

Bihar political turmoil

Nitish may resign today | May join BJP-led NDA

PATNA/NEW DELHI, Jan 27 (PTI)

BIHAR Chief Minister Nitish Kumar on Saturday appeared all set to make his second political volte-face in less than three years, with a highly-placed source close to Kumar saying that the JD(U) President is likely to tender his resignation by Sunday morning.

The source, who requested anonymity, told PTI that though there was a possibility of Kumar resigning by late Saturday evening, "It would definitely take place by Sunday morning".

The comments came even as RJD leaders held extensive deliberations over the course of action to be followed in the event of Kumar calling off the alliance and returning to the BJP-led NDA.

Before submitting his resignation, Kumar will hold a customary meeting of the legislature party, the source added.

He also said Government offices like the secretariat have been asked to remain open on Sunday "in view of hectic activity expected during the day" that may see the installation of a new government with the BJP's support.

Meanwhile, Janata Dal (United)'s political adviser and



RJD supporters gather outside party leader and Bihar Deputy Chief Minister Tejashwi Yadav's residence amid Bihar political crisis, in Patna on Saturday. (PTI)

RJD leaders authorise Lalu to take decision

PATNA, Jan 27 (PTI)

RJD leaders in Bihar on Saturday authorised party president Lalu Prasad "to take any decision" amid fears that the party might be ditched by ally JD(U) of Chief Minister Nitish Kumar.

This was announced by RJD national spokesman and Rajya Sabha MP Manoj Jha, after a party meeting held here at the residence of Prasad's wife Rabri Devi.

"Please do not ask us any

more questions", said Jha who also showered praise on Tejashwi Yadav, the deputy CM, and party supremo's son for "transforming the health sector, a portfolio he ably managed". All senior leaders of the party, including members of the state legislature, were present at the meeting.

The RJD, with 79 MLAs, is the single largest party in the assembly and helms the 'Mahagathbandhan' which includes the Congress and three Left parties.

spokesperson K C Tyagi told reporters in Delhi that the grand alliance Government in Bihar is on the verge of collapse, and accused a section of the Congress leadership of repeatedly "insulting" Kumar.

"The I.N.D.I.A. bloc is on the verge of collapse. The alliance of I.N.D.I.A. bloc parties is almost over in Punjab, West Bengal and Bihar," he said.

Also on Saturday, state BJP leaders, who held a meeting in Patna, stopped short of making any formal announcement of support to the JD(U) chief in the event of his pulling out of the Mahagathbandhan.

Requesting anonymity, BJP sources said instructions have been received from the top leadership to put on hold "any formal announcement" till Kumar, who had dumped the NDA less than three years ago, put in his papers.

For Kumar, who has maintained a deafening silence over the turmoil in the 'Mahagathbandhan', ignoring pleas from allies RJD, Congress and the Left to clear the air about the intense political speculation on his future step, it was business as usual.

Apart from flagging off new fire brigade engines at the city's veterinary college ground, he visited Buxar for the inauguration of a beautification project of a renowned temple, a

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RED SEA CRISIS

Crew extinguish fire on tanker hit by Houthi missile off Yemen

US Forces conducted a strike against a Houthi anti-ship missile that was aimed at the Red Sea

JERUSALEM, Jan 27 (AP)

THE crew aboard a Marshall Islands-flagged tanker hit by a missile launched by Yemen's Houthi rebels extinguished an hourslong fire onboard the stricken vessel on Saturday sparked by the strike, authorities said.

The attack on the Marlin Luanda further complicated the Red Sea crisis caused by the Iranian-backed rebels' attacks over Israel's war on Hamas in the Gaza Strip. The tanker carried Russian-produced naphtha, a flammable oil, drawing Moscow further into a conflict that so far it had blamed on the US. Early on Saturday, US Forces conducted a strike against a Houthi anti-ship missile that was aimed at the Red Sea and prepared to launch, the US Military's Central Command said. That attack came after the USS Carney, an Arleigh Burke-class destroyer, had to shoot down a Houthi missile targeting it.

The Marlin Luanda burned for hours until being extinguished on Saturday, said Trafigura, a Singapore-based trading firm. Its crew of 25



A view of the oil tanker Marlin Luanda on fire after an attack in the Red Sea. The crew aboard a Marshall Islands-flagged tanker hit by a missile launched by Houthi rebels is battling a fire onboard the stricken vessel sparked by the strike. (AP/PTI)

Indian nationals and two Sri Lankans were still trying to battle the blaze sparked by the missile strike, it said. No one was injured by the blast, it added. "We are pleased to confirm that all crew on board the Marlin Luanda are safe and the fire in the cargo tank has been fully extinguished," Trafigura said. "The vessel is now sailing towards a safe harbour."

The Indian Navy said its guided missile destroyer INS Visakhapatnam was assisting the Marlin Luanda's crew in fighting the fire. It posted images showing the blaze still raging Saturday, likely fueled by the naphtha on board.

The ship, managed by a British firm, is carrying the Russian naphtha bound for Singapore, the company said.

It described the flammable oil as being purchased below the price caps set by G7 sanctions placed on Russia over its ongoing war on Ukraine. It wasn't clear what environmental impact the attack had caused.

Houthi military spokesman Brig. Gen. Yahya Saree claimed the attack on the Marlin Luanda in a prerecorded statement late Friday, describing it as a "British oil ship."

Since November, the rebels have repeatedly targeted ships in the Red Sea over Israel's offensive in Gaza against Hamas. But they have frequently targeted vessels with tenuous or no clear links to Israel, imperiling shipping in a key route for global trade between Asia, the Mideast and Europe.

India, France unveil defence industrial roadmap

■ Tata, Airbus conclude helicopter deal. To jointly build H125 helicopters

NEW DELHI, Jan 27 (PTI)

INDIA and France on Friday unveiled ambitious defence industrial roadmap to co-develop critical military hardware, firmed up a space situational awareness programme even as the Tata Group and Airbus announced to jointly build H125 helicopters following talks between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and French President Emmanuel Macron.

Foreign Secretary Vinay Kwatra, announcing the outcomes of Thursday's Modi-Macron talks in Jaipur, said a scheme for exchange of professionals in the age bracket of 18 to 35 years and activation of Schengen visas with a five-year validity for Indian post-graduate alumni of French institutions were among other key decisions.

The two sides inked a total of nine agreements that would provide for cooperation in a large number of areas including defence-space partnership, satellite launches boosting engagement in the healthcare sector and scientific research.

The pacts included the defence industrial roadmap and the Tata-Airbus deal. The two sides also announced operationalisation of India's Unified Payment Interface (UPI) at Eiffel Tower.



(L) Prime Minister Narendra Modi with chief guest French President Emmanuel Macron during the 75th Republic Day parade, at the Kartavya Path, in New Delhi on Friday. (R) President Droupadi Murmu with French President Emmanuel Macron, Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chief Justice of India (CJI) Justice D Y Chandrachud during a banquet at the Rashtrapati Bhawan, in New Delhi on Friday. (PTI)

The French President began his two-day visit to India from Jaipur and was the chief guest at the Republic Day celebrations in Delhi on Friday.

At a media briefing, Kwatra said both sides deliberated on various aspects to advance civil-nuclear energy cooperation and that there was a "very positive, forward leaning" ongoing conversation on small modular reactors (SMRs).

Modi and Macron also expressed "grave concern" at the possibility of further expansion of the conflict in the Middle-East, including in the Red Sea, which already has a



External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar with Union Minister Smriti Irani and her husband Zubin Irani during the 'At-Home' reception on the occasion of 75th Republic Day, at the Rashtrapati Bhawan, in New Delhi on Friday. (PTI)

significant "economic impact", a joint statement released late in the night said. "They recalled the utmost importance of upholding freedom of navigation in the Red Sea and of respecting the international law of the sea. They had detailed conversation aimed at coordinating their efforts in that region in this regard," it said.

FRENCH PRESIDENT EMMANUEL MACRON VISITS HAZRAT NIZAMUDDIN AULIA DARGAH IN DELHI: FRENCH President Emmanuel Macron on Friday visited the Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia Dargah in south Delhi.

Meanwhile, in a reaffirmation of the long-standing friendship between India and France, President Emmanuel Macron on Friday said: "Long live the friendship between France and India." At the outset of his address during a banquet hosted by President Droupadi Murmu, Macron expressed heartfelt gratitude for the warm welcome extended to his delegation.

Macron expressed deep honour in having French soldiers participate alongside their Indian counterparts, deeming it an unforgettable memory for the entire delegation.

Government working on ~~SEZ~~ reforms: Commerce Secretary

KOLKATA, Jan 27 (PTI)

THE Government is working on reforms in the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) domain so that movement of goods between domestic tariff area (DTA)



Sunil Barthwal

and SEZ space is carried out smoothly without affecting the competitiveness of goods in the export markets, Commerce Secretary Sunil Barthwal said on Saturday.

During the pandemic two years ago, many office spaces in the SEZ areas had been vacated due to 'work from home' practice initiated by the occupants. Barthwal said this had led to the demarcation of

SEZs into SEZ and DTA spaces.

"Scale economies have become very important nowadays. Reforms in the SEZ are in the offing so that movement of goods from SEZ to DTA and vice-versa are not affected rendering goods produced become less competitive," Barthwal said at a symposium organised by the Bharat Chamber of Commerce.

The official said that the foreign trade policy (FTP) of the Government had been framed keeping in mind the global value chain.

"Our foreign trade policy has been designed for exporters to take advantage of the global value chain. The industry, which had always sought protection in the past, will now have to integrate with the global value chain and look at where the competitive advantage lay," he added.

Stating that the target of achieving USD two trillion exports by 2030 is possible, Barthwal said that USD one trillion will be forthcoming from merchandise exports and another USD one trillion from services.

"Services appear to be intangible, but there is a huge scope to grow. We should look at the impediments which are preventing the growth of the services sector," he added.

Barthwal said with external trade becoming an important part of the growth engine, both the industrial and foreign trade policies are now intertwined.

He said that there is an increasing demand by countries to ink free trade agreements (FTAs) with India.

In bilateral and multilateral agreements, the most important aspect is to understand the policy of 'give and take'.

Cash-strapped **Pakistan** seeks USD 2 billion loan from **China**

ISLAMABAD, Jan 27 (PTI)

CASH-STRAPPED Pakistan has sought financial assistance of USD 2 billion from its close ally China for a year, according to a media report on Saturday.

Caretaker Prime Minister Anwaarul Haq Kakar, in a letter, has requested his Chinese Premier Li Qiang to roll over the debt as soon as the deposit time for the loan from China is completed on March 23.

In his letter, Kakar expressed gratitude to China for its financial assistance to Pakistan during its economic crisis as the cash-strapped country has secured a safe deposit of a total of USD 4 billion in loans from China, reducing

the country's mounting pressure on external debt payments and stabilising its foreign exchange reserves, The Express Tribune newspaper reported.

Earlier this month, the UAE rolled over Pakistan's maturing loan of USD 2 billion. Apart from the UAE, Saudi Arabia has deposited USD 5 billion with the State Bank of Pakistan. Following the loan rollover by the UAE, the interim government requested the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to dispatch a new mission this month for talks for the last loan tranche of USD 1.2 billion.

The IMF's next mission is critical for not only securing the last loan tranche but also for beginning negotia-

tions for a new long-term programme. While speaking to a private TV news channel recently, former finance minister Ishaq Dar said in case his party – the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) – won the elections and formed the government, the decision about the new IMF programme would be made at the earliest.

Dar, the four-time finance minister of the country, added that in case his party decided not to enter the IMF programme, it would immediately start implementing the belt-tightening measures. The IMF has made new adjustments in its fresh staff-level report about the available financing to Pakistan.

Life in Gilgit-Baltistan comes to standstill after protests against wheat price hike

GILGIT-BALTISTAN, Jan 27 (ANI)

THE lives of people in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir's (PoK) Gilgit-Baltistan have come to a standstill with a complete shutter down and wheel-jam strike being observed against an increase in the subsidised wheat rate and other grievances across the region, as reported by Dawn.

People have been holding big protest demonstrations and rallies in all districts of Gilgit-Baltistan, and hence the traffic has been suspended in all the regions.

Moreover, shops, markets, restaurants and trade centres were closed on Friday in vari-

ous areas of Gilgit, Skardu, Diamer, Ghizer, Astore, Shigar, Ghanche, Kharmang, Hunza and Nagar.

The Awami Action Committee (AAC) gave the strike call, in consultation with the associations representing traders, transporters and hotel owners, according to Dawn.

However, it was the next phase of the protest that has been going on for the last month against the Gilgit-Baltistan Government's decision to raise the subsidised wheat prices.

Maryam SKhan, a researcher at the Institute of Development and Economic Alternatives (IDEAS), Pakistan, posted on

social media X, stating that the largest telecom operator of PoK, Special Communications Organization, has blocked internet services in Gilgit-Baltistan.

"As protests grow stronger over wheat subsidy issue, SCOM @hq_sco has blocked internet services in Gilgit-Baltistan," Khan reposted on X.

https://x.com/harf_e_naguffa/status/1750826186463215699?s=20

Whereas, an X user shared a video of Senator Farhatullah Babar, stressing that Gilgit-Baltistan is the only region of Pakistan where people do not own their lands.