

!! Continuations from Page 1 !! Harness heritage, build...

and Navratri mark an inner journey. Over nine days of fasting, prayer, and discipline, Navratri transforms the devotee from within," the Lieutenant Governor said. The Lieutenant Governor highlighted that our traditions outline four stages of devotion- attentively hearing the prayer, deeply contemplating it, internalizing it fully, and reaching samadhi, where the knower and the known merge as one. "I pray that all devotees experience these stages in life," he said.

The Lieutenant Governor also encouraged the youth to build a strong and lasting connection with the timeless traditions, rich spiritual heritage and wisdom that remain among our greatest treasures.

"Youth will not merely inherit India's legacy but reshape it and propel it toward a developed, sustainable tomorrow," he further said.

On the occasion, the Lieutenant Governor also felicitated Padma Shri Brij Lal Bhat.

K.K Khosa, President, Kashmiri Pandit Sabha, Jammu; Deepak Dhar, senior Vice President and other office-bearers of Kashmiri Pandit Sabha and people from different walks of life joined the Navreh celebrations.

Padma Shri Dr SP Varma; Dr Ashok Bhan, Member, Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board; Brij Mohan Sharma, Principal Secretary Culture; Ashok Koul, BJP General Secretary (Organisation), J&K and Ladakh; senior officials and prominent citizens were also present.

India condemns attacks...

Infrastructure in West Asia are "condemnable and can lead to avoidable escalation".

New Delhi described the attacks on the gas infrastructure as "deeply disturbing" and that assaults will only serve to further destabilise an already uncertain energy market globally.

An Israeli attack on Iran's strategic gas fields of South Pars on Wednesday resulted in an intense Iranian retaliation on key energy infrastructure in a number of Gulf nations including Qatar's LNG (liquefied natural gas) hub of Ras Laffan. Qatar accounts for nearly 40 per cent of India's LNG requirement.

India's reaction to the attacks on the energy infrastructure appeared to mark a nuanced shift in its position as it did not distinguish between Israeli strike on the Iranian gas hub and Iran's counter attack.

New Delhi had earlier only condemned Iran's attacks on civilian infrastructure in several Gulf nations, including Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, but stopped short of denouncing attacks on Iranian facilities.

"India had previously called for the avoidance of targeting civilian infrastructure, including energy infrastructure, across the region," External Affairs Ministry spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said at his weekly media briefing.

"The recent attacks against energy installations in different locations across this region are therefore deeply disturbing and only serve to further destabilise an already uncertain energy scenario for the whole world," he said.

"Such attacks are unacceptable and need to cease," Jaiswal said without naming any country.

The spokesperson said LNG supply could be impacted due to the latest attacks and the closure of the Strait of Hormuz. But he also said India is in talks with several countries and stakeholders to see how best it can secure the country's energy needs.

The fresh attacks resulted in a further spike in global energy prices, with crude oil prices hitting USD 115 a barrel.

As concerns mounted over the escalating situation in West Asia, PM Modi spoke to Oman's Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, Jordan King, French President Emmanuel Macron and Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim.

In his conversation with the Omani Sultan, Modi also spoke about the need for free passage through the Strait of Hormuz, a strategically key shipping lane.

"We agreed on the need to prioritize dialogue and diplomacy for de-escalation and subsequent restoration of peace and stability," the prime minister said on social media.

Modi said he also reiterated India's condemnation of the violation of Oman's sovereignty and territorial integrity and appreciated the Gulf nation's efforts to facilitate the safe return of thousands of people, including Indian nationals.

"India and Oman stand for safe and free navigation through the Strait of Hormuz," Modi said.

Oman is among the Gulf nations bearing the brunt of Iranian retaliation following strikes by Israel and the US on Iranian targets.

Following his phone conversation with Macron on the situation in West Asia, Modi said there is an "urgent need for de-escalation, as well as a return to dialogue and diplomacy."

"We look forward to continuing our close coordination to advance peace and stability in the region and beyond," he said.

Macron said India and France are "working closely together to reduce tensions in the region and to keep diplomacy at the heart of our efforts for peace".

After speaking to Ibrahim, Modi said: "We also discussed the deeply concerning situation in West Asia and reaffirmed our shared commitment to de-escalation and the early restoration of peace and stability through dialogue and diplomacy."

On his talks with Jordan's King, Modi said India and Jordan stand in support of "unhindered transit of goods and energy".

"We expressed concern at the evolving situation in West Asia and highlighted the need for dialogue and diplomacy for the early restoration of peace, security and stability in the region," Modi said.

"Attacks on energy infrastructure in West Asia are condemnable and can lead to avoidable escalation," he said.

"Deeply appreciated Jordan's efforts in facilitating the safe return of Indians stranded in the region," he added.

In a related move, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar spoke to his Israeli counterpart Gideon Sa'ar.

"Exchanged views on the ongoing West Asia conflict and its many repercussions," the external affairs minister said on social media.

Jaishankar also held a meeting with United Arab Emirates' Minister of State for International Cooperation Reem Al Hashimy.

"Thanked the UAE Government for taking care of the Indian community. Discussed the latest developments pertaining to the conflict in West Asia," the external affairs minister said on X.

At the media briefing, Jaiswal also spoke about the Indian seafarers stranded onboard various merchant vessels due to restrictions on passage through the Strait of Hormuz.

"We have a large community of seafarers, possibly the largest in the world. Ninety per cent of our seafaring community serve global commercial shipping. We have 22 ships," he said.

According to estimates, around 610 seafarers are stuck onboard over 20 ships.

"We have seafarers across the region. We are in touch with their companies. Several seafarers have also come back. For example, 15 seafarers who were injured have come back to India or will be arriving in India shortly," he said.

As the overall situation deteriorated further in West Asia, several global leaders called for de-escalation of the situation.

"It is time to open a path towards de-escalation in order to restore stability in the Middle East," French President Macron said.

"France calls for the immediate implementation of a moratorium on strikes targeting civilian infrastructure, whether related to water or to energy. Freedom and security of navigation must be restored," he said.

Macron said tempers must cool and hostilities must cease, in order to give a real chance to the prospect of a negotiated solution to the crisis.

German Chancellor Friedrich Merz indicated that US President Donald Trump is willing to halt the military action.

After Iran attacked Qatar's Ras Laffan LNG facility, Trump threatened to blow up Iran's largest gas field if Tehran keeps up its attacks on Qatar.

Testing time, not...

Leaders have been in touch with their counterparts, as I just spoke about the conversation between our prime minister and the Crown Prince of Kuwait. Similarly, we have been in touch with several other leaders," Jaiswal said.

The two leaders exchanged views on the evolving situation in West Asia and expressed concern over recent developments. The prime minister reiterated India's condemnation of attacks on Kuwait's sovereignty and territorial integrity, he said.

The prime minister also underlined the importance of ensuring safe and free navigation through the Strait of Hormuz. Both leaders agreed that sustained diplomatic engagement remains essential for ensuring regional peace and stability.

He was asked if the West Asia conflict situation has proven to be a test of New Delhi's diplomatic approach in challenging global scenarios.

"Couple of days back you saw that because of our engagement, we were able to... and with talks and diplomacy with several of the stakeholders, we were able to get two of our LPG ships through the Strait of Hormuz," he added.

The MEA spokesperson said India "continues to remain in touch with several stakeholders in this matter, so that we can ensure our energy security needs, as also

at the same time, ensure well-being and safety of our Indian nationals, diaspora, present in large number in this region".

"So, our diplomatic efforts continue, and we are committed to taking care of our interests," he asserted.

Later, at his weekly media briefing, Jaiswal said India has been saying that there has to be an "early end to this conflict" through the path of dialogue and diplomacy.

The West Asia conflict has stretched into three weeks, with an Israeli attack on Iran's strategic gas fields of South Pars resulting in an intense Iranian retaliation on key energy infrastructure in several Gulf nations, including Qatar's LNG (liquefied natural gas) hub of Ras Laffan, triggering global concerns.

Qatar accounts for nearly 40 per cent of India's LNG requirement.

The MEA in a statement said the strikes are "unacceptable and need to cease" even as Prime Minister Narendra Modi reached out to top leaders of Oman, France and Malaysia, emphasising the urgency to restore peace in the volatile region.

New Delhi described the attacks on the gas infrastructure as "deeply disturbing" and said that assaults will only serve to further destabilise an already uncertain energy market globally.

Additional Secretary (Gulf), Ministry of External Affairs, Aseem R Mahajan, said the MEA continues to "closely monitor" the developments in the Gulf and wider West Asia region, with the safety, security and welfare of the Indian community remaining the highest priority.

Since February 28, around 2.8 lakh passengers have returned from the region to India.

In the UAE, limited non-scheduled flights continue to operate, with around 75 flights on March 18, and about 90 flights expected later on Thursday from various airports to India, Mahajan said.

Flights continue to operate from Oman and Saudi Arabia to India. Qatar airspace remains partially open, with Qatar Airways operating non-scheduled flights, including nine flights to India on Thursday, he added.

Kuwait airspace has remained closed since February 28; special non-scheduled flights by Jazeera Airways are being operated from Al-Qaisumah Airport in Saudi Arabia, with the first flight to Cochin scheduled on Friday.

Bahrain airspace remains closed, with Gulf Air operating special flights from Dammam in Saudi Arabia and additional services expected.

For Indian nationals in Kuwait, Bahrain and Iraq, where airspace remains restricted, transit through Saudi Arabia continues to be facilitated, particularly for emergency cases, the MEA official said.

On the 15 Indian crew members of MT Safesha Vishnu who were rescued, he said they have departed from Iraq and are "expected to return to India shortly".

The Mission remains in contact with the crew and Iraqi authorities to facilitate their return and to expedite repatriation of the mortal remains of the deceased Indian national, he said.

The government told reporters that all Indian seafarers in the region are safe and no shipping incident involving Indian-flagged vessels has been reported in the past 24 hours.

At present, 22 Indian-flagged vessels with 611 Indian seafarers remain in the western Persian Gulf region, with DG Shipping continuing close monitoring in coordination with ship owners and Indian Missions.

Jaiswal, on a query regarding fertilisers supply, said, "Our fertiliser situation at this point in time, especially for kharif 2026, we have adequate stock, so we are comfortable. The Department of Fertilisers has also put out global tenders well in advance in anticipation of the current situation, and these have received a very good response. We expect the bulk of the quantities ordered from a variety of sources to arrive by the end of March."

Par panel commends...

The Ministry of Defence for the year 2026-27 on Army, Air Force, Navy, Joint Staff, Ex-Servicemen Contributory Health Scheme and Director General of Armed Forces Medical Services.

The panel praised the Indian Army's "decisive role" in safeguarding national security during Operation Sindoor last year, and emphasised the need for sustained investment in defence preparedness.

It urged that future budgets should "prioritise induction of state-of-the-art weapon systems and the development of requisite infrastructure", so that the Army's hallmark swiftness and coordinated response to diverse security scenarios can be maintained and further strengthened.

The panel also praised the Indian Air Force for its "commendable role during Operation Sindoor. By executing precision strikes with advanced aerial platforms and integrating indigenous technologies, the Air Force demonstrated exceptional professionalism and operational readiness".

Its swift deployment, accurate targeting, and seamless coordination with ground forces ensured the success of the mission, "significantly degrading hostile infrastructure," it added.

The Committee emphasised upon the defence ministry that such capabilities underscore the importance of continued investment in modern air power to maintain India's strategic edge and safeguard national security.

It urges upon the ministry to make all necessary efforts for providing adequate financial support for acquiring latest advanced aircraft, weapons and equipments required to meet the challenges of present geopolitical scenario so that preparedness and combat capability of the air force are "enhanced to a significant level".

In the report, the panel also noted that with a view to fast track the process of the-aterisation, a dedicated team of officers from all three Services has been formed under the Chief of Integrated Staff to Chairman Chiefs of Staff Committee (CISC).

The Committee also note that three Joint Staff Officers undertake study of global military organisations as well as organise discussions among the three Services to streamline the process of reorganisation.

The Joint Staff has been able to take forward the process of theaterisation to an "advanced stage," it said.

The Committee said it is happy to note that all the three Services are working towards one common goal and enhancing their integration through pursuits in common operational planning process, technology development, harmonising intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance resources, aggregating remotely piloted assets, joint standard operating procedures and formulation of joint military civil fusion doctrine.

In a separate report, 'Review of Sainik Schools, Rashtriya Indian Military College (RIMC) and Rashtriya Military Schools', also presented in Parliament on Wednesday, the panel flagged that the average dropout rate during the last five years in the Sainik Schools, Rashtriya Military School and Rashtriya Indian Military College is 6.93 per cent, 6.96 per cent and 7.1 per cent, respectively.

The Committee said it feels that the seats which fall vacant after the cadets leave these institutions midway remain vacant until the next entrance examination is held.

"This has a rippling effect as on one side the precious resources of the Government go waste due to idling of seats, on the other side it curtails the opportunities of candidates who intends to join the NDA course. The Committee, therefore, urges upon the Ministry to address this dropout issue on priority basis," it said.

The Committee also urge the ministry to reinforce its commitment and take all necessary steps in a time bound manner for providing requisite infrastructure including administrative infrastructure, dormitories and related facilities for girls cadets in RIMC, which would eventually result in enhancement of their physical and mental faculties for preparation and induction into the armed forces of the nation.

It also recommend that the ministry should review or revisit its existing policy, particularly relating to land criteria required for establishment of new Sainik Schools, first of which came up in 1961, and currently number 33 across the country.

Int'l cyber fraud...

use psychological manipulation and impersonation tactics and launder money through modern digital and cryptocurrency channels," officials informed.

Explaining the technical modus operandi, officials said the accused had established a covert, unregistered call centre infrastructure using VoIP-based systems, enabling them to generate international virtual numbers, mask their real location using server routing and spoofing techniques, and appear as legitimate service providers to unsuspecting victims.

International calls were being generated and routed through this call centre. A fake YahooMail.com website and Google advertisements were used to target victims, they said.

"Individuals across multiple countries were approached through organised call operations and online phishing ads. Once a victim clicked on the advertisement, a toll-free number appeared on their screen. This toll-free number was operated by the suspects, who then deceived innocent people into providing their banking and other personal details," the officials said.

They added that funds were subsequently transferred into various accounts, including mule accounts and cryptocurrency wallets, primarily USDT.

"The illicit proceeds were further layered, converted, and withdrawn to conceal their origin. Victims were contacted and deceived into believing that their devices or bank accounts were compromised and they needed to pay for technical support or avoid penalties," they said.

The fraudulently obtained money was then transferred through banking channels, digital wallets, and cryptocurrency, routed through mule accounts. It was subsequently converted into USDT and other cryptocurrencies, layered multiple times to

evade detection and tracing. Notably, no cash transactions were involved, underscoring the fully digital and sophisticated nature of this crime, officials said.

The transactions carried so far seem to be running in several crores, they added.

A case has been registered under relevant laws, including charges of cheating, criminal conspiracy, and pertinent sections of the Information Technology Act.

"Follow-up raids are being conducted to apprehend additional suspects. Forensic analysis of seized devices is underway, and efforts are ongoing to identify victims and trace financial flows," they said. Investigations into the wider network, including national and international connections, are continuing, officials noted.

Fresh snowfall in...

Gulmarg resort since the previous day.

Other higher-altitude areas also reported fresh snowfall, including Pir Ki Gali along the Mughal Road in Shopian district, as well as Razdan Top, Gurez in Bandipora, and Sadhna Top in Kupwara. Most upper regions of the valley have experienced intermittent snowfall since Sunday.

In contrast, the plains of the valley, including Srinagar, were affected by heavy rain. The officials noted that this wet weather has resulted in lower temperatures across the region.

The Meteorological Department has forecast erratic weather conditions until March 20. It indicated the possibility of intermittent light to moderate rain or snow across most areas until Friday. The higher reaches of the Chenab valley and regions in south Kashmir may experience moderate to heavy snowfall.

The MeT Office anticipated generally dry weather from March 21-24, but mentioned a chance of a brief spell of rain or snow in some areas on March 23.

From March 26-28, there is a likelihood of light rain or snow, particularly in higher altitudes, while another spell of rain or snow is expected from March 29-31.

Additionally, there could be occurrences of thunder and gusty winds, reaching speeds of 40-50 km/h, in some areas, with a possibility of isolated hailstorms. The MeT Office advised farmers to resume agricultural operations after March 21.

2011 SARFU CUSTODIAL...

The Commission has also sought an action taken report on the findings of the Magisterial Inquiry and the current status of any departmental proceedings initiated against police personnel involved in the case. Authorities have been instructed to submit all documents through the HRCNet portal, while any physical evidence such as audio or video recordings must be sent via Speed Post or authorized channels. The NHRC has clarified that submissions made via email will not be accepted.

The renewed attention to this case underscores the NHRC's commitment to ensuring accountability and transparency in custodial death cases, even those that are over a decade old. The Commission is expected to take further action after reviewing the reports to be submitted by the concerned authorities.

Chanting 'Jai Mata Di'...

on the auspicious occasion and prayed for peace, prosperity, happiness and well-being of all, the L-G's office said on X.

A pilgrim from Rajasthan, 90-year-old R K Pawar, said, "I am happy to pay obeisance at the feet of Mata Rani, my sacred practice for the past seven decades. There is a huge rush at the cave shrine on the occasion of Chaitra Navratri."

He said rains cannot deter devotees from paying obeisance to the Mata. "Those who come here for the fulfillment of their wishes never go back empty-handed."

Another pilgrim, Mithlesh Kumar from Uttar Pradesh, said the beauty of Mata's abode is like the paradise that none wish to abandon. "I have paid obeisance at the lotus feet of Mata. I do not have words to describe the beauty of the Bhawan. Such is the divinity that one wishes to stay here forever."

Sushma Tiwari from Bihar, patiently waiting at the serpentine queue outside the Bhawan, said the arrangements are excellent, with beautiful decorations and lights captivating everyone. "The atmosphere here is divine, as if part of Devlok (realm of Gods)."

The Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board, which manages the yatra, has set up registration counters at the Katra railway station to ease the process for pilgrims in view of the expected influx during Navratri. "All arrangements for smooth yatra have been ensured," the board said.

A comprehensive, multi-layer security arrangement has been implemented involving Central Reserve Police Force, Jammu and Kashmir Police, and Army personnel, with round-the-clock CCTV surveillance via an Integrated Command and Control Centre, they said.

"Police, CRPF and shrine board security personnel have been deployed along the track from Katra to the Bhawan. Elaborate security arrangements have been made following a comprehensive review," police officials said.

In response to the heavy rush, crowd management systems integrated with CCTV and RFID surveillance have been put in place.

Extensive facilities including pony services for the elderly and disabled, sanitation, water, and food services have been prepared for the expected influx of pilgrims, the shrine board said.

The shrine has been adorned with indigenous and exotic flowers, and large pandals have been set up in the Bhawan area for the auspicious occasion, they added.

Meanwhile, in Jammu, long queues were seen at the Mata Kali temple, popularly known as Bawe Wali Mata, located at Bahu Fort. Hundreds of devotees lined up since before dawn to pay obeisance.

Deputy Chief Minister Surinder Kumar Choudhary paid obeisance at the temple and greeted people on Navratri. "I extend my greetings to the people on the occasion of Navratri. I wish everyone peace, prosperity and happiness," he said.

Two major theft cases solved; 4 arrested, stolen property recovered

■ STATE TIMES NEWS

JAMMU: Jammu Police, South Zone achieved a major success by solving a theft case involving stolen electrical wiring from an under-construction residential house and arresting two accused persons. The case came to light when Kirti Sharma, wife of Kuldeep Sharma and a resident of Sainik Colony, Jammu, lodged a written complaint reporting that unknown individuals had stolen electrical wires from their property. Acting promptly, FIR No. 67/2026 under sections 331(4)/305/317(2) of BNS was registered at Police Station Channi Himmat and an investigation was launched.

A special investigation team was constituted under the guidance of SP City South, led by the In-Charge of Police Post Sainik Colony, and working under the close supervision of SHO Channi Himmat and SDPO City East. The team carried out detailed inquiries, carefully examined CCTV footage, and collected technical and forensic evidence. Their persistent and methodical efforts resulted in the identification and arrest of the accused: Ajay Chokidar @ Suecha, son of Dadloo Chokidar, a resident of Madhya Pradesh currently in Kunjwani, Jammu, and Harish Kumar @ Billa @ Ashu, son of Late Mukhtyar Chand, a resident of Samba currently in Gangyal, Jammu.

During interrogation, the accused confessed to the crime, leading the police to recover 12 bundles of 4mm electrical wires and approximately 10 kilograms of copper wire. The stolen property, estimated to be worth several lakhs of rupees, has been seized. Further investigation into the case is ongoing.

In another case, Jammu Police has successfully solved a theft case involving Smart City surveillance equipment.

On 28 February 2026, batteries and other vital components were stolen from Smart City CCTV installations at prominent locations, including Asia Chowk, Bikram Chowk, and Amphalla Chowk. The theft severely disrupted surveillance and traffic monitoring systems across these areas. In this regard, FIR No. 60/2026 under Sections 305 and 303(2) of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) was registered at Police Station Gandhi Nagar, Jammu.

Acting swiftly, a dedicated police team was constituted under the leadership of Inspector Jaipaul Sharma, SHO Police Station Gandhi Nagar. The team, comprising PSI Nadeem Akram, PSI Arun Thakyal, ASI Pintoo Kumar, and SPO Rashpaul Kumar, worked under the close supervision of SDPO South Kuljeet Singh and SP South Dr. Ajay Sharma, with overall supervision of SSP Jammu.

Utilizing a combination of technical surveillance, CCTV footage analysis, and human intelligence, the team successfully apprehended two accused-Himanshu Gill alias "Badaa Prince" and his associate Prince Sharma. Preliminary investigation revealed that Himanshu Gill is a habitual offender with multiple cases registered against him across various police stations in Jammu and adjoining districts.

On the disclosure of the accused, police recovered 18 stolen batteries, marking a significant step towards restoring the Smart City surveillance network.

This successful operation underscores the effective integration of modern technology with proactive policing. Further investigation is underway to identify additional associates and recover any remaining stolen property.

This achievement reflects the dedication, professionalism, and proactive policing of Jammu Police, South Zone, underscoring their commitment to public safety, prompt justice, and maintaining citizens' trust. The case demonstrates the alertness, strategic approach, and relentless efforts of the police in combating crime, sending a strong message that criminal activities will be swiftly detected and punished.