



## LG Sinha: J&K will be terror-free soon

Disruptions to peace or commerce will face full legal action | Police committed to safeguard order, stability, earn public trust

Yogesh

Reasi (Jammu), Mar 17: Asserting that Jammu and Kashmir will be terror-free soon, Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha on Tuesday said that anyone who threatens peace, law and order, or the safety of innocent civilians in the Union Territory will have to pay a very heavy price.

Addressing the Passing Out Parade of the constables at the STC Talwara here, LG Sinha, according to the news agency—Kashmir News Observer (KNO) said, "With all resources and resolve, J&K Police pursue zero tolerance to terrorism. We are working on a multi-pronged strategy with all the stakeholder agencies and soon J&K will be terror-free."

"Any individual or group that seeks to threaten the peace, law and order, or the safety of innocent civilians in Jammu Kashmir will have to pay a very heavy price," he said, adding, "Any attempt to disrupt public peace, undermine commercial activity, or incite violence shall be met



with the full force of the law and J&K Police is unequivocal in its commitment to safeguard order and stability, and shall pursue all necessary measures against such acts, without exception."

Congratulating the bravehearts of J&K Police on their successful completion of the tough training, the Lieutenant

Governor called upon them to focus on protecting Jammu Kashmir's achievements. "J&K Police has been instrumental in forging a terror-free, crime-free UT where no insecurity overshadows civilian lives. The force has played a pivotal role in achieving remarkable milestones in | More on P6



Colorful Shikara boats docked on Dal Lake under a moody, cloudy sky  
Pic: Jahangir Shah (KNO/KT)

## CM Omar hosts Iftaar in Srinagar

Emphasises unity, compassion

KT News Desk

Srinagar, Mar 17: Chief Minister Omar Abdullah on Tuesday hosted Iftaar at Sher-e-Kashmir International Convention Centre here, bringing together people from different walks of life in the spirit of harmony and togetherness during the holy month of Ramadan.

The Iftaar was attended by Deputy Chief Minister Surinder Kumar Choudhary, Ministers Sakina Itoo, Javid Ahmad Dar and Satish Sharma, Advisor to the Chief Minister Nasir Aslam Wani, legislators, senior civil and police officers, religious scholars, representatives of civil society and members of the media. The gathering



reflected the inclusive ethos and communal harmony that Jammu and Kashmir has long been known for.

Speaking on the occasion, the Chief Minister extended his warm greetings to the

people and said that the holy month of Ramadan symbolises compassion, patience and generosity.

Omar Abdullah also prayed for lasting peace, prosperity and | More on P6

## Snowfall, rains continue for 3rd consecutive day in Kashmir

MeT predicts cloudy skies, precipitation for two more days

Sajid Raina

Srinagar, Mar 17: Several upper reaches of Kashmir received fresh snowfall, while plains recorded rains for third consecutive day on Tuesday.

An official told the news agency—Kashmir News Observer (KNO) that areas including Gurez, Karnah and Razdan Top experienced fresh snowfall, while light rainfall was reported in Srinagar and other plains of the Valley.

The Meteorological Centre Srinagar said the sky is expected to remain partly cloudy with brief spells of light rain in plains and light snowfall over higher elevations at a few places till March 20.

The MeT office said a few upper reaches of the Chenab Valley and parts of South Kashmir may receive moderate to heavy snowfall during this period.

After this spell, weather conditions are expected to improve for a few days. The department said the region is likely to remain generally dry from March 21 to March 25.

However, another spell of cloudy weather is expected between March 26 and March 28, with the possibility of light rain in plains and light snowfall over higher reaches at scattered to many places.

The Meteorological Department has issued an advisory for travellers and the general public, particularly those moving through mountainous areas and important passes.

Travellers, transporters and people planning to move across higher | More on P6

## J&K Police moving to dense forests, mountains to neutralise terrorists: DGP

Nalin Prabhat says battle has shifted to jungles, upper reaches | 'We're not allowing nefarious neighbour to succeed in its designs'

Sajid Raina

Reasi (Jammu), Mar 17: Revealing that Jammu and Kashmir Police have changed tactics to counter terror, Director General of Police Nalin Prabhat on Tuesday said the force is now carrying out operations in dense forests and mountainous areas to neutralise terrorists operating in the region.



Addressing a passing out parade of the constables at the STC Talwara here, the DGP, according to the news agency—Kashmir News Observer (KNO) said, "Over the past two years the J&K Police altered its operational strategy and intensified action in remote forests and mountains where terrorists have attempted to regroup."

He said, "The battle has shifted to | More on P6

## Evacuation of students from Iran hits delays, families demand faster action

Kashmir parents call for direct flights, smoother border crossings

Jahangeer Ganaie

Srinagar, Mar 17: Anxiety continues to mount among parents in Jammu and Kashmir as the evacuation process of Indian students stranded abroad faces delays, logistical challenges, and what families describe as an inadequate response from the Government of India.

Despite ongoing efforts to bring students back safely, several developments over the past 24 hours have added to the uncertainty.

According to details obtained by the news agency—Kashmir News Observer (KNO), a group

of 51 students from Golestan has departed towards Armenia as part of the evacuation process. However, many others remain stranded at various transit points, awaiting clearance and further assistance.

The third batch of Indian students returning from Yerevan, Armenia, has been delayed by approximately three hours. Flight FZ718, originally scheduled to depart at 11:25, is operating via Dubai and was expected to reach New Delhi at 9:55 AM. Officials confirmed that the flight is running behind schedule, further prolonging the | More on P6

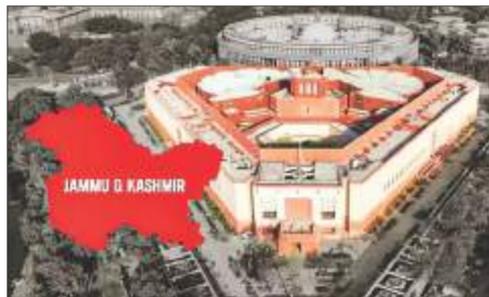
## Moderate increase in J&K's Central assistance allocation for 2026-27: Parl panel

Calls for enhancing capital support, greater focus on disaster preparedness

KNO Special Correspondent

Srinagar, Mar 17: The Department-related Standing Committee on the Ministry of Home Affairs has observed that there has been a moderate increase in the allocation for Jammu & Kashmir in the Budget Estimates for 2026-27 compared to the previous year.

In its report tabled in the Lok Sabha on Monday, a copy of which is in possession of news agency—Kashmir News Observer (KNO), the Committee stated that while the allocation for 2026-27 reflects a moderate increase over the previous year, greater alignment between projected requirements and approved



allocations, improved planning of project-linked expenditure, and an enhanced focus on capital formation would contribute to more effective and outcome-oriented utilisation of funds.

According to the report, the Union Territory was allocated Rs 43290.29 crores against a projected requirement of Rs 50,640.02 crores.

The Committee observed that

there is scope for enhancing capital support to facilitate asset creation and long-term growth.

"The Committee further notes that support for capital expenditure has remained constant at Rs 101.77 crores and has been fully utilised during 2025-26 (till 31st January 2026). In the Committee's view, given the infrastructure and developmental needs of the Union Territory, there is scope for enhancing capital support to facilitate asset creation and long-term growth," reads the report.

The Committee said that a significant portion of the allocation for the current fiscal was yet to be utilised.

"The Committee | More on P6

## LPG crunch continues; central govt pushes states to clear city gas projects

PTI

New Delhi, Mar 17: With the LPG supply squeeze impacting hotels, businesses and household consumers through longer waiting periods and panic bookings, the Centre has asked states to expedite approvals for piped gas projects to enable faster rollout and ease pressure on cooking gas availability.

As the war in West Asia, which blocked India's access to almost 60 per cent of its LPG, continues with no end in sight, the government is now pushing for the use of alternative cooking mediums like induction cookers.

"Situation remains a matter

of concern, but we are providing supplies as before to the domestic consumers," said Sujata Sharma, Joint Secretary, Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas.

This was made possible as refineries were asked to ramp up domestic output, which was then prioritised for household kitchens. Commercial use of LPG, such as in hotels and restaurants, was initially curtailed, but later restored to a fifth of their normal offtake.

"We have to look at alternatives," she said at a media briefing.

Giving statistics, she said panic bookings for a refill LPG cylinder peaked to 87.7 lakh on



March 13, but have since eased, with about 70 lakh bookings being done on Monday. This compares to about 55 lakh bookings in pre-war days.

LPG deliveries have kept

pace. "We delivered 62.5 lakh cylinders on March 13, 60 lakh on March 14... this compares to 50 lakh deliveries in pre-conflict times", she said.

There is still panic booking

happening despite assurances that there are enough LPG supplies to meet household needs, she said, adding that domestic production of LPG has increased by 38 per cent compared to March 5 levels.

To ease pressure on LPG, the government is promoting commercial and household LPG users to switch to piped natural gas. City gas companies are offering incentives and faster connections.

The government is also expanding the city gas distribution network to ease pressure on LPG demand, Sharma said.

The central government has, on March 16, written to all state governments to expedite

approvals for city gas projects. It asked them to issue deemed permission for pending applications for large city gas pipelines, approvals for new city gas projects within 24 hours, waive road restoration charges, and relax working schedules.

"Situation still is worrying, but there is no dry out at any LPG distributorship," she said.

India's LPG supplies came under strain as the Strait of Hormuz - a key route for imports - faces disruptions following the US and Israel attack on Iran and Tehran's sweeping retaliation.

With shipments from major suppliers, such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates,

affected, India, which imports about 60 per cent of its LPG needs, has moved to ration supplies. The government has curtailed allocation to commercial users and industries to prioritise household consumption and prevent an immediate shortage of cooking gas.

The disruption has begun to ripple through several sectors that rely heavily on LPG. Restaurants have started dropping slow-simmered dishes from their menus because they consume large amounts of cooking gas, while industries, such as brick and tile manufacturing, ceramics and glass kilns, are also facing difficulties in sustaining | More on P6

## H&P staff quarters project in Jammu nearing completion, Secretary reviews progress



KT NEWS DESK

JAMMU, MARCH 17: Secretary of the Hospitality and Protocol (H&P) Department, Avny Lavasa, inspected the ongoing construction of staff quarters adjacent to the Circuit House at Canal Road, Jammu, on Monday. The project, as per an official statement issued on Tuesday, valued at Rs. 3.43 crore, is being executed under the SASCI scheme and is slated for completion by the end of the current financial year.

The project, which is 95 percent complete, includes 12 two bedroom flats for the employees of H&P

department.

The Secretary expressed satisfaction with the progress and directed the Executive Engineer and executing agency to ensure physical and financial completion of the project before closing of the current financial year. The inspection was followed by a meeting with H&P department officers, where Lavasa discussed departmental issues, including reorganisation and human resource matters. She directed the officials to resolve these issues promptly.

Director H&P and other departmental officers were present during the visit and meeting.

## DC Anantnag reviews progress of Land Record Digitization

KT NEWS DESK

ANANTNAG, MARCH 17: Deputy Commissioner (DC) Anantnag, Dr. Bilal Mohiud Din Bhat, on Monday reviewed the status of the district on land record digitization during a meeting with the concerned officers at Dak Bungalow Khanabal.

The meeting, as per an official statement, was attended by the ADC, ACR, SDMs besides the Tehsildars, Naib Tehsildars and other officials of revenue department.

At the outset, the DC conducted Tehsil-wise evaluation of the progress of verification and uploading of Jamabandies on PM Gati Shakti Portal and issued specific directions to the Tehsils, showing pendency, to ensure the verification of the remaining Jamabandies immediately.

Dr. Bilal emphasized that the digitization initiative is aimed at enhancing transparency and directed the officers to take appropriate action on non-quasi judicial errors within the stipulated timeframe. Simultaneously the work on back log mutations be taken up so that maximum update is achieved, he remarked.

The DC enjoined upon the Tehsildars to start the grievance collection work,



with respect to last updated Jamabandies and ensure the process along with data capturing is completed within the

stipulated timeframe of next 3-4 weeks. To achieve this, special camps be conducted and field functionaries be tasked

to collect the data from the land holders during regular and scheduled visits to the Revenue Villages, he added.

Directing ADC, ACR and SDMs to monitor the process, the DC asked them that a proper mechanism and format be devised to receive the information on grievances from every Revenue Village and Tehsil on a daily basis.

Reviewing implementation of the Public Services Guarantee Act, the DC directed the officers that benefits of all revenue services that come under the ambit of the Act be provided to the eligible applicants in a fair, transparent and time bound manner.

The meeting was informed that verification of digitized Jamabandies is nearing completion and the district has achieved above 99% progress so far, with possibility of achieving 100% this week. Also updated geo-referenced digitized maps showing attributes such as Khasra Number and area stand prepared besides appreciable progress has been made on sub-parcellisation of maps.

Further, the work on the pending mutations which will update the current revenue records, is also being carried out.

## KU concludes week-long entrepreneurship training on ornamental plants, mushroom cultivation

KT NEWS DESK

Srinagar March 17: The University of Kashmir (KU) on Monday concluded week-long entrepreneurship training programmes on "Nursery & Post-Harvest Management of Commercially Important Ornamental Plants" and "Cultivation & Commercialization of Edible and Medicinal Mushrooms in Kashmir" at the Main Campus.

Organised by the varsity's Department of Botany, the programmes, as per a statement issued by KU on Tuesday, aimed to equip participants with practical skills and technical knowledge in nursery management, mushroom cultivation and post-harvest handling, while encouraging entrepreneurship and livelihood generation in the floriculture and mushroom sectors. Speaking at the

valedictory session, Vice-Chancellor KU, Prof. Nilofar Khan, said that skill-oriented training programmes play a crucial role in linking academic knowledge with practical enterprise opportunities.

"Such initiatives help build entrepreneurial capacity among participants and encourage them to explore sustainable livelihood avenues by applying scientific knowledge to local resources," she said.

Registrar KU, Prof. Naseer Iqbal, said that the University remains committed to promoting innovation, entrepreneurship and skill development through focused training programmes that address local needs and economic opportunities.

Dean, School of Biological Sciences KU, Prof. Abdul Hamid Wani, highlighted the growing potential

of floriculture and mushroom cultivation in the region and emphasised the importance of scientific training and capacity building in strengthening these sectors.

Earlier, Head, Department of Botany KU, Prof. Aijaz Ahmad Wani, said the programme was designed to provide participants with practical exposure and scientific understanding necessary for developing entrepreneurial ventures in ornamental plant nurseries and mushroom production.

The training programme included 12 expert sessions and five practical training sessions, providing hands-on learning opportunities for participants. The sessions focused on nursery management, climate-controlled cultivation environments, floriculture systems suited to Kashmir's conditions, and post-harvest

innovations aimed at extending the vase life and market value of flowers.

Participants also undertook field visits to the Division of Floriculture (SKUAST-K), Government Hi-Tech Nursery at Polo View, and several private nurseries to gain practical insights into commercial nursery management and cultivation practices.

Entrepreneurs from nursery management and mushroom cultivation programmes, along with participants, shared their feedback and expressed satisfaction with the training programme.

On the occasion, the 'Botanical Society Bulletin' was also released, and certificates were distributed among the participants. The formal vote of thanks was delivered by Prof. Manzoor Shah, faculty at the Department of Botany KU.

## Anantnag hosts Gender Sensitisation Workshop to empower rural women

### DDC calls women "Leaders of Change", deserving due recognition

KT NEWS DESK

ANANTNAG, MARCH 17: In continuation to International Women's Day celebrations aimed to promote inclusivity and empower rural women, the Agriculture Production Department Anantnag, on Monday organized a "Gender, Targeting & Inclusion Sensitization Workshop" at Town Hall Anantnag.

The workshop, as per an official statement, was held on the theme "Rights, Justice, Action for all Women and Girls," under the aegis of the IFAD-JKICP Project.

District Development Commissioner (DDC), Dr. Bilal Mohiud Din Bhat, graced the event as chief guest, which also witnessed the participation by Chief Agriculture Officer, DD Fisheries, officers from agriculture and allied sectors, officials and women from different walk of life.

The main objective of the program was to sensitize officers and field functionaries on the importance of gender mainstreaming in agricultural projects. Discussions primarily centered on ensuring women farmers and girls have equitable access to resources, technology, and decision-making processes within the farming community.

Addressing the gathering, the DDC called women as leaders and drivers of change who are committed



to excel in all sectors including agriculture, adding they deserve due recognition for their gender specific and general roles in the society. He encouraged women to choose suitable lines of activity in agriculture and allied sectors and generate employment for themselves and others as well, through flagship initiatives like HADP, JKICP and Mission YUVA.

Dr. Bilal stressed that farmers and prospective beneficiaries must come forward and take full advantage of various government schemes aimed at strengthening the agriculture sector and improving livelihoods.

On the occasion, the CAO briefed participants about different schemes of the

department, which have been designed to enhance agricultural productivity and boost livelihood opportunities. These schemes can have a positive effect on economic upliftment and social empowerment of women associated with agriculture and allied sectors, he noted.

At the conclusion, women achievers were felicitated with mementoes and certificates for their outstanding contribution in different fields.

The initiative underscores the commitment of District Administration and Agriculture Department to Women Empowerment and effective implementation of HADP, JKICP and Mission YUVA schemes.

**Kashmir Thunder**  
IS AVAILABLE AT ALL LEADING STALLS

## National Ayush Mission Ayush Ministry expands digital platforms, awareness campaigns

KT NEWS DESK

New Delhi, MARCH 17: The Ministry of Ayush has developed digital platforms such as the Ayush Hospital Management Information System (AHMIS) under Ayush Grid to digitize inventories and track the availability of medicines in Ayush facilities by doctors and pharmacists.

As per a PIB statement, under National Ayush Mission (NAM), State/UT Governments are being supported for implementation of Behavior Change Communication (BCC) and Information, Education, and Communication (IEC) activities for creating awareness in the community about the strength of the Ayush system. These initiatives use mass media platforms to promote Ayush based preventive healthcare

practices and encourage communities to adopt healthier lifestyles. In addition to it different outreach activities are also being supported through structured Ayush Public Health Programmes for creating awareness in the community by conducting camps and address public health issues by utilizing the potential of Ayush systems, with appropriate referral linkages with other Ayush healthcare facilities, in providing preventive, promotive, curative and rehabilitative health care services, either as standalone interventions or as an add-on to conventional systems of medicine.

(d) Under NAM, 12,500 Ayushman Arogya Mandir AAM (Ayush) [AAM (Ayush)] have been made operational across the Country. The Ministry of Ayush has organized Training of Trainers (ToT)

programmes to train healthcare workers, including ASHA and ANM workers, about the benefits of Ayush for maintaining general wellness and preventing diseases. These grassroots workers are associated with AAM (Ayush) and involved in creating awareness in the community and guide people on simple preventive healthcare practices using Ayush methods for common illnesses. Additionally, in collaboration with the Central Health Education Bureau (CHEB), Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), and the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (India), Master Trainer programmes were organized in 2024 and 2025 on the management of musculoskeletal and metabolic disorders in Ayush systems of medicine.

## Centre disburses over Rs 1,789 crores XV FC grants to rural local bodies in 5 states

KT NEWS DESK

New Delhi, MARCH 17: The Union Government has released Fifteenth Finance Commission (XV-FC) Untied Grants for Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs)/Rural Local Bodies (RLBs) in the States of Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Telangana and Maharashtra during FY 2025-26. This release covers allocations pertaining to different financial years and aims to further strengthen rural local governance. As per a PIB state-

ment, in Chhattisgarh, the 2nd installment of Untied Grants amounting to Rs 232.60 crores has been released for all eligible 33 District Panchayats (DPs), 146 Block Panchayats (BPs) and 11,693 Gram Panchayats (GPs). Additionally, Rs 8.0238 crores of the withheld portion of the 1st installment have been released to 1 DP, 8 BPs and 350 GPs.

Similarly, Gujarat has received Rs 509.2177 crores as the 2nd installment covering 33 DPs, 247 BPs and 14,563 GPs, along with Rs 14.64 lakhs of the

withheld portion released to 2 additional GPs.

For Madhya Pradesh, Rs 630.6454 crores have been released as the 1st installment of Untied Grants for 51 DPs, 296 BPs and 22,914 GPs along with Rs 104.6556 crores of the withheld portion of the 1st and 2nd installments for FY 2023-24 to additionally eligible 21 DPs, 106 BPs and 834 GPs. In Telangana, Rs 256.2101 crores have been released as the 2nd installment (for FY 2024-25) covering 12,702 GPs. While Maharashtra

has received 151.1856 crores as the withheld portion of the 1st and 2nd installments for FY 2022-23, benefiting 12 DPs, 125 BPs and 324 GPs.

Government of India through Ministry of Panchayati Raj and Ministry of Jal Shakti (Department of Drinking Water and Sanitation) recommends release of XV-FC grants to States for Panchayati Raj Institutions/ Rural Local Bodies, which is then released by Ministry of Finance. The allocated grants are recommended and released in 2 installments in a financial

year. The Untied Grants will be utilized by RLBs for location-specific felt needs, under the twenty-nine subjects enshrined in the Eleventh Schedule of the Constitution, except for salaries and other establishment costs. The Tied Grants can be used for the basic services of (a) sanitation and maintenance of ODF status, and this should include management and treatment of household waste, and human excreta and fecal sludge management in particular and (b) supply of drinking water, rainwater harvesting and

## Sluggish markets cast shadow over Eid-ul-Fitr

JAHANGEER GANAIE

Srinagar, Mar 17: The festive buzz that traditionally sweeps Kashmir's markets in the days before Eid-ul-Fitr is missing this year, with traders across the Valley describing one of the slowest pre-Eid seasons in living memory. They say that the effects of the Pahalgam attack, a bad apple season, rising prices, and global oil problems have all made families spend much less money.

"We have never seen such dullness before Eid. Usually, by this time, markets remain crowded till late evening, but now there are barely any customers," said Bashir Ahmad, a trader from Shopian. "Sales are at an all-time low, and it is becoming difficult to even cover daily expenses."

Traders said that while Eid shopping traditionally centred on clothes, footwear and bakery items, this year people were buying only essentials. They said the decline has been building since autumn, with hopes of a pre-Eid recovery now fading.

Mohammad Shafi Ganaie, a trader from Anantnag, said the damage ran deep. "People suffered losses due to low tourism after the Pahalgam attack last year and low apple demand due to highway closures. They are just buying essential commodities," he said.

Rouf Ahmad, a member of the Traders Association in Pulwama, said



sales had plummeted to a level where many were worried about sustaining their businesses. He cited global war tensions, rising crude oil prices and a shift in local investment towards high-density farming as compounding factors.

According to traders, tourism plays a crucial role in boosting local trade, and the lack of adequate tourist inflow has had a cascading effect on the overall economy.

"Last year's tourism was not as good as expected, and that has directly affected our earnings," said Ghulam Nabi, a garment shop owner in Anantnag.

Eid shopping."

Traders also noted a shift in spending patterns among those who do have resources. Rather than shopping, many are investing in high-density orchards. "People who have money are not spending in markets but are investing in agriculture. That is affecting retail businesses significantly," said a trader from Kupwara.

Business associations have urged authorities to improve tourist inflow, ensure better returns for horticulture produce and control inflation to restore market confidence. Traders remain hopeful that last-minute shopping may bring some relief, but the prevailing mood suggests this Eid may pass without the economic cheer Kashmir's markets are known for.

Senior trade leader and Kashmir Economic Alliance Chairman Mohammad Yaseen Khan said market activity in Kashmir has remained largely subdued ahead of Eid, with traders yet to witness the expected festive surge.

"So far, the market response has been quite dull. There is routine movement due to traffic, but the usual rush for Eid shopping, especially in clothing, is missing. Normally, we see a significant rise in sales a week before Eid, but that momentum is not visible this time," he said.

With just a couple of days left, Khan said they are still hopeful. However, as of now, there is no major pickup in trade," he said—(KNO)

"People associated with tourism – cab drivers, hotel workers and guides – have less money this year, which means less spending in markets." The horticulture sector also faced challenges. Apple growers said they faced a "punishing" season. They added that low demand and poor returns left an entire segment of Kashmir's economy with less to spend.

Inflation has emerged as another major concern. "Poor people are bearing the brunt of inflation," said Abdul Rashid, a grocery shop owner in Baramulla. "They are focusing only on essential items and cutting down on everything else, including

## Completion of two vital bridges pending for two decades

JAHANGEER GANAIE

Pulwama, Mar 17: Nineteen years after their foundation stones were laid, two bridges over the Jhelum river at Dogripora and Reshipora in Pulwama district remain unfinished, forcing hundreds of residents, school children, elderly citizens and patients to cross the river daily in wooden boats, at constant risk to their lives.

The Dogripora bridge was sanctioned in 2006, with construction beginning in 2008, while work on the Reshipora bridge started shortly after. Despite nearly two decades of assurances from successive governments, both projects remain stalled, largely due to funding constraints and prolonged administrative delays.

Residents fear a tragedy on the lines of the Gandbal boat capsized could occur if the projects are not completed urgently.

Yasir Ahmad, a resident of Dogripora said that

the delay had made life extremely difficult. "Several people have suffered injuries while crossing the river. These bridges are lifelines that would connect our villages to the national highway and the Panzgam Railway Station. Their completion would significantly cut travel time between Tral and Shahoora and boost local economic activity," he said.

In Reshipora, residents said they were forced to travel nearly 10 kilometres to reach the highway, a journey that would take minutes if the bridge were functional. "It is not just an inconvenience but a daily suffering. During emergencies or harsh weather, we feel completely cut off," said Tariq Ahmad, a local resident, adding that the absence of public transport compounded the hardship for children and the elderly.

Basit, another Dogripora resident, said nearly 70 per cent of the bridge structure had already been completed before work

abruptly stopped. "The foundation was laid during the PDP-Congress regime, and work was initiated by JKPC in 2007-08. Since then, the incomplete structure stands as a reminder of unfulfilled promises," he said.

Last year, the government sanctioned Rs 1,529.47 lakh for the completion of the Dogripora bridge, raising hopes among residents. However, no visible progress has been made on the ground. For the Reshipora bridge, a revised Detailed Project Report estimating the remaining work at Rs 1,383.01 lakh has been prepared and is awaiting administrative approval.

A senior official said both bridges were partially complete and work had been halted due to financial constraints.

"The tendering process will begin once approvals are in place. We are aware of the public concerns, and efforts are underway to resume work at the earliest," the official said—(KNO)

## Lone seeks review of EWS norms for Jobs, Admissions reservation

KNO

Srinagar, Mar 17: Citing official figures of Below Poverty Line (BPL) population in Kashmir Valley, Peoples Conference president Sajad Gani Lone has asked the J&K government to reconsider the asset-based criteria under the Economically Weaker Section (EWS) category for reservation in jobs and admissions.

In a post on X, Lone said that the BPL population in Kashmir exceeds that of Jammu, yet only one out of nine qualifiers in the EWS category in the recent KAS examination was from Valley.

"The number of souls in the Below Poverty Line Category (Antyodaya Anna Yojana + Priority Households) in Kashmir Valley exceeds that in Jammu," Lone said, citing official figures of 37.71 lakh in Kashmir compared to 29.81 lakh in Jammu. He pointed out that in response to his questions in the Assembly, the government revealed that only 7.7% and 8.6% of certificates issued under the EWS category were from Kashmir.

He said the problem lies in the criteria for granting these certificates.

"While almost all BPL



population in Kashmir falls within the income criteria for issuing these certificates, the asset-related conditions, especially the size of the residential house and residential plot ensures exclusion of Kashmiris from the EWS category," he said.

Citing the district-wise BPL population of Kashmir, Lone said that asset-based criteria is grave injustice with people of the Valley.

"It is grave injustice with people of Kashmir. We have 5.09 lakh BPL souls in Srinagar, 5.21 lakh in Kupwara, 5.79 lakh in Baramulla and 5.76 lakh in Anantnag," he said, adding that EWS certificates could have been a major confidence building measure for old city Srinagar, old town Baramulla, Anantnag, Budgam and parts

of Sopore.

Lone appealed to the Chief Minister to address the issue urgently, stating that continuing recruitment without correcting the criteria would amount to injustice. "All reservations are heavily tilted towards Jammu. This particular category is tilted towards Jammu because of government norms, not because Kashmir is rich and Jammu is poor," he said.

He asked why Jammu & Kashmir cannot do away with asset-based norms.

"It is time to study what states like Rajasthan and Kerala have done. If they have done away with asset-related conditions, why cannot we?" Lone asked—(KNO)

## Hotel damaged in Pahalgam fire Man killed by reversing fire truck

KNO

Srinagar, Mar 17: A hotel and a vehicle were damaged after a massive fire broke out in the Pahalgam area of south Kashmir's Anantnag district late Monday evening, officials said, adding that a man also died after being hit by a reversing fire truck during fire-fighting operations.

An official said that the fire engulfed Asal Resort late evening, following which fire trucks were rushed to the spot. "During fire-fighting operations, multiple LPG cylinder explosions occurred, hampering efforts. The fire was put off after strenuous efforts. Three structures of the hotel and a vehicle suffered damaged in the incident. The cause of fire is being ascertained," he said.

He said that a man also died after being hit by a reversing fire tender during the fire-fighting operations. He has been identified as Manjeet Singh (31) son of Wakeel Singh of Hutmara Mattan. The deceased was working as a gatekeeper at Vale Lodge in the vicinity—(KNO)

## ACB arrests PDD meter reader in bribery case

KNO

Srinagar, Mar 17: The J&K Anti-Corruption Bureau on Tuesday said they have arrested, a meter reader posted in PDD Rajouri, after catching him red-handed while accepting a bribe of rupees 30,000 from a complainant in exchange for reducing an inflated electricity bill.

In a statement, a spokesperson said the J&K Anti-Corruption Bureau registered a case against Arif Iqbal, presently posted as Meter Reader in PDD Rajouri vide FIR no. 03/2026 at PS ACB Rajouri u/s 7 of Prevention of Corruption Act, 1988 (as amended in 2018) on 17.03.2026 on the basis of a complaint alleging therein that complainant was running a Tyre Shop from the year 2019 to 2021, after which his shop was closed.

"He has an electricity connection and was regularly paying his electricity bill. He received an electricity bill for the period from 31.12.2025 to 31.01.2026 for

an amount of 2497 in February 2026."

"In this connection, Arif Iqbal Meter Reader of PDD Rajouri met complainant and asked him to give 50,000 so that he can take care of his electricity bill on this complainant told him that he will pay bill according to the meter reading."

"After this, he threatened the complainant that his electricity bill will be increased. On 05.03.2026, Arif Iqbal came again and handed over an electricity bill for the period of 31.01.2026 to 28.02.2026 for an amount of 1,53,890 with due date for payment as 27.03.2026 and when complainant asked him about such a high bill. Arif Iqbal (Meter Reader) demanded 50,000 as bribe to adjust the bill. Subsequently, the said demand was negotiated to 30,000," said the spokesperson.

Continued on  
www.kashmirthunder.in

## Vehicle theft case solved in Pulwama

KNO

Srinagar, Mar 17: Demonstrating swift and effective policing, Police in Pulwama solved a theft case within days of reporting and recovered the stolen vehicle.

According to a statement, on 14/03/2026, Police Station Kakapora received a written complaint from Mohd Noor Alam son of Abdul Hashim resident of Banagogi, Badalgawun, District Nagaon (Assam), stating that unknown thieves had stolen his Auto Rickshaw bearing registration No. JK04D-3791 from Kakapora Chowk. Accordingly, a case FIR No. 20/2026 under relevant sections of law was registered and investigation was taken up.

Acting promptly on a specific input, a team from Police Station Kakapora apprehended one suspect identified as Yawar Ahmad Shaksaz son of Manzoor Ahmad resident of Karnabal Samboora. During sustained interrogation, the accused confessed to the commission of the crime, leading to the recovery of the stolen auto at his instance.

During further investigation, the accused also disclosed his involvement in another theft case. He, along with an accomplice named Amir Ahmad Sofi son of Gh Mohd Sofi resident of Astan Mohalla Kakapora, had stolen batteries from vehicles parked at Okhoo in July last year. Acting on this disclosure, some of the stolen batteries have also been recovered. Further investigation is underway.

J&K Police remains committed to ensuring safety and security of citizens and urges the public to report any suspicious activities to the nearest police establishment—(KNO)

## We managed on our own, say Kashmiri students stranded at Iran border

REHAN QAYOOM MIR

Srinagar, Mar 17: Far from home and caught in a maze of uncertainty, around 180 Kashmiri and Indian students studying in Iran are stranded near the Azerbaijan border, facing fear, mounting financial losses and an unclear path back as evacuation efforts remain inconsistent on the ground.

The students, mostly pursuing medical and professional courses, were first relocated from Tehran to Qom amid rising tensions in Iran. Initially offered routes through Armenia and later Azerbaijan, they were asked to book tickets in advance and share PNR details. Limited border clearances and changing instructions have since left them stranded near Astara, waiting anxiously to return home.

One of the students over call described a distressing journey over the past nearly three weeks, marked by repeated relocations, changing travel plans and prolonged waiting at the Astara border crossing.

"We left our universities hoping we would be evacuated safely, but we have ended up managing everything on our own," a student said.

According to her, they were initially in Tehran when tensions escalated, prompting them to seek evacuation. "We were later moved to Qom, considered relatively safer at the time, where we stayed for around 10-12 days amid uncertainty," she said. "Even there, we were told repeatedly



that evacuation was not confirmed. Later, we were given options to leave through Armenia or Azerbaijan, but we had to arrange everything ourselves," the student said.

The student said they were advised to book flight tickets in advance and share their travel details before being moved further.

"To secure our exit, we booked tickets ranging from rupees 50,000 to over rupees 1 lakh from Azerbaijan to New Delhi. For many of us, this amount is more than our families' monthly income," another student said.

However, upon reaching the Astara border near Azerbaijan, the situation became more uncertain. Students said crossing requires official clearance or 'codes', which are being issued in very limited numbers.

"Initially, we were told dozens would be allowed daily, but the numbers kept decreasing. Now, only a handful are being allowed, and many are still waiting despite having confirmed tickets," the student said.

Notably, the delays have resulted in several students missing their flights, many of which

were non-refundable or difficult to reschedule.

"We were first told to book tickets to be moved forward. Now we are being asked to cancel or reschedule them, with no clarity on refunds. We don't know how much more loss we can bear," she added.

Students also described the situation at the border as unpredictable, with names being cleared without a clear sequence, leaving others waiting anxiously.

"Every day we gather, hoping our turn will come. It feels uncertain and stressful because we don't know who will be allowed next," the student said.

Apart from financial losses, students spoke about emotional strain and pressure from families back home.

"Our parents are worried. Some of us used all available savings for tickets. We do not know what to tell them when flights are missed, and plans keep changing," another student said. Students said they remain in contact with associations and officials, but pointed to a lack of consistent communication regarding routes, permissions and timelines.

The situation involves multiple stages of coordination, including movement within Iran and permissions at the Azerbaijan border, which students believe has contributed to delays and confusion.

The stranded group has appealed for smoother border clearances, clearer communication and support in managing financial

losses caused by missed or cancelled travel plans.

Meanwhile, the Jammu & Kashmir Students Association (JKSA) has sought the urgent intervention of External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, requesting immediate steps to facilitate safe passage for the stranded students and ensure their timely return.

The Association, in a statement, highlighted growing distress among students and their families, stressing the need for coordinated diplomatic and logistical support.

National Convener of the Association, Nasir Khuehami, said the students had travelled from different parts of Iran and reached the Azerbaijan border in the hope of crossing over for their onward journey to India. "However, Azerbaijani authorities have reportedly closed the border and are not allowing them to enter the country or granting transit permits, leaving hundreds of Indian students, of which the majority are from Kashmir, stranded in extremely distressing conditions."

Khuehami said that students were earlier instructed to book their flight tickets in advance and submit their PNR details, after which they would be escorted to the border. They were also informed that travel permissions would be coordinated in batches, enabling them to cross the border and board their onward flights. Following these instructions, many students booked tickets for March 18, 19, and 21—(KNO)

## EDITORIAL

### Protect Citizens, Crack Down On Hoarding, Black Marketing

Chief Minister Omar Abdullah's directive to officials to remain vigilant against hoarding and black-marketing comes at a critical juncture when global disruptions threaten local stability. With Eid approaching, Navratras underway, and the tourist season beginning, the pressure on essential commodities intensifies precisely when global supply chains face unprecedented strain. The West Asia conflict has disrupted energy supplies worldwide, and India, as a major importer, is not immune. The instruction to Deputy

Commissioners to maintain strict oversight at the district level acknowledges that crises are ultimately managed not in boardrooms but on the ground. Hoarding and black-marketing thrive where enforcement is weak and oversight fragmented. District authorities must now step up and demonstrate that they can protect consumers from exploitation. Equally important is the need for transparent public communication. In times of uncertainty, rumours spread faster than facts. Panic-buying, artificial scarcity, and price spikes often result

not from actual shortages but from perceived ones. Authorities must regularly update the public about actual stock positions and supply chains. This transparency can disarm those who would exploit public anxiety for private gain. The assurance that adequate reserves of petrol, diesel, and LPG exist across Jammu and Kashmir must be backed by visible action. Essential institutions such as hospitals and educational establishments must remain protected. The temporary cap on non-domestic LPG supplies, while shielding these vital

institutions, reflects the kind of prioritisation that is necessary during shortages. However, such measures must be carefully calibrated so that they do not unnecessarily harm businesses like restaurants and hotels that depend on these supplies. Stakeholder consultation is not optional. Before any further rationalisation of supplies, authorities must sit with restaurateurs, hoteliers, and other affected groups. The tourism industry cannot become collateral damage in the pursuit of energy security. Strict action against hoarders

and black-marketers is essential. Those who seek to profit from public distress must face consequences that serve as a clear deterrent. Without visible punishment, unscrupulous elements will continue to exploit every crisis. The current situation demands a coordinated response that brings together enforcement, communication, and genuine engagement with those affected. The real test of administration is not whether challenges arise, but how effectively it protects its citizens when they do.

# Celebrating The Power Of Vaccines

## National Vaccination Day

Immunisation through vaccination saves crores of lives every year by reducing the risks of contracting diseases. It builds people's natural defences to create protection against illnesses.

In India, vaccines have had a resounding impact on the improvement of public health. Apart from polio, vaccines have eradicated smallpox, and eliminated yaws, polio, and maternal and neonatal tetanus. They have reduced child mortality rates, measles-rubella, and tuberculosis. During COVID-19, India — the pharmacy of the world — supplied over 200 crore COVID-19 vaccine doses, including indigenously developed and licensed vaccines manufactured in the country. In 2026, the Government of India launched a nationwide HPV vaccination campaign for girls aged 14 years to protect against cervical cancer, and an indigenously manufactured tetanus-diphtheria (Td) vaccine.

India's robust Universal Immunisation Programme (UIP), a widespread network of publicly funded healthcare centres, workers, and cold-chain infrastructure, along with a strong digital network, have delivered results. Full immunisation coverage has risen from 62% in 2015 to 98.4% as of January 2026. India's percentage of zero-dose children relative to the total population has declined from 0.11% in 2023 to 0.06% in 2024. India has a long history of prioritising vaccination and continues to push for higher vaccination rates to further improve public health through the UIP.

India celebrates National Vaccination Day on 16 March every year to commemorate the first dose of the Oral Polio Vaccine given to citizens in 1995, under the Pulse Polio Programme launched the same year. The programme successfully eliminated polio in India, with the last case reported on 13 January 2011 in Howrah, West Bengal.

## Universal Immunisation Programme

Mothers pass antibodies to their babies at birth. However, these antibodies, transferred through pregnancy and breast milk, only provide immune protection for the first few months of a newborn's life.

Vaccines are crucial to protect babies and infants from germs and life-threatening diseases. It is best to administer vaccines to children before they are exposed to illnesses — ideally within the first 12 to 18 months of life.

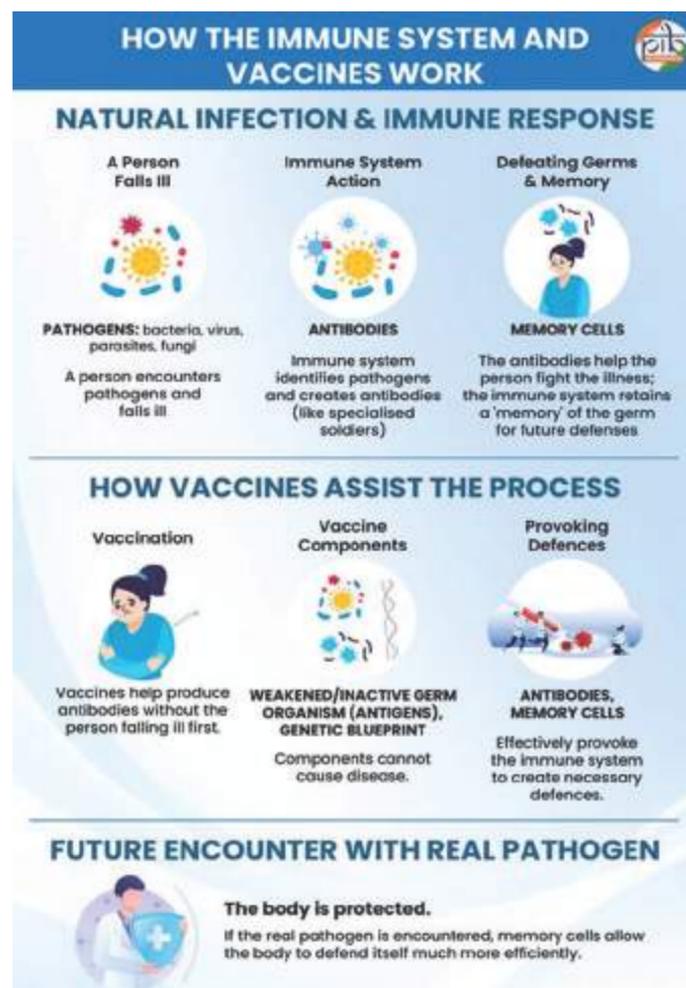
The Universal Immunisation Programme, launched in 1985 and implemented by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, aims to provide free vaccines to children and pregnant women against various diseases. The programme reaches approximately 2.9 crore pregnant women and 2.54 crore newborns annually.

The objectives of the UIP are:  
 - To increase immunisation coverage  
 - To improve the quality of services  
 - To establish a reliable cold chain system to the health facility level  
 - To monitor performance  
 - To achieve self-sufficiency in vaccine production

The UIP provides vaccines to newborns, children, adolescents, and pregnant women, protecting against 12 diseases. The Japanese Encephalitis vaccine is provided only in endemic districts, while the rest are provided nationally.

In the past decade, various new vaccines were added to the programme: Inactivated Polio Vaccine (IPV) (2015), Rotavirus Vaccine (RVV) (2016), Measles-Rubella (MR) vaccine (2017), and Pneumococcal Conjugate Vaccine (PCV) (2017). The vaccines administered under UIP are:

- Bacillus Calmette-Guérin (BCG)
- Diphtheria, Pertussis, and Tetanus (DPT)
- Tetanus and adult Diphtheria (Td)
- Bivalent oral polio vaccine (bOPV)
- Measles-Rubella (MR) vaccine
- Hepatitis B (Hep B)
- Pentavalent — DPT + Hepatitis B + Haemophilus Influenzae type b (DPT + Hep B + Hib)
- Rotavirus Vaccine (RVV)
- Pneumococcal Conjugate Vaccine (PCV)
- Japanese Encephalitis (JE) Vaccine



These vaccines protect against the following life-threatening diseases:

- # - Disease and Description
- 1 - Tuberculosis (severe childhood form) - Bacterial infection affecting the lungs; can spread to the brain and multiple organs
- 2 - Diphtheria - Bacterial infection affecting the throat; can damage the heart and nerves
- 3 - Pertussis (Whooping Cough) - Highly contagious cough illness, dangerous for infants
- 4 - Tetanus - Bacterial infection from contaminated wounds causing muscle stiffness
- 5 - Polio - Viral infection attacking the nervous system; can cause permanent paralysis or death
- 6 - Measles - Highly contagious viral disease, causes fever and rash
- 7 - Rubella - Mild viral illness with fever and rash; spreads through coughing and sneezing
- 8 - Hepatitis B - Viral infection of the liver that can become chronic and cause liver damage
- 9 - Meningitis & Pneumonia (Hib) - Meningitis: infection and inflammation of membranes surrounding the brain and spinal cord; Pneumonia: infection and inflammation of the lungs
- 10 - Rotavirus Diarrhoea - Viral infection causing severe diarrhoea in infants
- 11 - Pneumococcal Pneumonia - Bacterial lung infection causing fever and breathing difficulty
- 12 - Japanese Encephalitis - Mosquito-borne viral disease causing brain inflammation

## National Immunisation Schedule

Timely vaccination is essential for protection from life-threatening diseases. The prescribed schedule under the UIP for pregnant women, infants, and children is as follows:

## Pregnant Women

- Td-1: As early as possible during the first antenatal visit
  - Td-2: 4 weeks after first Td shot
  - Td-Booster: If two Td doses were already received in a previous pregnancy within the last 3 years
- All doses ideally given before 36 weeks — but administered even if missed, including during labour.

## Infants and Children

- At birth: Hep B, bOPV, BCG
- By 1st birthday: 3 doses of bOPV, 3 doses of rotavirus vaccine, 3 doses of pentavalent, 3 doses of fractional IPV, 3 doses of PCV, 1st dose of MR vaccine, 1st dose of JE vaccine (where applicable)
- By 2nd birthday: 2nd dose of MR vaccine, 1st dose of DPT booster, 1 dose of bOPV booster, 2nd dose of JE vaccine (where applicable)
- After 5th birthday: 2nd dose of DPT booster at 5 years, 1 dose of Td vaccine at 10 years, 1 dose of Td vaccine at 16 years

## Recent Vaccine Launches and Programmes

The most recent chapter in this expansion is also the most ambitious — with two landmark launches in early 2026 extending UIP's reach.

## Indigenous Tetanus-Diphtheria (Td) Vaccine Launch (2026)

An indigenously manufactured Tetanus and Adult Diphtheria (Td) vaccine was launched on 21 February 2026. The vaccine is produced at the Central Research Institute (CRI), Kasauli. Approximately 55 lakh doses will be supplied to the UIP by April 2026. India's domestic vaccine manufacturing capacity underpins this entire edifice. As the world's largest vaccine producer, India supplies approximately 60% of global vaccines. The launch of the indigenously manufactured

Td vaccine is an expression of self-reliance.

## Nationwide HPV Vaccination Campaign (2026)

A nationwide Human Papillomavirus (HPV) vaccination campaign was launched on 28 February 2026 from Ajmer, Rajasthan, by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. It targets 14-year-old girls to protect them from cervical cancer. Around 1.15 crore girls across India are expected to receive the vaccine free of cost at government health facilities.

## Mission Indradhanush

To reach children and pregnant women who are unvaccinated or partially vaccinated, the government launched the Mission Indradhanush programme in 2015, followed by Intensified Mission Indradhanush Missions (with greater focus on urban areas) and greater inter-ministerial convergence. These missions aim to achieve over 90% full immunisation coverage under the UIP by strengthening routine immunisation services and targeting hard-to-reach populations.

Twelve phases of Mission Indradhanush have been held so far, up to 2023, vaccinating 5.46 crore infants and 1.32 crore pregnant women across 765 districts.

## Infrastructure Supporting UIP Implementation

## Community Health Centres and Workers

UIP vaccines are provided free of cost to all beneficiaries at fixed sites such as Primary Health Centres (PHCs), Community Health Centres (CHCs), and government hospitals, at sub-centres, and through outreach sessions held at Anganwadi centres or other identified locations within villages. Since 2005, UIP has been under the National Rural Health Mission and is also implemented in urban slums.

Frontline health workers — ASHAs (Accredited Social Health Activists), Anganwadi Workers (AWWs), and link workers — play a central role in mobilising beneficiaries to session sites and ensuring no child or pregnant woman is missed.

## Model Immunisation Centres

The Government of India encourages states and union territories to establish model immunisation centres. They are already operational in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and the union territories of Chandigarh and Ladakh.

## Cold-Chain Network

Vaccines must be stored continuously within a limited temperature range — from manufacture to the moment of vaccination. Temperatures too high or too low can cause a vaccine to lose its potency (its ability to protect against disease), and once lost, potency cannot be regained. The system for storing and transporting vaccines within prescribed conditions is called a cold chain system.

India's vaccine cold chain is one of the largest in the world — spanning nearly 30,000 cold chain points, from Government Medical Supply Depots at the national level down to Primary Health Centres at the sub-district level. These storage points at hospitals, community health centres, primary health centres, and other health facilities are equipped with over 1.06 lakh ice-lined refrigerators and deep freezers, and 432 walk-in coolers and walk-in freezers for bulk vaccine storage. Conducting over 1.3 crore immunisation sessions annually across this network, maintaining temperature integrity at every point is critical to ensuring vaccines reach the last beneficiary in potent condition.

To digitise and strengthen this vast infrastructure, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare uses the Electronic Vaccine Intelligence Network (eVIN) — a state-of-the-art software platform that tracks vaccine stock levels and storage temperatures in real time at multiple locations across the country, backed by strong IT infrastructure and trained professionals. eVIN has expanded nationwide across all states and union

## Key Takeaways

- India has eradicated smallpox, polio, and maternal and neonatal tetanus through vaccination, and continues to expand its immunisation programme — most recently launching HPV and indigenous Td vaccines in 2026.
- The Universal Immunisation Programme (UIP) is one of the world's largest immunisation programmes, reaching 2.9 crore pregnant women and 2.54 crore newborns every year, free of cost.
- Full immunisation coverage has risen from 62% in 2015 to 98.4% in January 2026.
- The percentage of zero-dose children to the total population has declined from 0.11% in 2023 to 0.06% in 2024.

territories. The platform proved critical during the COVID-19 pandemic, enabling the vaccination of a record number of people in a short period.

## Digital Initiatives

India's immunisation management system has been upgraded through a robust digital ecosystem with platforms for registration, appointment scheduling, vaccine tracking, and real-time monitoring.

## U-Win

U-Win is a digital platform and app to help people find vaccination centres near their residence, manage vaccination appointments at health facilities, and maintain vaccination records. One user can register up to 10 people under a single mobile number, including citizens or guardians, pregnant women, infants (0-1 years), children (1-7 years), and adolescents (7-19 years). U-Win was launched in October 2024 and is available in 12 languages, including English.

## CoWIN

Like U-Win, CoWIN is a digital platform for COVID-19 vaccination registration at health and other centres, and for managing vaccination appointments and records. It was launched on 16 January 2021, and since then, over 220 crore doses have been administered through it.

## Impact

Vaccination is one of several factors — alongside improvements in nutrition, sanitation, maternal care, and healthcare access — behind India's broader gains in child and pregnant women survival rates. Better-nourished, better-immunised women face lower risks during pregnancy and childbirth, while stronger healthcare systems that deliver vaccines also expand access to skilled birth attendants and emergency obstetric care, reducing maternal mortality.

The newer vaccines — rotavirus, PCV, and Measles-Rubella — have directly targeted the leading infectious causes of child death. The percentage of zero-dose children relative to the country's population has been halved, from 0.11% in 2023 to 0.06% in 2024 — an achievement acknowledged by the UN Inter-Agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation (2024) in positioning India as a global exemplar in child health.

Vaccination campaigns do more than protect public health — they reduce the financial burden of illness on families, keeping children healthy and allowing them to live fuller, more meaningful lives. The benefits extend across generations: a healthy child becomes a healthy adult, and a healthy population contributes more productively to the workforce, driving broader social and economic progress.

## Conclusion

From eradicating smallpox in 1977 to eliminating polio and neonatal tetanus, administering 200 crore COVID-19 doses, and now pursuing measles-rubella elimination — India's immunisation journey is one of verified, milestone-by-milestone achievement.

The views expressed by contributors on this page are their own and do not necessarily reflect the policies or positions of the newspaper

## Shaheed Wali Mohammad Itoo: The Durr-E-Naayaab Who Lived For People

Martyred on March 18, 1994, his legacy lives on through his daughter, Minister Sakeena Itoo, whose governance style reflects his ideals

Shahid Ali

In a world where politics feels like a game of power grabs, vote counts and slick PR stunts, the world needs reminders of leaders who lived it differently. Shaheed Wali Mohammad Itoo was one of those rare souls in Jammu and Kashmir, a true 'Durr-e-Naayaab', a priceless gem whose shine only grows brighter over time.

**A Leader People Could Reach**

For those who lived in Noorabad Constituency (now DH Pora), Shaheed Wali Mohammad Itoo was not merely a Minister or an MLA, he was hope. He was someone people could walk up to and spill their problems, without any appointments or political barriers. Villagers of Damhal Hanji Pora always recall that his office rarely felt like a formal political space, but it felt more like a meeting place where ordinary voices mattered.

Shaheed Wali Muhammad Itoo believed in a simple idea: people remember the hand that helps, not the voice that echoes.

**Standing Tall In Tough Times**

J&K's turbulent years tested everyone. Fear, uncertainty and instability pushed some leaders into silence, staying out of sight. But not Shaheed Sahib. He chose the opposite path. He continued visiting villages, meeting people and remaining visible when it was easier to disappear. In times when public life itself carried



risks, his decision to stay connected to the people required not just political commitment but personal courage.

**Building Lives, Not Just Roads**

Development wasn't a buzzword for him; it was personal. In Noorabad's backroads, he pushed for schools that actually taught, clinics that saved lives and jobs that gave families hope. He saw it as his duty, especially to the quiet ones whose pleas never made it to the big offices. Governance, to him, meant lifting people up. He saw governance as a moral duty owed to the people who trusted him. For Shaheed Itoo Sahib, development was never a campaign slogan.

**Cost Of Caring**

History sometimes carries a painful truth: leaders who remain closest to their people often face the greatest risks.

The martyrdom of Wali Mohammad Itoo on 18th March 1994 after Friday prayers was not only a tragic loss for his family and supporters, but it became a deeply emotional moment in the political history of Kashmir.

For many, his sacrifice symbolised the dangers that accompanied public service during the region's most difficult periods.

**Legacy That Lives On**

Legacies in politics are often spoken about symbolically. But they become meaningful when values continue through action.

Today, that continuation is visible in the work of his daughter, Sakeena Itoo, who serves as a Minister in the Council of Ministers led by Chief Minister Omar Abdullah in Jammu and Kashmir. Her work across health, education and social welfare sectors reflects a governance style rooted in accessibility and public welfare, which remained at the core of her father's political journey. Sakeena's service and commitment stand as a living tribute to her father's ideals.

Observers often see echoes of her father's approach in her public life, humility, accountability and a belief that leadership must remain connected to people.

**Remembering The Lesson**

As Jammu and Kashmir continues its journey toward stability, development and social cohesion, remembering leaders like Shaheed Wali Mohammad Itoo is more than a tribute. Remembering leaders like Itoo is, therefore, not only an act of tribute, but it is also a moment of reflection on what democratic representation can mean when public service remains its guiding principle.

In every sense of the phrase, Shaheed Wali Mohammad Itoo remains a 'Durr-e-Naayaab', rare, invaluable and unforgettable.

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## 7 Strategies To Embrace Criticism As A Gift

How to receive feedback without defensiveness and turn it into growth

Joel Wong

From books to articles to blogs, there's no shortage of advice on how to give constructive feedback: Use the sandwich method. Be specific. Lead with empathy. Yet we talk far less about how to receive critical feedback well—even though your willingness not just to tolerate but to embrace critical feedback may be one of the most powerful predictors of your growth.

In intimate relationships, a willingness to accept influence, including critical feedback, from one's partner predicts greater relationship satisfaction. In the workplace, people who are more receptive to feedback—including critical feedback—perform better and report greater job satisfaction. As a professor, I've found that students who are most open to critical feedback tend to improve over time; those who are not stagnate.

But as Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen explain in their book *Thanks for the Feedback*, receiving such feedback is really, really difficult. As humans, we face two conflicting drives—we want to learn and improve, but we also crave approval, acceptance, respect, and (I'll add) a sense of competence. Critical feedback can threaten our need to feel competent in the eyes of others.

**4 Types of Critical Feedback**

Critical feedback can come from many sources, especially from our family members, partners, spouses, co-workers, supervisors, teachers, and coaches. Such feedback also shows up in many shapes and sizes. You can think of it along two dimensions:

**Helpfulness:** Does it help you improve?  
**Care:** Is it delivered with kindness or harshness?

By combining these two dimensions, we get what I call the Critical Feedback Matrix.

The top right quadrant represents feedback that is both caring and helpful. That's the best kind you can receive. The person provides actionable steps for improvement and communicates in ways that show genuine care for your success. I call this compassionate clarity—you might simply call it constructive feedback.

One example came from my practicum supervisor, Dr. Carlos Díaz-Lázaro, more than 20 years ago when I was a graduate student. When reviewing my CV, he noted that my name was in a much larger font than the rest of the document. He gently suggested that others might perceive this as narcissistic and encouraged me to consider reducing the font size. Notice that he didn't call me a narcissist. He shared a concern about perception. I thanked him and made the change.



Over the years, I've reflected on how impactful that feedback was. It addressed a blind spot that could have harmed my career. And I knew Carlos cared about me and wanted me to succeed. I'm grateful to him—and grateful for his feedback.

The bottom two quadrants represent uncaring feedback—criticism. This may include personal attacks ("You're lazy!"), a harsh tone, public shaming, or even discrimination based on your social identity, such as your race or gender.

But not all uncaring feedback is unhelpful. Brutal clarity sits in the bottom right quadrant—helpful but delivered without care. Maybe a supervisor offers concrete suggestions but compares you negatively to a coworker. Not cool—but potentially still useful.

Empty negativity—the worst kind—sits in the bottom left quadrant. It's both uncaring and unhelpful. Perhaps someone berates you without offering any tangible suggestions for improvement.

Finally, the top left quadrant reflects empty critique—caring but unhelpful feedback. It may be wrapped in kindness but so diluted that you're left unsure about what to do differently.

**Critical Feedback and Gratitude**

When feedback is both caring and helpful—compassionate clarity—we can be grateful to the person and grateful for the feedback. But what about brutal

clarity—helpful but uncaring feedback? You might not feel grateful to the person, but you can still be grateful for the growth opportunity.

Gratitude becomes harder with unhelpful feedback—especially empty negativity. But even with empty critique—caring but unhelpful—you might recognize the person's positive motives. Even if they lack skill, their care may still be something you can appreciate.

**Practical Tips for Embracing Critical Feedback**

Now let's get to the hard part. If critical feedback can aid our personal and professional growth, how can we learn to embrace it as a gift? Here, I offer seven practical strategies.

**1. Uncaring Might Not Mean Unhelpful**  
The type of feedback we're most likely to dismiss is brutal clarity—the uncaring but helpful message. When someone's feedback is harsh, we tend to reject both the messenger and the message.

But it's important to separate helpfulness from care. Even uncaring, poorly delivered feedback can contain something valuable. You may not feel grateful to the person—but you can still be grateful for what you can learn.

**2. Cultivate Self-Awareness**  
If you frequently react poorly to critical feedback—even to compassionate clarity—it's worth asking what triggers you.

Is your need for competence on overdrive?

Is your self-esteem overly tied to performance, such that any critical feedback immediately elicits shame?

Are you overly concerned with your reputation or worried about appearing weak in front of others?

Are you a people-pleaser who fears disappointing others?  
Understanding your triggers won't erase your emotions, but it empowers you to pause, reflect, and respond more thoughtfully over time.

**3. Sit on the Feedback**  
If you feel flooded—overwhelmed by intense emotions—when you receive critical feedback, know that that's normal. It's okay if your first reaction is anger, sadness, or anxiety—not gratitude. In this situation, the best thing to do is usually... nothing.

You might say to your feedback provider, "You've shared some important information. I'd like to think about it and get back to you." Often, feedback feels less threatening after you've had time to step away and reflect on the feedback.

**4. Helpfulness Is Not the Same as Truth**  
Notice that the matrix focuses on helpfulness, not truth. These are not identical. Our instinct, when we receive critical feedback, is to ask: Is this true? But self-perception is often distorted by emotion.

A more useful question, focusing on

helpfulness, may be: Does this help me grow?

Perception often matters more than objective truth. If your partner or spouse says they don't feel valued and offers specific suggestions, that feedback deserves attention—regardless of whether it's "objectively" true.

**5. Give Feedback About the Feedback**  
Unhelpful feedback can be frustrating. But you can sometimes turn it into something useful. You could nudge your feedback provider to focus on your growth edges rather than your deficits:

"What specifically can I do to improve?"  
"Could you recommend two or three concrete steps I can take?"

"I tend to respond better when you share what I can do instead of what I'm not doing."

**6. Look for Learning Opportunities**  
Simply asking, "What can I learn from this feedback?" can shift your perspective. Even empty negativity—the worst possible type of critical feedback—can teach you something. If you focus on learning:

You may discover that something you say unintentionally triggers others, even if it's not your fault.

You may realize it's time to part ways with a verbally abusive supervisor or a toxic organization.

You may gain insight into how not to treat others.

**7. Remember the Bad, but Honor the Good**

We're far more likely to recall the criticisms that hurt us than the caring critical feedback that helped us grow. We remember the anger, resentment, and sleepless nights—but we often forget the kindness embedded in feedback that embodies compassionate clarity.

If someone has given you caring and helpful feedback—and you've seen its positive impact over time—I encourage you to write them a gratitude note. Don't just thank them. Tell them specifically how their feedback helped or changed you.

I'm trying to practice what I preach. I wrote Carlos to thank him for the constructive feedback he gave me 20 years ago.

Growth is often nurtured by those brave and kind enough to tell us what we need to hear—not necessarily what we want to hear. These individuals deserve our thanks.

This piece is part of a mini-series on the Varieties of Goodness. It also appears in my *Substack* newsletter on the science and practice of gratitude.

References

Stone, D., & Heen, S. (2015). *Thanks for the feedback: The science and art of receiving feedback well*. Penguin Books.

Source: *Psychology Today*

## Pope's upcoming Africa odyssey takes him to mosque, prison and site of deadly 2021 blast

The Vatican released on Monday details of Pope Leo XIV's upcoming four-nation Africa tour, suggesting Christian-Muslim relations, comforting victims of violence and encouraging the Catholic community in former European colonies will be key themes. (Reuters/File)

AFP

Rome, Mar 17: The Vatican released on Monday details of Pope Leo XIV's upcoming four-nation Africa tour, suggesting Christian-Muslim relations, comforting victims of violence and encouraging the Catholic community in former European colonies will be key themes.

The April 13-23 trip begins in Algeria, which has never before welcomed a pope. It includes a visit to the Great Mosque in Algiers as well as a meeting with Leo's fellow Augustinians in the place most associated with St. Augustine of Hippo, the 5th-century inspiration for their religious order.

Leo will preside over a peace meeting in northwest Cameroon, visit an important Marian shrine in Angola and pray at a memorial to victims of a 2021 blast in Equatorial Guinea that killed more than 100 people and was blamed on negligence.

All the while, he'll meet with local bishops, celebrate Masses for the faithful and have private talks with the four nations' leaders, two of whom have been in power for decades.

Here's a look at some of the key stops in each of the countries.

The pope will tour a mosque and meet Catholic faithful in Algeria.

Leo has a busy first day in Algiers, meeting with government authorities, touring the mosque and meeting with the local Catholic community.

He'll later visit Annaba, far to the east on the Algerian coast, formerly known as Hippo, where St. Augustine lived and died in 430, one of the theological and devotional giants of early Christianity. Leo will meet with a community of Augustinian sisters and priests, and tour an archaeological site.

The pope will also celebrate Mass in the capital's basilica named after St. Augustine.

Leo is set to lead a 'peace



meeting' in Cameroon

Leo's next stop is in Cameroon, where Pope Benedict XVI visited in 2009. He will visit the capital, Yaoundé, the country's economic hub, Douala, and Bamenda, a major city in the North-West region.

Cameroon's western regions have been plagued by fighting since English-speaking separatists launched a rebellion in 2017 with the stated goal of breaking away from the French-speaking majority and establishing an independent English-speaking state. The conflict has killed more than 6,000 people and displaced over 600,000 others, according to the International Crisis Group, a think tank.

One of the highlights of Leo's visit will be a "peace meeting" that the pope will lead in Bamenda on April 16. No details of who might participate were immediately announced.

The country is also plagued by fighting involving Boko Haram militants in the north, as

the Islamic extremist group's insurgency in neighboring Nigeria has spilled over into Cameroon.

The pope's visit has sparked concerns among some Cameroonians that it could be instrumentalized by the country's leader following a disputed presidential election.

Cameroonian Jesuit priest and opposition activist Ludovic Lado expressed his concerns to Leo in an open letter, warning that the visit could be "interpreted as an implicit form of endorsement of a discredited and illegitimate government."

The country's 92-year-old President Paul Biya, already in power for 42 years, was declared the winner of October's presidential election, securing another seven-year term. But his main challenger, former government spokesman Issa Tchiroma Bakary, has continued to maintain that he is the legitimate winner.

A large Catholic community awaits Leo in Angola

The pope's trip to Angola will take him to a former Portuguese colony in southern Africa that is overwhelmingly Christian. Catholicism is the largest faith group in the Portuguese-speaking nation of around 38 million people because of the former colonial ruler's influence.

Angola gained independence from Portugal in 1975, though it immediately slipped into a long and bloody civil war that didn't end until 2002.

The pope will visit the capital, Luanda, the town of Muxima, and the city of Saurimo. At Muxima, the pope will see the Sanctuary of Mama Muxima, a Marian shrine inside the Church of Our Lady of Muxima that has become one of the most important Catholic pilgrimage sites in Angola.

The church was first built around the end of the 16th century by the Portuguese after they established a fortress at Muxima. It became a key point

in the Portuguese trans-Atlantic human trade as a place where enslaved people were baptized before they were sent on ships to the Americas.

The pope will visit three dioceses in Equatorial Guinea

Leo's final stop is in Equatorial Guinea, which has one of the largest proportions of Catholic populations in Africa, with roughly 70 percent of its 1.9 million citizens Catholic. A vestige of its Spanish colonialism, the Catholic Church has remained a dominant and influential institution in the Central African country.

While officially a secular state, the Catholic Mass is part of state ceremonies, including Independence Day celebrations.

Leo's visit to the country, the second after Pope St. John Paul II's 1982 tour, will have him traverse three of the country's five dioceses in Malabo, the state capital, Bata, and Mongomo.

In Bata, Leo will meet with prison inmates and will also pray at the memorial to victims of a 2021 blast at a military barracks that killed more than 100 people. The explosions were blamed on the negligent handling of dynamite in a barracks close to residential areas.

Equatorial Guinea has long been ruled by Africa's longest-serving president, Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, who has been in power since 1982 and has been accused of running an autocratic regime.

Catholics in Equatorial Guinea experienced intense persecution under the rule of former President Francisco Macias Nguema, who closed down churches in 1975 and officially banned the Catholic Church in 1978. Nguema wanted to eliminate colonial influences. The decree was repealed when Teodoro came to power in a coup.

Despite the country's economy being powered by oil and gas wealth, at least 57 percent of its entire population lives in poverty, according to the World Bank.

## Top US counterterrorism official Kent resigns over Trump's Iran war

Says Iran posed no imminent threat



AP

Washington, Mar 17: Joe Kent, the director of the National Counterterrorism Center, announced his resignation on Tuesday, saying he "cannot in good conscience" back the Trump administration's war in Iran.

Kent said on social media Iran "posed no imminent threat to our nation, and it is clear that we started this war due to pressure from Israel and its powerful American lobby."

There was no immediate comment from the White House.

Kent, a former political candidate with connections to right-wing extremists, was confirmed to his post last July on a 52-44 vote. As head of the National Counterterrorism Center, he was in charge of an agency tasked with analyzing and detecting terrorist threats.

Before entering President Donald Trump's administration, Kent ran two unsuccessful campaigns for Congress in Washington state. He also served in the military, seeing 11 deployments as a Green Beret, followed by work at the CIA.

Democrats strongly opposed Kent's confirmation, pointing to his past ties to far-right

figures and conspiracy theories. During his 2022 congressional campaign, Kent paid Graham Jorgensen, a member of the far-right military group the Proud Boys, for consulting work. He also worked closely with Joey Gibson, the founder of the Christian nationalist group Patriot Prayer, and attracted support from a variety of far-right figures.

During his Senate confirmation hearing, Kent also refused to distance himself from a conspiracy theory that federal agents instigated the Jan. 6, 2021, attack at the Capitol, as well as false claims that Trump, a Republican, won the 2020 election over Democrat Joe Biden.

Democrats grilled Kent on his participation in a group chat on Signal that was used by Trump's national security team to discuss sensitive military plans.

Still, Republicans praised Kent's counterterrorism qualifications, pointing to his military and intelligence experience.

Sen. Tom Cotton, the GOP chair of the intelligence committee, said in a floor speech that Kent had "dedicated his career to fighting terrorism and keeping Americans safe."

## CONTD. FROM FRONT PAGE

### LG Sinha: J&K

good governance, innovation, social unity, and building a just society. We must uproot separatist elements which are trying to divide people and derail development. Let this serve as their stern warning," the Lieutenant Governor said.

He observed that every woman or man donning the J&K Police uniform pledges to exceed public expectations with superior standards. "From today, public trust is your greatest asset but earn it relentlessly through integrity, impartiality, and empathy. Your role transcends enforcing law; embody its spirit and soul. I trust you will uphold every citizen's dignity in protection," the Lieutenant Governor said.

He stated that J&K Police stand fully committed to peace, security, and democratic values, ensuring every citizen scale new height of progress in tranquillity.

A total of 430 trainee constables passed out after their basic training and all trainees were administered the oath. On the occasion, the Lieutenant Governor awarded trophies to the trainee constables who excelled during their training: Johnny Victor (All-Round Best), Vishal Bharat (Second All-Round Best), Yogesh Sharma (Third All-Round Best), Pankaj Raina (Indoor Best), Touseef Ahmed Lone (Outdoor Best), Tahir Rashid Dar (Best Marksman), Tasleem Kosar (Parade Commander) and Sushant Sharma (Parade 2nd-in-Command).

Director General of Police Nalin Prabhat and other senior officials were present on the occasion. (KNO)

### J&K Police moving

jungles and upper reaches. We are moving upwards into these areas to get them (terrorists) and destroy their hideouts."

DGP Prabhat said Police are now actively engaging terrorists in forests of Udhampur and Kathua Districts.

In an apparent reference to Pakistan, the DGP said, "Our operations are aimed at countering terrorists who are sent by our nefarious neighbour. We are not allowing them to succeed in their evil plans."

Recalling last year's "Operation Mahadev," the DGP said security forces eliminated three Pakistani terrorists during the operation. "The terrorists were responsible for the killing of 26 civilians in the Baisaran (Pahalgam) area. Police had pursued them deep inside the forest before neutralising them."

The J&K Police Chief also highlighted the force's outreach programmes and its engagement with local communities across the Union Territory.

He said the police maintained close ties with society and had conducted around 5300 "Thana Diwas" programmes in the past year to strengthen interaction with the public and address local concerns.

DGP Prabhat also spoke about the police campaign against drug trafficking in the Union Territory.

He said, "Nearly 2,276 accused were arrested in the past year. As many as 226 cases were registered under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act. Police also attached 54 properties linked to illegal activities."

The DGP said Jammu and Kashmir ranks among the top states in the country in action taken under NDPS laws.

DGP Prabhat said the police were organising sports and youth-engagement programmes to channelise the energies of young people in the Union Territory.

He said nine major events and 228 sports activities had been organised across districts to encourage youth participation and strengthen their connection with the police.

He also congratulated the new recruits who were joining the Jammu and Kashmir Police and asked them to remain committed to their duties.

He said the path ahead would be challenging but expressed confidence that the new personnel would contribute significantly to maintaining peace and security in the region. (KNO)

### CM Omar hosts

well-being of the people of Jammu and Kashmir. He expressed hope that the sacred month would further strengthen the spirit of unity and social cohesion across communities.

The Chief Minister interacted with the guests and exchanged greetings with them on the occasion. The attendees appreciated the initiative, describing it as a meaningful gesture that brings people together and reinforces the spirit of goodwill during the holy month.

The evening concluded with special prayers for peace, progress and prosperity in Jammu and Kashmir.

### Snowfall, rains

reaches and key mountain passes have been advised to plan their journeys accordingly between March 18 and March 20 in view of the expected weather activity.

The department also warned of the possibility of thunderstorms accompanied by gusty winds with speeds of 40 to 50 kilometres per hour at a few places during the same period. It said isolated locations may also witness hailstorms.

Farmers have been advised to suspend agricultural operations between March 18 and March 20 due to the expected wet weather conditions.

Meanwhile, weather data released by the department showed Srinagar recorded a maximum temperature of 14.9 degrees Celsius on Monday, slightly below the normal of 16 degrees Celsius, while the minimum temperature settled at 4.4 degrees Celsius.

Jammu recorded a maximum temperature of 25.7 degrees Celsius, about 1.8 degrees below normal, while the minimum temperature was recorded at 11.5 degrees Celsius.

Among other stations, Gulmarg recorded a maximum temperature of 4.2 degrees Celsius and a minimum of minus 3.4 degrees Celsius, while Pahalgam recorded a maximum temperature of 12 degrees Celsius and a minimum of minus 2.2 degrees Celsius, the MeT department said. (KNO)

### Moderate increase

notes that as on 31st January 2026, expenditure stood at Rs 38349.77 crores against RE of Rs 41340.22 crores, indicating that a significant portion of funds was yet to be utilised in the last quarter. The Committee further observes that support for capital expenditure has been fully utilised, reflecting effective deployment of limited capital grants," the report reads.

The Committee recommended that project-linked allocations, particularly under hydro-power and externally aided flood recovery projects, may be synchronised with realistic implementation timelines. "Efforts may be made to avoid bunching of expenditure in the last quarter. Periodic review mechanisms may be strengthened to ensure that allocations translate into tangible physical outcomes, especially in infrastructure and recovery projects," reads the report.

The Committee recommended close monitoring of the Jehlum Tawi Flood Recovery Project (JTFRP) so that financial releases are matched with timely physical progress. An allocation of Rs 259.25 crores has been provided in BE 2026-27 for JTFRP in line with the projection.

The Committee recommended adequate emphasis on disaster preparedness, mitigation, and resilience-building measures in addition to relief expenditure.

"The allocation under the Disaster Response Fund remains at Rs 279 crores, consistent with previous years. The Committee notes that utilisation under this head is demand-driven and contingent upon the occurrence of notified disasters. However, considering the vulnerability

of the Union Territory to floods and other natural calamities, the Committee recommends that adequate emphasis be placed on preparedness, mitigation, and resilience-building measures in addition to relief expenditure," reads the report. (KNO)

### Evacuation of students

wait for anxious families back home.

In another development, a separate flight carrying students from Azerbaijan is scheduled to arrive in New Delhi at 3:40 AM on March 17. However, concerns persist regarding students currently stuck in Azerbaijan, where several individuals are facing difficulties in crossing the border. Families allege that the lack of clearances and coordination has left many students in a state of distress.

Parents of the stranded students have expressed deep concern over what they term as a "slow and insufficient evacuation process." Many have urged the Government of India to step up its efforts and ensure the safe and timely return of all students.

"We are constantly in touch with our children, but the uncertainty is unbearable. The government must act more decisively and ensure that no student is left behind," said a parent from Pulwama, whose child is currently stranded near the Azerbaijan border.

Another parent from Srinagar echoed similar concerns, stating that the situation demands urgent intervention at the highest level. "There seems to be a lack of coordination. Students are moving from one place to another without clarity. The government should facilitate smooth border crossings and arrange more direct flights," he said.

Amid these concerns, a positive development has brought some relief to families. A group of 16 students who had earlier arrived in New Delhi has been facilitated by the Jammu and Kashmir Government, which arranged buses for their onward journey. The students have successfully reached Jammu and are currently on their way to Kashmir.

Meanwhile, the All India Medical Students Association (AIMSA) has acknowledged the support extended by prominent leaders and coordinators during the crisis. The association expressed gratitude to Aga Syed Ruhullah Mehdi and Nasir Sogami for their continuous efforts in coordinating with authorities and assisting stranded students.

Students who have managed to reach safer locations have also shared their ordeal, describing long waits, uncertain travel routes, and lack of proper information at border points. Many have appealed for better communication

and on-ground support to ensure a smoother evacuation process. (KNO)

### LPG crunch continues

operations due to gas shortage. Essential services, including crematoriums, laundries and hospital kitchens, are similarly struggling to maintain regular activity, even as bakeries, street-food vendors and community kitchens report curtailing output amid tighter LPG availability.

Sharma said fuel supplies remain stable with all refineries operating at high capacity and maintaining adequate crude inventories.

Commercial LPG stocks have been placed with states, who have been asked to decide on the priority for its usage, Sharma said, adding that states like Bihar, Delhi, Haryana, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka and Uttarakhand have already issued LPG distribution guidelines.

Also, states have been given 48,000 kilolitres of additional kerosene, she said, adding that Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Kerala, Manipur, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, and Karnataka have taken stocks from this additional quota.

India, she said, continues to be self-sufficient in petrol and diesel, with no fuel dry-outs reported at retail outlets.

"Citizens have been advised against panic buying as supplies remain sufficient," she said.

With as much as 30 per cent of India's gas supplies being impacted due to the blockage of the Strait of Hormuz, supplies to priority segments, such as piped cooking gas (PNG) and CNG, remain fully protected, while supplies to industrial and commercial users have been curtailed to about 80 per cent.

Commercial LPG users are being encouraged to switch to piped natural gas, with city gas companies offering incentives and faster connections. The government is also expanding the city gas distribution network to ease pressure on LPG demand.

LPG supplies continue to be closely monitored, with no reported shortages at distributors. However, booking patterns have shifted, with online bookings rising to around 90 per cent, while measures, such as enhanced delivery authentication and state-level allocation controls, have been implemented to prevent diversion. Several states have stepped up enforcement action, including raids to curb hoarding and black marketing.

As many as 12,000 raids have been conducted and 15,000 cylinders seized, she said, adding that oil companies have conducted 2,500 surprise inspections of LPG dealerships and petrol pumps.

## India, EU discuss energy security amid escalating West Asia conflict

PTI

New Delhi, Mar 17: The escalating conflict in West Asia and its ripple effects on global energy security figured prominently in External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar's high-level talks with his counterparts from the 27 European Union (EU) member states in Brussels.

A day after the talks, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said on Tuesday that both sides underlined the need for dialogue and diplomacy to resolve the crisis.

Global oil and gas prices have surged after Iran virtually blocked the Strait of Hormuz, a narrow shipping lane between the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, that handles roughly 20 per cent of global oil and LNG (Liquefied Natural Gas).

The West Asia has been a major source of India's energy procurement.

Jaishankar visited the Belgian capital at the invitation of EU foreign and security policy chief Kaja Kallas to join a meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council, which comprises the foreign ministers



of the bloc.

It was the first high-level visit from India to the Brussels-headquartered EU after the two sides firmed up a landmark Free Trade Agreement (FTA) following summit talks between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the EU leadership in January.

Jaishankar also held separate meetings with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and his counterparts from EU member states such as Germany and Belgium.

The external affairs minister highlighted the strong momentum following the India-EU Summit in January and called for unlocking the full potential of the FTA, besides deepening defence industrial collaboration

the need for dialogue and diplomacy.

"They also discussed the situation in Ukraine and the Indo-Pacific. EAM stressed on the growing convergence between India and the EU in maintaining a stable international order and strengthening multilateralism," the MEA added.

On the margins of the Foreign Affairs Council, Jaishankar held a bilateral meeting with Kallas.

"Both sides reaffirmed their shared ambition to further elevate India-EU cooperation to a higher strategic level. They also underlined the importance of regular consultations on key global and regional matters including the Indo-Pacific," the MEA said.

Jaishankar also held separate bilateral meetings with his counterparts from Belgium, Cyprus, Germany, Greece and the Netherlands, "India-EU relations have entered a phase of renewed strategic momentum, with both sides intensifying engagement on implementation of the 'Towards 2030: A Joint India-EU Comprehensive Strategic Agenda'," the MEA said.

It said the ministers also exchanged views on pressing global challenges, particularly the situation in West Asia including its effects on energy security and underlined

## SC strikes down 'discriminatory' law limiting maternity leave to adoption of children under 3 months

PTI

New Delhi, Mar 17: Observing that adoption is part of the right to reproductive autonomy, the Supreme Court on Tuesday struck down a law which said a woman would be eligible for maternity leave if she legally adopts a child below the age of three months, holding it is discriminatory.

Ruling that age-based classification under Section 60(4) of the Code on Social Security 2020 was violative of Articles 14 and 21 of the Constitution, a bench of Justices J B Pardiwala and R Mahadevan held that an adoptive mother should be entitled to maternity leave of 12 weeks, irrespective of the age of the adopted child.

The protection of maternity benefit cannot be confined to keeping in mind the age of the child, the court said, adding that an adoptive mother would have the same rights and obligations towards the child as the natural mother.

"We have reached the conclusion that Section 60(4) of the 2020 Code, insofar it puts an age limit of three months on the age of the adoptive child, for the adoptive mothers to avail maternity benefit under the 2020 Code, is violative of Articles 14 and 21 of the Constitution respectively," the bench said.

The apex court also asked the Centre to come out with a provision recognising paternity leave as a social security benefit.

"The distinction drawn by sub-section (4) of Section 60 does not have a rational nexus with the object of the 2020 Code. The object of maternity benefit is not associated with the process of childbirth but with the process of motherhood.

"The purpose of maternity protection does not



vary with the manner in which the child is brought into the life of the beneficiary mother. Insofar as the roles, responsibilities, and caregiving obligations are concerned, women who adopt a child aged three months or above are similarly situated to women who adopt a child below the age of three months," the bench said.

The top court said the process of adjustment and integration within the adoptive family, both for the parents as well as the child, remains substantially the same irrespective of the age of the child.

"The impugned classification overlooks the significant emotional, psychological, and practical adjustments required of the adoptive parents and the adopted child, more particularly, in cases involving children with disabilities or single adoptive mothers," it said.

The top court's judgment came on a plea filed by advocate Hamsaanandini Nanduri, an adoptive mother of two children, challenging Section 60(4) of the Social Security Code that allows 12 weeks of maternity leave only if an adoptive mother adopts a child below three months

of age. The petition stated that the purported 12 weeks of maternity benefit to adoptive mothers is not only a "mere lip service, but when juxtaposed with the maternity benefit of 26 weeks provided to biological mothers, fails to stand even the basic scrutiny of Part III of the Constitution, which is wedded to the concept of non-arbitrariness."

In its judgment spanning 100-pages, the top court said women who adopt a child aged three months or above are similarly situated to women who adopt a child below the age of three months, insofar as their roles, responsibilities, and caregiving obligations are concerned.

"The essential attributes, capacities, and commitments of adoptive mothers do not undergo any material change merely on account of the age of the child at the time of adoption and the immediate period following the adoption," it said. The apex court said the process of adoption itself entails significant emotional, psychological, and practical adjustments for both the child and the adoptive mother.

It said children adopted at any age require sustained

care, reassurance, and stable parental presence to overcome past vulnerabilities and integrate into a new familial environment.

"This is even more imperative to allow such mothers to avail themselves of the leave. In such circumstances, denying maternity benefit solely on the basis of an arbitrary age threshold disregards these essential aspects of adoption and undermines the very purpose of social welfare legislation," the bench said. "The protection of maternity leave is a basic human right, as it recognises conditions that are necessary for the full development of human personality and realization of equality. It embodies an essential component required to promote equality in the workplace and safeguards maternal and child health," the bench said.

Emphasising that law cannot overlook the practical realities, the court said extending the benefit of maternity leave is not merely a matter of convenience but a necessary support that enables the woman to discharge her parental responsibilities while securing her economic independence.

### West Asia conflict

#### India's second LPG ship Nanda Devi reaches Gujarat port

PTI

New Delhi, Mar 17: India's second LPG carrier 'Nanda Devi' arrived safely at Vadinar port in Gujarat on Tuesday, carrying 46,500 metric tonnes of gas after navigating the Strait of Hormuz amid the West Asia conflict, an official said.

The first ship, 'Shivalik', reached Mundra Port in Gujarat on Monday.

'Nanda Devi' has docked at Vadinar port in Devbhumi Dwarka district, and preparations were being made to shift the LPG (liquefied petroleum gas)

to the daughter ship, Deendayal Port Authority Chairman Sushil Kumar Singh told reporters. "A consignment of 46,500 metric tonnes of LPG has been brought in; this cargo will be transferred to a vessel named BW Birch, which will subsequently proceed to discharge portions of the consignment at the ports of Ennore (Tamil Nadu) and Haldia (West Bengal) along the eastern coast," he said. "The transfer process takes place at a rate of 1,000 tonnes per hour; consequently, the entire operation is expected to take two days to complete," he added.

The port authority at Vadinar is tasked with ensuring that these operations are executed with maximum efficiency, as per the directive of the Ministry of Ports, Singh said.

"This constitutes a standard operational procedure that we have consistently carried out here at Vadinar. However, the current directive issued by the ministry mandates that incoming LPG vessels be accorded top priority; we must ensure that their transfer and discharge processes are completed as expeditiously as possible," he said.

## Globalisation, open economy required updating of laws: Former SC judge

PTI

New Delhi, Mar 17: Former Supreme Court justice Mukundam Sharma on Tuesday said that when India opted for an open economy and moved towards globalisation, it became important that its laws were updated and modified to meet emerging needs.

He was speaking at the 2nd Bharat Legal Conclave on Aligning India's Legal Ecosystem with Global Standards and Legal Landscape, hosted by the Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India (ASSOCHAM).

"When we accepted an open economy and open

trade and commerce, our laws had to be updated, modified and new legislations brought in to suit the requirements and the necessity of the time," he said.

The former top court judge said India had initially declared itself a socialist country, indicating a regulated and planned economy with a mixed model of production. However, with the advent of globalisation, the country gradually transitioned towards an open market system.

"In the preamble of our Constitution, we have declared ourselves as a socialist country indicating a regulated and

planned economy and also a bag of mixed product. But with globalisation, we have turned to the concept of open economy, open market.

"There is definitely a conflict between the two concepts. It is not only us, even communist countries like China and Russia are accepting this notion of open economy," he said.

Union Law Minister Arjun Ram Meghwal also attended the event virtually and addressed the gathering. He said that in a rapidly transforming technological world, it is essential for our legal and regulatory framework to keep pace.

### Nitish Kumar launches projects worth Rs 1,151 crore in Bhagalpur, Banka districts

PTI

Bhagalpur/Banka, Mar 17: Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar on Tuesday launched several development projects and schemes worth around Rs 1,151 crore in Bhagalpur and Banka districts during his 'Samridhi Yatra'.

The CM also reviewed ongoing schemes and development projects in both districts.

A statement issued by the Chief Minister's Office said, "The CM launched more than 144 development projects/schemes worth Rs 442 crore in Bhagalpur. These include the inauguration of 88 schemes worth Rs 171 crore and laying the foundation stones for 56 schemes worth Rs 271 crore."

The CM reviewed various ongoing development projects in the



district and directed officials to ensure their speedy completion. He emphasised that once completed, these projects would greatly benefit the public. Kumar also visited Bajani gram panchayat in Jagdishpur block and reviewed the ongoing construction of the panchayat building, Ayushman Arogya Mandir, government middle school.

**WEDNESDAY, 18 MARCH**

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# MOVIES SCHEDULE

**O' ROMEO (A)**  
HINDI - 12:00 PM, 03:30 PM

**DHURANDHAR (A)**  
HINDI - 12:00 PM, 02:00 PM

**DHURANDHAR THE REVENGE (A)**  
HINDI - 05:00 PM, 07:00 PM  
HINDI ATMOS - 06:00 PM

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# رمضان المبارك

1447 H / 2026 CE

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

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

### DUA FOR SEHRI

وَبِصَوْمٍ غَدٍ نَّوَيْتُ 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

Kashmir Thunder

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