09	19	05:27 AM	06:36 PM
10	20	05:26 AM	06:37 PM
11	21	05:25 AM	06:38 PM
12	22	05:24 AM	06:38 PM
13	23	05:23 AM	06:39 PM
14	24	05:20 AM	06:40 PM
15	25	05:19 AM	06:41 PM
16	26	05:18 AM	06:42 PM
17	27	05:16 AM	06:42 PM
18	28	05:15 AM	06:43 PM
19	29	05:14 AM	06:44 PM
20	30	05:12 AM	06:45 PM

تاریخ	رمضان المبارک	اعتتام سحری	وقت افطار
19	1	05:49 AM	06:21 PM
20	2	05:48 AM	06:22 PM
21	3	05:47 AM	06:23 PM
22	4	05:46 AM	06:24 PM
23	5	05:45 AM	06:24 PM
24	6	05:44 AM	06:25 PM
25	7	05:42 AM	06:26 PM
26	8	05:41 AM	06:27 PM
27	9	05:40 AM	06:28 PM
28	10	05:39 AM	06:29 PM
01 MAR	11	05:38 AM	06:30 PM
02	12	05:37 AM	06:31 PM
03	13	05:36 AM	06:32 PM
04	14	05:34 AM	06:33 PM
05	15	05:33 AM	06:33 PM

**DUA FOR SEHRI**  
وَبِصَوْمٍ غَدٍ نُوَيْتُ مِنْ شَهْرِ رَمَضَانَ  
I intend to keep the fast for tomorrow in the month of Ramadan

**DUA FOR IFTAAR**  
اللَّهُمَّ إِنِّي لَكَ صُمْتُ وَبِكَ آمَنْتُ [وَعَلَيْكَ تَوَكَّلْتُ] وَعَلَى رِزْقِكَ أَفْطَرْتُ  
O Allah! I fasted for You and I believe in You and I put my trust in You and I break my fast with Your sustenance

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