

STABLE BUT SENSITIVE

Deployment along LAC extremely robust: Army chief

NEW DELHI, Mar 15 (PTI)

ARMY chief General Manoj Pande on Friday said he would describe the situation along the Line of Actual Control as “stable but sensitive” while asserting that deployment of Indian troops and other elements along the LAC is “extremely robust” and “balanced”.

During a panel discussion at a conclave here, he also said “we need to keep a close watch and monitor” what other developments are taking place along the border in terms of infra-

structure and movement of troops. At the discussion on India & Indo-Pacific Threats and Opportunities, held as part of the ‘India Today Conclave 2024’, the Army chief was asked a range of questions in the context of China’s growing influence in the region and the future preparedness of the army “if the situation along the LAC escalates”. The eastern Ladakh border standoff erupted on May 5, 2020, following a violent clash



in the Pangong Lake area. Ties between the two countries nose-dived significantly following the clash in the Galwan Valley in June 2020 that marked the most serious military conflict between the two sides in decades.

General Pande said, “Very briefly if I were to sum up as to what the situation is, I would describe it to be stable but sensitive. And, this is where we need to keep a close watch, monitor very closely the activ-

ities across the LAC, both in the immediate, shall we say depth, and further behind.”

“I would say upfront, our deployment in terms of the troops and other elements that we have along the LAC, is extremely robust and, it is balanced. We do maintain adequate reserves, in terms of our infantry formation and other artilleries and the other elements, to be able to deal with any situation that may arise across the entire length of the LAC. So, this is as far as our preparedness is concerned,” he added.

1st team of Indian military personnel back in India from Maldives, says MEA

NEW DELHI, Mar 15 (PTI)

INDIA on Friday said its first team of military personnel that was operating an advanced light helicopter in the Maldives has returned from the island nation.

The military team has been replaced by civilian technical experts.

Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu had set March 10 as the deadline for withdrawal of the first group of Indian military personnel from his country.

“The turnaround of the first team of personnel who were operating the ALH helicopter

has been completed. The first batch of people that had to be replaced has been completed. The turnaround has happened,” external affairs ministry spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said at his weekly media briefing.

Following the second meeting of the high-level core group that was set up to address the issue of withdrawal of Indian military personnel, the Maldivian Foreign Ministry had said India will replace all its military personnel in two phases by May 10.

The second meeting of the core group took place in Delhi on February 2.

Amid calls for reform, Abbas appoints Mustafa as Prime Minister of Palestine

RAMALLAH, Mar 15 (AP)

PALESTINIAN President Mahmoud Abbas has appointed his longtime economic adviser to be the next Prime Minister in the face of US pressure to reform the Palestinian Authority as part of Washington's postwar vision for Gaza.

Mohammad Mustafa, a US-educated economist and political independent, will head a technocratic Government in the Israeli-occupied West Bank that could potentially administer Gaza ahead of eventual statehood. But those plans face major obstacles, including

strong opposition from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and the Israel-Hamas war that is still grinding on with no end in sight.

It's unclear whether the appointment of a new Cabinet led by a close Abbas ally would be sufficient to meet US demands for reform, as the 88-year-old President would remain in overall control.

"The change that the United States of America and the countries of the region want is not necessarily the change that the Palestinian citizen wants," said Hani al-Masri, a Palestinian political analyst. "People want a real change in politics, not a

change in names ... They want elections."

He said Mustafa is "a respected and educated man" but will struggle to meet public demands to improve conditions in the occupied West Bank, where Israeli restrictions imposed since the start of the war have caused an economic crisis.

In a statement announcing the appointment, Abbas asked Mustafa to put together plans to re-unify administration in the West Bank and Gaza, lead reforms in the Government, security services and economy and fight corruption.

Mustafa was born in the West

Bank town of Tulkarem in 1954 and earned a doctorate in business administration and economics from George Washington University. He has held senior positions at the World Bank and previously served as Deputy Prime Minister and Economy Minister. He is currently the chairman of the Palestine Investment Fund.

The previous Prime Minister, Mohammad Shtayyeh, resigned along with his Government last month, saying different arrangements were needed because of the "new reality in the Gaza Strip."

Two new ECs assume charge

NEW DELHI, Mar 15 (PTI)

NEWLY-APPOINTED Election Commissioners Gyanesh Kumar and Sukhbir Singh Sandhu assumed charge on Friday. The former bureaucrats were appointed as Election Commissioners on Thursday.

They are the first ones to have been appointed as members of the poll panel after the new law on appointment of Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) and ECs came into force recently.

Welcoming them, CEC Rajiv Kumar spoke about the significance of their joining at a historic point when the Election Commission is all set to conduct Lok Sabha elections, a spokesperson said.

The vacancies had come up in EC after the retirement of Anup Chandra Pandey on



Chief Election Commissioner Rajiv Kumar (C) poses for a picture with the newly-appointed Election Commissioners Sukhbir Singh Sandhu (L) and Gyanesh Kumar (R) in New Delhi on Friday. (ANI)

February 14 and the sudden resignation of Arun Goel on March 8. Gyanesh Kumar and Sandhu, both 1988-batch IAS officers, belonged to the Kerala and Uttarakhand cadres, respectively.

SC REFUSES TO STAY

APPOINTMENTS OF NEW ECS: THE Supreme Court on Friday refused to stay the appointments of new Election Commissioners (ECs) under a 2023 law that excluded the Chief Justice of India from the selection panel.

Indian Army raises its first **APACHE** attack chopper squadron in Jodhpur

NEW DELHI, Mar 15 (ANI)

IN A major capability boost, the Indian Army on Friday raised its first Apache attack helicopter squadron in the desert sector in Jodhpur near the Pakistan front.

The squadron was raised in Jodhpur in the presence of Director General Indian Army Aviation Lt Gen Ajay Suri and officials from the original manufacturer Boeing along with other senior officials, Indian Army Officials told ANI.

The Indian Army Apache helicopters would camouflage desert colours and the first batch of choppers would arrive and join the fleet by May this year, they said. There is a slight delay in view of the ongoing global security situation but



they are now on track, the officials said. Earlier, the Indian Army has signed a contract to acquire six Apache helicopters from the US.

Also known as the 'tanks in the air', these advanced attack helicopters will land at the Indian Air Force's (IAF) Hindon Air Force Station and then will be deployed in Jodhpur in May, near the India-Pakistan border, the officials added. The

Army Aviation Corps, which currently operates utility helicopters such as the Dhruv and Chetak, earlier inducted the indigenously developed Light Combat Helicopters (LCH) Prachand at Missamari, Assam last year.

Notably, the IAF already operates a fleet of 22 Apache helicopters which have been deployed on the eastern and western fronts.

Upgrading 25 Dornier aircraft: MoD inks Rs 2,890 cr deal with HAL

NEW DELHI, Mar 15 (PTI)

THE Defence Ministry on Friday inked a contract worth over Rs 2,890 crore with State-run aerospace major Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd (HAL) for mid-life upgrade of 25 Dornier aircraft of the Indian Navy.

Under the project, the HAL will incorporate state-of-the-art avionics systems and sensors onboard the aircraft. The Defence Ministry said the project will be implemented within six and half years.

"The Ministry of Defence signed a contract with the HAL on March 15 for mid-life



upgrade (MLU) of 25 Dornier aircraft along with associated equipment for the Indian Navy at a cost of Rs 2,890 crore," an

official readout said.

"The MLU for Dornier aircraft includes an upgrade to incorporate state-of-the-art avionics systems and primary role sensors," the ministry said. It said the upgrade would significantly enhance the operational capability of the Dornier aircraft. "The upgrade

would significantly enhance the operational capability of the Dornier aircraft of the Indian Navy to perform primary roles of maritime surveillance, coastal surveillance, electronic intelligence and development of maritime domain awareness," the Ministry said in the readout.



LS POLL SCHEDULE TO BE ANNOUNCED TODAY

NEW DELHI, Mar 15 (PTI)

THE Election Commission will announce the schedule for the Lok Sabha polls on Saturday.

In a post on X, the poll panel said a press conference to announce the schedule for Lok Sabha elections and some State Assemblies will be held at 3 pm on Saturday. The term of the present Lok Sabha ends on June 16 and a new House has to be constituted before that. The term of the Assemblies in Andhra Pradesh, Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh and Odisha is coming to an end on various dates in June.

Last time the Lok Sabha polls were announced on March 10 and held in seven phases beginning April 11. Votes were counted on May 23.

In 2014 also, the EC had sent invites for its poll schedule press conference a day in advance. The invite was

sent in the evening for the presser to be held early next day. Nearly 97 crore people are eligible to cast vote in the upcoming polls at over 12 lakh polling stations. In the last parliamentary polls, the BJP had won 303 seats while the Congress got 52 seats. It could not muster enough numbers to claim the position of Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha.

The 2024 parliamentary polls are being seen as a do or die battle for the Opposition I.N.D.I.A. bloc.

According to a News 18 opinion poll, the BJP-led NDA is headed for a "historic mandate" in the upcoming polls. The opinion poll claimed that the NDA is set to win 411 seats in the 543-member Lok Sabha with the BJP alone clinching a record 350 seats.

According to an opinion poll survey by ABP-CVoter, the I.N.D.I.A. bloc is likely to get only six seats in the crucial State of Uttar Pradesh.