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ISRAEL LAUNCHES NEW WAVE OF ATTACKS ON TEHRAN; IRAN THREATENS TO CUT ALL GULF ROUTES BY LAYING SEA MINES

## Trump Twist: Good talks with Iran, 5-day pause on hitting energy infra



Iranian Red Crescent emergency workers clear rubble from a residential building hit in a US-Israeli strike, in Tehran, Monday, AP

**Says Tehran wants to make a deal, US envoys have been holding talks with 'respected' Iranian leader**

**Jon Gambrell, David Rising & Samy Magdy**  
Dubai, March 23

US PRESIDENT Donald Trump extended his deadline for Iran to reopen the crucial Strait of Hormuz to international shipping, saying Monday that the US would hold off on threatened strikes against Iranian power plants for five days.

In his announcement, Trump said the US would hold off on threatened strikes against Iranian power plants for five days.

Truth is, Trump also held out the possibility of a resolution to the war — though Iranian officials denied there were negotiations.

Trump's turnaround appeared to offer something of a reprieve after the US and Iran traded threats with potentially catastrophic repercussions for civilians across the region.

Trump later told reporters that Iran wants "to make a deal", and claimed US envoys have been holding talks with a "respected" Iranian leader. He said his Middle East special envoy Steve Witkoff and son-in-law Jared Kushner contacted talks Sunday into the evening, and that the negotiations would continue.

Trump did not name any of

ficial or officials representing Tehran. He said the US has not talked to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Mojtahab Khamenei.

Trump said if a deal is reached with Iran, the US will move to take Iran's enriched uranium critical to its disputed nuclear program.

Shortly after Trump's social media announcement — hours before the deadline was set to expire — Iranian state television declared that the American leader had backed down "following Iran's firm warning."

The war, now in its fourth week, has already seen several dramatic turning points — the killing of Iran's Supreme Leader, the bombing of a key Iranian gas field, and strikes targeting oil and gas facilities and other civilian infrastructure in Gulf Arab nations. The conflict has killed more than 20,000 people, shaken the global economy, sent oil prices surging, and endangered some of the world's busiest air corridors.

The latest threatened attacks could have cut electricity to wide swaths of people in Iran and around the Gulf and

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## Dialogue and diplomacy only solution, Hormuz blockage unacceptable: PM

**Deeptiman Tiwary**  
New Delhi, March 23

LEADING WITH a strong diplomatic pitch, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Monday told the Lok Sabha that India is "consistently working" to bring down tensions in West Asia, stressing that "dialogue and diplomacy is the only solution" to the ongoing conflict that has now entered its fourth week.

He said he has personally spoken to leaders across West Asia in two rounds of calls, urging them to de-escalate and end hostilities. "India has opposed attacks on civilians and infrastructure linked to energy and transport. Attacks on commercial ships and blockade of the Strait of Hormuz is unacceptable," he said, adding that New Delhi is actively engaging



Prime Minister Narendra Modi speaks in the Lok Sabha, Monday, AP

partners to ensure safe maritime corridors.

Positioning India's stance as rooted in "humanity and peace", Modi said the country is encouraging all sides to move

towards a peaceful resolution at the earliest, warning that threats to civilian lives are "not in the interest of humanity".

Even as he foregrounded diplomacy, Modi acknowledged

that the conflict has triggered "unprecedented challenges" for India — spanning economic pressures, national security risks and humanitarian concerns — given the country's deep trade ties with the region and its reliance on it for energy supplies.

"The region fulfills a large part of our energy needs and is a key trade route. Around 1 crore Indians live and work in the Gulf," he said, underlining the scale of exposure. He noted that commercial shipping routes in the region also employ a significant number of Indians, heightening New Delhi's concerns.

Detailing the government's response, Modi said over 3 lakh Indians have returned home safely since the conflict began, including more than 1,000

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•After Trump announced to pause strikes on Iran's energy sites, oil prices plunged over 13%. Global markets also recovered sharply, with US stock futures gaining around 1.3%

•US Central Command said the campaign against Iran was 'ahead or on plan' even as Tehran and Tel Aviv continued their attacks

•UAE to Saudi Arabia to Gulf countries said they intercepted incoming Iranian projectiles

•The Kremlin said any US strikes on Iran's Russia-built nuclear power plant could trigger 'irreparable' consequences

strikes on Iran's Russia-built nuclear power plant could trigger 'irreparable' consequences

•The United Nations Peacekeeping Force deployed in southern Lebanon said a building at its headquarters was struck by a projectile

•The death toll from the war rose to more than 1,500 people in Lebanon, 15 people in Israel and 13 US military personnel, as well as a number of civilians on land and sea in the Gulf region

•The Kremlin said any US strikes on Iran's Russia-built nuclear power plant could trigger 'irreparable' consequences

MORE REPORTS, PAGES 12, 11, 14

## Five takeaways: From economic concerns to diplomatic tightrope

**Shubhrajit Roy**  
New Delhi, March 23

PRIME MINISTER Narendra Modi's statement in Lok Sabha on the war in West Asia, which marks its fourth week, contained five important diplomatic takeaways — from highlighting the economic fallout to indicating a calibrated approach aimed at safeguarding India's interests.

First, he described the situation in West Asia as "concerning". His choice of Parliament as the platform underscored the gravity of the crisis and its impact on people's lives. Noting

the time-frame of the conflict, which has persisted for "more than three weeks", he pointed to the strain it has placed on global supply chains.

Second, he drew attention to the economic fallout of the war, saying it is adversely affecting the global economy and everyday life. Emphasising India's "extensive trade relations" with "countries at war and affected by war", in a reference to nations in West Asia and the Gulf, he flagged the broader economic implications.

In this context, he referred to the Strait of Hormuz, which

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## For women's quota, Govt looks at higher LS strength based on Census 2011

**Plans to keep proportion of states in the increase the same, addressing southern states' delimitation fears**

**Liz Mathew**  
New Delhi, March 23

THE GOVERNMENT has suggested an increase in the number of Lok Sabha seats, while maintaining the existing proportion among states, and Vidhan Sabha constituencies as a first step towards implementing the women's reservation Act. In talks with Opposition parties to evolve a consensus on this, the government has suggested the increase on the basis of Census 2011 — thus delinking it from the ongoing Census.

An Opposition party MP who was present at a meeting on Monday chaired by Union Home Minister Amit Shah on the Nari Shakti Vardan Adhiniyam told The Indian Express that one proposal was to raise the number of Lok Sabha seats to 816 from 543, after delimitation based on Census 2011. Of these, around 270 seats could be reserved for women, said the MP who did not wish to be named.

Shah met leaders of the BJP, YSRCP, NCP (SP), Shiv Sena

(UBT) and AIMIM in the Parliament building, and is expected to also hold talks with the Congress, TMC, DMK and SP. Sources said the government may convene an all-party meeting for this Tuesday, with a call on the changes to be taken after that.

Leaders of two other parties whose representatives attended the meeting confirmed the suggestions made by Shah. Sources said the Home Minister suggested that the number of seats in the Lok Sabha as well as

increased by 50%.

The government apparently hopes to ensure this as well as implement the women quota from the 2029 general elections onwards.

An MP of a party that is an ally of the BJP said the proportion of seats of states would remain the same. This will address the fears of southern states which have been apprehensive about seat increases proportional to population after the ongoing Census and

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**EXPRESS exclusive**



## DECISION 2026

'KHELA HOBE' ONLINE: TRINAMOL SCALES UP DIGITAL BATTLE

'PEOPLE OF ASSAM HAVE HAD ENOUGH OF LAW-BREAKERS.' PAGE 4,5

## How 'Godman' Kharat's former staff member blew lid off his scandal

**Vallabh Ozarkar**  
Mumbai, March 23

A FORMER staffer of self-styled godman Ashokkumar Eknath Kharat may have been the key to unravelling one of Maharashtra's most sensational exploitation scandals. On Sunday, he filed an FIR with the Nashik police alleging that Kharat had sexually assaulted a pregnant woman known to him. After learning of the assault, he installed a hidden camera inside Kharat's office cabin, gathered footage of multiple women being exploited, and eventually handed it over to the police.

The footage, submitted on a pen drive, purportedly shows



Ashokkumar Eknath Kharat is accused of sexually exploiting multiple women

women being given substances to make them disoriented, and Kharat engaging in inappropriate acts with them. Police said more than 100 video

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**Vencob**  
Ex-farm Broiler Chicken Rate ₹ 147 per kg  
Retail Sale Rate ₹ 175 per kg  
Dressed (with skin) Rate ₹ 219 per kg  
Retail Sale Rate for Eggs 63 per 12 eggs

## Happening today

•DENMARK WILL ELECT its new Parliament, with opinion polls showing a slim lead for PM Mette Frederiksen's centre-left bloc, boosted by her defiant stand against Trump on Greenland.

## Showdown in Maharashtra Legislative Council after ministers allege assault

**Dy Chair orders suspension of SP accused of manhandling minister during Satara ZP polls, Chair questions authority**

**Alok Deshpande & Mohamed Thaver**  
Mumbai, March 23

THE CHAOS and alleged manhandling of ministers during the Satara Zilla Parishad (ZP) presidential elections triggered an uproar in both houses of the legislature on Monday, bringing the internal rift within the ruling alliance to the open.

The controversy escalated after Legislative Council deputy chairperson Neelam Gorhe

directed the state government to suspend Satara Superintendent of Police Tushar Doshi, who was allegedly linked to a lathi-charge during the Maratha reservation protests in 2023. However, council chairman Ram Shinde later said he would rule on whether such powers could be exercised by the Deputy Chairperson, effectively putting the suspension in limbo.

In a rare public confrontation, Shiv Sena and NCP leaders targeted the BJP-led Home Department, headed by Chief Minister Devendra Fadnis, during a special session of the Council.

The flashpoint was the ZP election in Satara on March 20. Although the Shiv Sena and NCP secured a majority, the BJP won the post. The BJP is alleged to have poached Shiv Sena corporators in Satara and prevented two councillors from voting to secure the victory.

Matters worsened with claims that Satara Guardian Minister Shambhuraj Desai

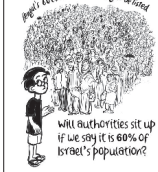
was assaulted by police personnel in plain clothes.

"This has happened for the first time in my 40 years of political career... I was with NCP minister Mahanand Patil and NCP (SP) MLC Shashikant Shinde. I was beaten up by the police when I was going into the ZP building. I was bleeding. Minister Patil's brother, Rajya Sabha MP Nitin Patil, was dragged from the staircase. This is unprecedented. And in this confrontation, two of our members were kidnapped by the police," Desai said in the Council.

He also alleged that BJP workers were allowed inside the

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## Business as Usual By EP UNNY



## NATION PAGE 4

## PUNJAB FORMER MINISTER HELD IN OFFICIAL'S SUICIDE CASE

•TOOL HAS ALSO PROVED CRUCIAL IN TRACING MISSING CHILDREN, ESPECIALLY AT CROWDED STATIONS

## One face, 463 cameras: Facial recognition fights crime on Mumbai rly platforms

**Mohamed Thaver**  
Mumbai, March 23

TWO MEN who harassed and stalked a Portuguese tourist were arrested last month; a 14-year-old boy from Goregaon who went missing was traced in Rajasthan weeks ago; the man who stabbed a Mumbai professor was arrested within two days in January; and, nearly a year ago, the alleged attacker of actor Saif Ali Khan was nabbed days after the hunt had hit a deadend.

All of these successful police investigations were aided by one crucial tool: the Facial Recognition System (FRS), linked to 463 of the 3,675 CCTV cameras in the Mumbai Division of the Railway Protection Force (RPF), covering stations from Churchgate to Surat in the north and up to Jalgaon in the east.

According to officials, Western Railway was the first division in the country's rail network to install FRS work to install FRS linked to CCTV cameras. "From last year, they are being installed in other divisions as well — eventually, the entire network will be covered. We get requests for assistance from police forces across the country and Central agencies," a Western Railway official said.

Sources said Mumbai Police units, which operate over 5,000 cameras, are also linking FRS to their network.

In the case of the Portuguese tourist, who uploaded a video showing two men harassing her for a photograph at Dhoobi Chat near Mahalaumi railway station on February 23, police initially drew a blank after scanning their own camera network. Investigators then took screenshots from the video and approached the RPF, which quickly generated a "hit" on the FRS.

The system found the accused on CCTV footage from February 13 at the Marine Lines station. Police then used their own camera network outside the station to track the two men — one of whom had fled to Bihar by then.

The FRS identifies individuals based on facial features such as the distance between the eyes, forehead, nose, ears and cheekbones, converting

them into data to create a unique numerical "fingerprint". The FRS-equipped CCTV cameras are connected to software available at Mumbai Central or

RPF police stations along the division. If a person on the watchlist passes any of these cameras, the software immediately issues an alert, triggering a chain of actions (see box). In addition to photographs of accused persons uploaded after incidents, images of suspects are also sent into the system. In 2024, around 10,000 photographs of individuals being tracked by agencies such as the NIA and CBI were uploaded. "So, even if the person is not also seen in the system, once the person enters the platform, we get a hit on the system," the official said.

Another key feature of the

system is its ability to map patterns in an individual's movements, which helps investigators track suspects.

In the case of a professor from NM College who was stabbed on January 24 at Malad railway station, RPF obtained footage of the accused, Omkar Shinde, and fed it into the FRS. The system revealed a pattern: Shinde boarded a train every morning from Malad at a fixed time and returned via Marine Lines in the evening. This helped police arrest him. "At times you may know the person was at the station but don't know where he went from

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Place : Wardha  
Date : 24-03-2026

AUTHORISED OFFICER  
Bank of India