

Russia begins withdrawing peacekeeping forces from Azerbaijan's Karabakh

MOSCOW, Apr 17 (AP)

PRESIDENT Vladimir Putin's spokesman said Wednesday that Russian forces are being withdrawn from Azerbaijan's Karabakh region, where they have been stationed as peacekeepers since the end of a war in 2020.

In a conference call with journalists, Dmitry Peskov confirmed reports of the withdrawal but did not give further details. The Karabakh region had been under the control of ethnic Armenian forces backed by Armenia's military since 1994. But Azerbaijan took con-

trol of sizeable parts of the region in a six-week war in 2020.

That war ended with a Russia-brokered ceasefire that called for placing about 2,000 peacekeeping troops in the parts of Karabakh that were still held by Armenians. The forces' duties were to include ensuring free passage on the sole road connecting Karabakh with Armenia.

But Azerbaijan began blocking the road in late 2022, alleging Armenians were using it for weapons shipments and to smuggle minerals, and the Russian forces did not intervene.

Storm dumps record rain across UAE, floods Dubai's airport

DUBAI, Apr 17 (AP)

THE desert nation of the United Arab Emirates attempted to dry out Wednesday from the heaviest rain ever recorded there after a deluge flooded out Dubai International Airport, disrupting flights through the world's busiest airfield for international travel. The state-run WAM news agency called the rain on Tuesday "a historic weather event" that surpassed "anything documented since the start of data collection in 1949."

That's before the discovery of crude oil in this energy-rich nation then part of a British protectorate known as the Trucial States. Rain also fell in Bahrain, Oman, Qatar and Saudi Arabia.



Vehicles sit abandoned in floodwater covering a major road in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, on Wednesday. (AP/PTI)

Adverse weather hits Dubai flights; Air India cancels services on Wed

NEW DELHI, Apr 17 (PTI)

FLIGHTS from India to Dubai have been disrupted significantly as heavy rains resulted in flooding of the emirate's airport, also one of the world's busiest airports.

Air India, which operates

72 weekly flights from various cities to Dubai, cancelled its services on Wednesday. Apart from Air India, Air India Express, Vistara and SpiceJet also operate flights from various Indian cities to Dubai, which is also home to a large number of Indian diaspora.

However, the rains were acute across the UAE.

One possible contributor may have been "cloud seeding," in which small planes operated by the Government fly through clouds burning spe-

cial salt flares. Those flares can increase precipitation.

Several reports quoted meteorologists at the National Center for Meteorology as saying they flew six or seven cloud-seeding flights before the rains.

ENVIRONMENT, CLIMATE CHANGE gain prominence in manifestos

■ By Gaurav Saini
NEW DELHI, Apr 17 (PTI)

FROM a few lines two decades ago to multiple full pages, Lok Sabha election manifestos of two primary national parties in India - the BJP and the Congress - reflect rising concerns over climate change and environmental degradation.

While policy experts have welcomed the increased attention to these issues, they, however, say many promises have proved to be symbolic considering the contradictory approach Governments have taken in certain matters, including forest and wildlife conservation. Election manifestos represent the political standing of parties and are often discussed, debated, and compared during elections. From international policy to jobs, health, and education, these address a range of issues and help the electorate make an effective decision.

The BJP, which released its 69-page election manifesto last Saturday, has dedicated three pages to environment and climate issues under the section ModI Ki Guarantee for Sustainable Bharat, coming a long way from just a paragraph on environment in the 1999 Lok Sabha elections.

The word climate change did not even figure in the 1999 and



2004 manifestos of the BJP, currently the world's largest political party. The Congress has allotted two pages for environment, climate, disaster management, and water and sanitation-related issues in its 2024 election manifesto.

A review of its previous Lok Sabha election manifestos shows a strong emphasis on climate change and environmental sustainability issues.

A 2022 study by the Centre for Policy Research noted that the Congress has consistently emphasised climate change and environmental sustainability over the last three elections and has discussed specific steps for environmental protection, like green budgeting and the creation of an independent authority to work on it. According to the study, while the BJP dedicates about 11 per cent of its manifesto to environmental issues, Left-leaning parties generally highlight water conservation, dedicating around 12

per cent of their content to environmental protection and sustainability.

Key commitments in the BJP's latest manifesto include achieving net-zero emissions by 2070, transitioning to non-fossil fuel energy sources, improving river health, achieving national air quality standards in 60 cities, expanding tree cover, and boosting disaster resilience. The Congress has proposed setting up a fund for a green transition and achieving the net-zero goal. Experts, however, have expressed concerns regarding the lack of specific steps in their manifesto to address environmental challenges. The BJP manifesto does not reflect the issues that ecologists have been raising regarding environmental policies where larger reforms are required, said Debadityo Sinha, a senior resident fellow at the Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy.

Sinha hoped the Government would take steps to protect the

Vote for clean environment, stable climate, urge civil society groups

NEW DELHI, Apr 17 (PTI)

MORE than 70 environmental and civil society organisations on Wednesday urged citizens to evaluate India's performance with respect to environment and ecology in the last few years before exercising their franchise in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections.

These organisations include the National Alliance of People's Movements, People for Aravallis, Youth for Himalaya, Climate Front India, Fridays for Future, Alliance for Rivers in India, Indian Social Action Forum, United Conservation Movement (Karnataka), Aarey Conservation Group, Yugma Collective, and Save Pune Hills from Maharashtra; Endangered Himalaya (Himachal Pradesh), Van Gujjar Tribal Yuva Sangathan (Uttarakhand), Chhattisgarh

existing natural forests and wildlife habitats, strengthen environmental laws, enhance the capacity of authorities, and ensure greater involvement of civil society in environmental decision-making.

Bachao Andolan, Jharkhand Kisan Parishad, Jan Vikas Shakti Sangathan (Bihar), and UP Land Right Forum. "As Indians prepare to vote in this year's Lok Sabha elections, it is crucial to consider the future of our democracy, especially the youth and their right to clean air and water security in the coming years as our country faces extreme impacts of climate change, including unpredictable rainfall, melting glaciers, and increasing pollution," they said in a joint statement.

They asked citizens to evaluate India's performance with respect to environment and ecology in the last few years along with other important factors such as "increase or decrease in quality of life, freedom of speech, democratic fabric of the nation, job creation, citizens' rights," etc before casting their vote.

Environmental activist and water policy expert Himanshu Thakkar said the UPA Government did better when it comes to transparency in such matters compared to the NDA Government.

India's crude oil **IMPORT** bill drops 16 per cent

NEW DELHI, Apr 17 (PTI)

INDIA'S crude oil import dropped 16 per cent in the fiscal year ended March 31 as lower international rates but the dependency on overseas suppliers rose to a new high, official data showed.

India imported 232.5 million tonnes of crude oil, which is refined into fuels like petrol and diesel, in the 2023-24 fiscal (April 2023 to March 2024), almost the same as in the previous financial year. But it paid USD 132.4 billion for the imports in FY24 as against USD 157.5 billion import bill in 2022-23, Oil Ministry's Petroleum Planning and Analysis Cell (PPAC) data showed.

The world's third largest oil importing and consuming nation has been able to add to its domestic production drop, raising its import dependence.

Import dependence of crude oil soared to 87.7 per cent in 2023-24, up from 87.4 per cent, according to PPAC.

Domestic crude oil production was almost unchanged at 29.4 million tonnes in 2023-24.

Besides crude oil, India spent USD 23.4 billion on import of 48.1 million tonnes of petroleum products like LPG. It also exported 62.2 million tonnes of products for USD 47.4 billion. Other than oil, India also imports gas in its liquid form, called LNG.

After the price shock of 2022-23, import of 30.91 billion cubic meters of gas cost USD 13.3 billion in the fiscal year ended March 31, 2024.

This compared with USD 17.1 billion spent on import of 26.3 bcm of gas in 2022-23 when energy prices shot up to record levels in the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Middle East conflict, US inflation, foreign fund outflows drag mkts **LOWER** from record peaks

NEW DELHI, Apr 17 (PTI)

GLOBAL uncertainties, mainly escalating tensions between Iran and Israel, have led to a massive correction in the equity markets in the last three days after a record-shattering rally that saw the BSE Sensex crossing the historic 75,000 mark last week.

Hotter-than-expected US inflation data fuelled concerns that the Federal Reserve will hold back on delivering the cuts to interest rates.

Also, foreign fund outflows and profit-taking contributed to the correction in the equity markets.

In the past three days, the BSE benchmark tanked 2,094.47 points or 2.79 per cent.

Investors' wealth tumbled Rs 7.93 lakh crore in the three days of the market crash amid simmering tensions in the Middle East and weak global trends.

"The heavy correction in the market can be attributed to several factors, including the



escalating tensions between Iran and Israel, which have heightened geopolitical uncertainties and prompted risk aversion among investors. Additionally, the Federal Reserve's hawkish stance on inflation has shifted interest rate expectations, dampening hopes for significant interest rate cuts. Rising geopolitical tensions in the Middle East have contributed to the correction, as investors move towards safer assets amidst uncertainty. These factors combined have led to a significant correction in the market after a period of record rally," said Suman Bannerjee, CIO of hedge fund Hedonova.

The BSE Sensex hit its all-

time peak of 75,124.28 on April 9. The index breached the historic 75,000 mark for the first time ever on the same day.

On April 10, the 30-share BSE benchmark settled above the 75,000 mark for the first time.

The market capitalisation of BSE-listed companies went past the coveted Rs 400 lakh crore mark for the first time ever on April 8.

From February 29 to April 10, the BSE benchmark jumped 2,537.85 points or 3.50 per cent. However, from April 12 onwards the markets have been falling.

"The recent heavy correction in the market can be attributed to geopolitical tensions. Additionally, anticipation of delayed rate cuts in the USA has added pressure. These factors have collectively contributed to the downturn following a period of record rally in the markets," Arvinder Singh Nanda, Senior Vice President, of Master Capital Services Ltd, said.

Israeli airstrikes hit 40 Hamas targets in Gaza

TEL AVIV [Israel], Apr 17
(ANI/TPS)

ISRAELI forces in central Gaza destroyed rocket launchers and Hamas terror infrastructure, while also eliminating terrorists, the Israel Defence Forces said on Wednesday morning.

One of the strikes was on a Hamas squad operating an armed drone near Israeli troops. In additional strikes, Israeli aircraft struck several rocket launchers that were primed to fire rockets at Israel.

More than 40 targets were struck, including underground launching posts, booby-trapped buildings, military structures, observation posts, and underground locations. At least 1,200 people were killed and 240 Israelis and foreigners were taken hostage in Hamas's attacks near the Gaza border on October 7. Of the remaining 134 hostages, Israel recently declared 31 of them dead.

13 killed, several injured after strike at refugee camp

GAZA CITY [Israel], Apr 17 (ANI)

AT LEAST 13 people, including seven children, were killed and over 25 others were injured after a strike targeted an Al-Maghazi refugee camp in central Gaza on Tuesday, *CNN* reported, citing Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital officials.

A graphic video obtained from eyewitness Nihad Owdetallah, showed several casualties lying on the floor, *CNN* reported. Several people seem to be running around in panic, shouting and trying to count and carry the dead bodies.

Speaking to *CNN*, Owdetallah, who resides in the camp, said that he heard an explosion at around 3:40 pm (local time) on Tuesday, around 30 to 40 metres away from him. He said, "I immediately walked to see what happened and found dead bodies thrown on the ground."

He said that people were screaming and kids were dead on the ground. Footage captured for *CNN* from Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital shows casualties and injured people being taken in as the emergency room was crowded with patients. Family members were crowding near their loved one's dead bodies, holding onto them and crying, according to a *CNN* report.

A video from a mortuary at the hospital shows families trying to identify their loved ones. Pointing to a white body bag with a young boy's bloodied face exposed, Fatmeh Issa said, "This is my son," *CNN* reported.

Another man said, "They have nothing to do with anyone! They are civilians. Have mercy on us. You are killing children. You are not killing an army or fighters; you are killing children who were peacefully playing in the street."

Venezuela mission in Ecuador shut in support of Mexico

Mexico City: Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro ordered the closure of his country's embassy and consulates in Ecuador on Tuesday in solidarity with Mexico in its protest over a raid by Ecuadorian authorities on the Mexican Embassy in Quito. Maduro and other presidents participating in a virtual meeting of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States expressed their support for Mexico's request to have the UN suspend Ecuador from the world body over the April 5 raid. But Maduro was the only one to announce the closure of diplomatic outposts. "The condemnation has been unanimous, total, absolute," Maduro said, referring to the excoriation Ecuador's move has drawn. "No one today in this world comes out to defend this barbaric act." AP