

Helicopter carrying Iran prez crashes, search is under way

Raisi Onboard Chopper With Foreign Minister, Says Official; Iranian State Media Says Bad Weather Cause Of Accident & It Is Complicating Rescue Bid

Dubai: A helicopter carrying Iranian Prez Ebrahim Raisi and his foreign minister crashed on Sunday as it was crossing mountain terrain in heavy fog, an Iranian official told Reuters, and rescuers were struggling to reach the site of the incident.

The official said the lives of Raisi and foreign minister Hossein Amirabdollahian were "at risk following the helicopter crash", which happened on the way back from a visit to the border with Azerbaijan in Iran's northwest. "We are still hopeful but information coming from the crash site is very concerning," said the official, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Raisi had met with Azerbaijan Prez Ilham Aliyev earlier on Sunday. At the time of the crash, a delegation of ministers was travelling with him in a convoy of three helicopters, state media reported, adding that the two other aircraft had reached their destinations. Raisi had been at the Azerbaijani border to inaugurate the Qiz-Qalasi Dam, a joint project. Aliyev, who said he had bid a "friendly farewell" to Raisi earlier in the day, offered assistance in the rescue.

Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who holds ultimate power in the Islamic Republic, sought to reassure Iranians, saying there would



Rescue team reaches Iran's East Azerbaijan province. 'It is dark and it has started raining, but the search continues. Rescue teams have reached the area ... however, the rain has created mud, making the search difficult,' a local reporter told state TV

beno disruption to state affairs.

Iranian state media said bad weather was the cause of the crash and was complicating rescue efforts. The chief of staff of Iran's army ordered all the resources of the army and the elite Revolutionary Guard to be put to use in search and rescue operations.

State TV had earlier stopped all its regular programming to show prayers being held for Raisi across the country and, in a corner of the screen, live coverage of rescue teams deployed on foot in the mountainous area in heavy fog.

The president's official website also posted a message

requesting prayers, and clerics at two of Iran's major Shia shrines in Qum and Mashhad led public services. Videos posted to Instagram by the Iranian Red Crescent Society showed rescue teams trekking through fog and difficult terrain in search of the crash site.

Neighbouring countries expressed concern and offered assistance in any rescue. The White House said US Prez Joe Biden had been briefed on reports about the crash. The EU offered emergency satellite mapping technology to help Iran with the search.

The crash comes at a time of growing dissent within Iran over an array of political, social and economic crises. Iran's clerical rulers face international pressure over Tehran's disputed nuclear programme and its deepening military ties with Russia during the war in Ukraine. Since Iran's ally Hamas attacked Israel on Oct 7, provoking Israel's assault on Gaza, conflagrations involving Iran-aligned groups have erupted throughout West Asia.

Raisi, 63, was elected prez in 2021. Iran's law stipulates that if the president dies, power is transferred to the first vice president and an election must be called within six months. The first vice president is Mohammad Mokhber, a conservative politician. REUTERS & NYT

Andhra-born is first Indian to go to space as a tourist

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India-born Gopi Thotakura made history on Sunday evening as he became the first Indian to venture into space as a tourist. He was part of the elite crew for Blue Origin's New Shepard-25 (NS-25) mission, which took off from the company's West Texas launch site in the US around 8.05 pm (IST), an hour late from its scheduled launch time of 9:35 am (local US time).

Born in Vijayawada (Andhra Pradesh), Gopi, an entrepreneur and a pilot, journeyed to the edge of space beyond the Earth's atmosphere along with five others. He is officially the second astronaut from the country after Wing Commander Rakesh Sharma, who flew as a professional cosmonaut to space on board Soyuz T-11 on April 3, 1984, as part of the Soviet Interkosmos programme. Astronauts Kalpana Chawla, Sunita Williams, Raja Chari, and Sirisha Bandla were all US citizens of Indian origin who also went to space as professional astronauts.

TOI had earlier reported on Gopi's probable entry to the elite astronaut club.

Following takeoff, the NS-25 vehicle reached beyond the boundary of space smoothly. The rocket and capsule then returned to Earth, with the rocket landing upright a few minutes after takeoff. The capsule successfully touched down, using two of its three parachutes, roughly 15 minutes after takeoff.

Introducing the Indian space tourist, a Blue Origin statement said, "Gopi Thotakura is a lifelong pilot and aviator who learned how to fly before he could drive. He flies jets commercially, in addition to piloting



A screen grab shows the Mission NS-25, with the New Shepard 4 rocket & crew capsule, taking off from Texas's Van Horn on Sunday



Gopi Thotakura is a pilot and aviator. He flies jets commercially, in addition to piloting bush, aerobatic, and seaplanes

60 years on, America's 1st black astronaut candidate finally goes to space at 90

America's first Black astronaut candidate finally rocketed into space 60 years later, flying with Jeff Bezos' rocket company on Sunday. Ed Dwight was an air force pilot when President John F Kennedy championed him as a candidate for Nasa's early astronaut corps. But he wasn't picked for the 1963 class. Dwight, now 90, got to



Ed Dwight

experience a few minutes of weightlessness with five other passengers aboard the Blue Origin capsule as it skimmed space. Launch officials said all of the astronauts were well shortly after the capsule parachuted down after a flight of roughly 10 minutes. **The brief flight from West Texas made Dwight the new record-holder for oldest person in space** — nearly two months older than "Star Trek" actor William Shatner was when he went up in 2021. Dwight was among the potential astronauts the air force recommended to Nasa. But he wasn't chosen for the 1963 class, which included eventual Gemini and Apollo astronauts, including Apollo 11's Buzz Aldrin and Michael Collins. Nasa didn't select Black astronauts until 1978, and Guion Bluford became the first African American in space in 1983. Three years earlier, the Soviets launched the first Black astronaut, Arnaldo Tamayo Mendez, a Cuban of African descent. AP

bush, aerobatic, and seaplanes. Gopi is a co-founder of Preserve Life Corp, a global center for holistic wellness and applied health." He studied for a BSc in aeronautical science at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, US. Gopi has worked in medical air evacuation services in India in the past.

This flight is Blue Origin's first tourist mission on New

Shepard since Aug 2022. The company was forced to halt flights of the rocket after a New Shepard vehicle suffered an engine failure mid-flight during an uncrewed mission in Sep 2022. This mission was the seventh human flight for the New Shepard programme and the 25th in its history. In all, New Shepard has flown 31 humans, the company said.

US & Iran held indirect talks in Oman: Report

Washington: Senior US and Iranian officials held talks through intermediaries in Oman this past week, the first such conversations since Iran launched a retaliatory attack on Israel with hundreds of missiles and drones last month, according to a person familiar with the recent meetings.

Brett McGurk, the top White House official on West Asia policy, and Abram Paley, the deputy special envoy for Iran, attended the talks in Oman.

The goal was to try to get Iran, which supplies weapons and training to militias across West Asia, to move to rein in its partners. Since the Israel-Hamas war broke out, several Iran-backed militias in Iraq and Syria have stepped up attacks on US troops, raising fears of a wider war. The most powerful of the regional militias, Lebanon-based Hezbollah, has been exchanging fire with the Israeli military in northern Israel and southern Le-



Brett McGurk (above), the top White House official on West Asia policy, and Abram Paley, the deputy special envoy for Iran, attended the talks in Oman

banon. However, US intelligence officials assess that neither Hezbollah nor Iran wants to engage in a wider war.

The US has had no diplomatic relations with Iran since 1979, and discussions are often conducted through intermediaries and back channels.

The format of the talks in Oman was similar to ones held in Jan: The Americans sat in one room while their Iranian counterparts sat in another, and Omani officials shuttled between the rooms. NYT



3,300+

CISF contingent to take full charge of Parliament security from today

its entire administrative and operational paraphernalia -- vehicles, weapons and commandos -- from the complex on Friday and its commander, a Deputy Inspector General (DIG)-rank officer, handed over all the security points in the complex to the incoming CISF group, the sources said.

A total of 3,317 Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) personnel are being inducted for securing both the old and new Parliament buildings and the associated structures in this complex located in central Delhi after

CISF to take over complete security duties following the withdrawal of over 1,400 CRPF staff.

the Government directed it to take over the task from the CRPF following the December 13 security breach incident of

last year, a senior officer told PTI. In a major security breach on the anniversary of the 2001 Parliament terror attack, two persons jumped into the Lok Sabha chamber from the public gallery during Zero Hour on December 13, 2023, released yellow smoke from canisters and shouted slogans before being overpowered by MPs. Outside the Parliament premises around the same time that day, two other persons sprayed coloured smoke from canisters while shouting slogans. Following this incident, a committee under the

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■ By Neelabh Srivastava
NEW DELHI, May 19 (PTI)

MORE than 3,300 CISF personnel will take over the complete counterterrorism and anti-sabotage security duties at the Parliament complex

from Monday following the withdrawal of over 1,400 CRPF (Central Reserve Police Force) staff from the country's most important symbol of democracy, official sources said.

The Parliament Duty Group (PDG) of the CRPF wound up



S-W monsoon makes onset over Nicobar Islands: IMD

NEW DELHI, May 19 (PTI)

SOUTHWEST monsoon, the lifeline of India's farm-based economy, on Sunday made its onset over the Nicobar Islands, the southernmost region of the country, the India Meteorological Department (IMD) said here.

"Southwest monsoon has advanced into some parts of the Maldives, and the Comorin

area and some parts of the South Bay of Bengal, Nicobar Islands and South Andaman Sea on Sunday," the weather office said.

The annual rainfall phenomenon is expected to reach Kerala by May 31.

The date of monsoon onset over Kerala has varied widely over the last 150 years, the earliest being May 11 in 1918, and the most delayed being

June 18 in 1972, according to IMD data.

The rain-bearing system arrived in the southern state on June 8 last year, May 29 in 2022, June 3 in 2021 and June 1 in 2020.

Last month, the IMD had forecast above-normal rain in the monsoon season in India with favourable La Nina conditions, cooling of equatorial Pacific Ocean, expected to set

in by August-September. La Nina conditions help in a good monsoon season over India.

Large parts of the country are battling a brutal heatwave with maximum temperatures touching 48 degrees Celsius, shattering records in several states and severely impacting health and livelihoods. Southern India experienced heatwave spells in April.

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Armed group claims to have captured town in western Myanmar

Muslim Rohingyas flee again

BANGKOK, May 19 (AP)

A POWERFUL ethnic armed group fighting Myanmar's Military Government in the country's western State of Rakhine claimed on Saturday to have seized a town near the border with Bangladesh, marking the latest in a series of victories for foes of the country's military Government.

Members of the State's Muslim Rohingya ethnic minority, targets of deadly Army-directed violence in 2017, appear to have been the main victims of fighting in the town of Buthidaung, where the Arakan Army claims to have chased out forces of the military Government. There are contradictory accounts of who is to blame for the reported burning of the town, compelling its Rohingya residents to flee.

The competing claims could not be verified independently, with access to the Internet and mobile phone services in the area mostly cut off.

Khaing Thukha, a spokesperson for the Arakan Army, told 'The Associated Press' by text message from an undisclosed location that his group had seized Buthidaung after capturing all the military's outposts there. The Arakan Army is the well-trained and well-armed military wing of the Rakhine ethnic minority movement, which seeks autonomy

from Myanmar's Central Government. It is also a member of an armed ethnic group alliance that recently gained strategic territory in the country's North-East on the border with China.

The group said in a Saturday statement on the Telegram messaging platform that fighting was ongoing on the outskirts of Buthidaung as its troops chased after the retreating Army soldiers and local Muslims it said were fighting alongside them.

Khaing Thukha said the Arakan Army's troops were caring for Muslim villagers fleeing the fighting. He denied allegations by Rohingya activists on social media that the Arakan Army had set fire to the town, which is mostly populated by Rohingya.

Rohingya have lived in Myanmar for generations, but they are widely regarded by many in the country's Buddhist majority, including members of the Rakhine minority, as having illegally migrated from Bangladesh.

The Rohingya face a great amount of prejudice and are generally denied citizenship and other basic rights.

The Rohingya were the targets of a brutal counterinsurgency campaign incorporating rape and murder that saw an estimated 7,40,000 flee to neighbouring Bangladesh.

International bodies must take cognisance of human rights violations in PoK: Rajnath

SAMBALPUR/Keonjhar/Khurda (Odisha), May 19 (PTI)

DEFENCE Minister Rajnath Singh on Sunday said that international bodies should take cognisance of human rights violations in Pakistan occupied Kashmir.

Addressing an election rally in Odisha's Khurda, he said, "Human rights are being violated in PoK... International human rights agencies should take cognisance of the happenings in PoK."

He claimed that the people of PoK now desire to join India instead of remaining under the Pakistani administration.

"I had earlier said we need not attack anyone, they will come on their own. Two days ago, I saw a video in which peo-



ple of PoK were seen uprooting a Pakistani flag-post," he said. "PoK is and will remain an integral part of India," he asserted.

He said that barring a few stray incidents in Jammu and Kashmir, terrorism has been reduced to zero under the NDA rule, while several terror attacks took place under the previous UPA regime.

"In 2008, our IPS officers fell to bullets in Mumbai (26/11 attack)... What was the then Congress government doing? But now, nobody dares to attack Indian people have understood India's capability of eliminating terrorism not only within the country but also across the border," he asserted.

"However, we have never attacked any country or tried to occupy an inch of any other country's land. But Pakistan has all along tried to create disturbances in our country," he said. Singh also addressed two other rallies in Rairakhol in Sambalpur Lok Sabha seat and Patana in Keonjhar parliamentary constituency.

He alleged that Congress is misleading people by making promises of reservation on the

basis of religion which is not permissible according to the Constitution.

"Earlier, the Supreme Court had rejected such reservations accorded in two universities," he said. Stating that the Modi Government has ended 'triple talaq', he asserted that the BJP does not indulge in politics for votes but for building the nation. Singh alleged that Odisha remained backward during the 50-year-rule of Congress and 24-year-rule of BJD.

"From Jawaharlal Nehru to Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi and Manmohan Singh, all failed to eradicate poverty from the country. But PM Modi pulled 25 crore people out from poverty," he claimed.

Singh said Modi provided

pucca houses, piped water to households, free cooking gas, foodgrains, toilets and many other facilities to the poor people of the country.

"With Ram Lalla coming to his temple, Ram Rajya will be established in India," he asserted. He came down heavily on the BJD Government for not implementing Ayushman Bharat health scheme in Odisha and promised that the initiative will be implemented if the BJP comes to power in the state.

Singh blamed the BJD Government for the missing keys of Ratna Bhandar or treasury of Lord Jagannath.

"The BJP will open Lord Jagannath's Ratna Bhandar in Puri temple after it forms government in Odisha," he said.