

# Acting prez a conservative with ties to Khamenei

With the death of Prez Ebrahim Raisi, Iran's first vice-president, Mohammad Mokhber, becomes acting president. Mokhber is a conservative political operative with a long history of involvement in large business conglomerates closely tied to Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. In a statement Monday Khamenei said that Mokhber must work with the heads of the legislature and judiciary to hold elections for a new president within 50 days.

Vice-presidents in Iran are typically low profile, operating more as players within the govt than as public figures.

Mokhber is around 68 years old and became first vice president in August 2021. He is originally from Khuzestan province in Iran's southwest. He was a deputy governor there, and during the Iran-Iraq war in the 19-80s served as a member of Iran's

Revolutionary Guard medical corps. One of Mokhber's relatively few high-profile appearances came when he and three other senior Iranian officials went to Moscow in Oct 2022 to complete a sale of Iranian drones and ballistic missiles to Russia, for use in Ukraine.

Raisi chose him as vice-president after Mokhber held senior positions in some of Iran's most powerful organisations, including the Mostazafan Foundation, Sina Bank and Setad, a conglomerate entirely controlled by Khamenei that has billions of dollars in assets and was involved in efforts to make and distribute a Covid-19 vaccine.

All three organisations are part of an opaque network of financial entities that are tied to the Iran state, although they are not directly state-owned. They are also connected to projects that are priorities for the supre-

me leader and his inner circle.

Mokhber's involvement suggests that he has been a successful behind-the-scenes player who is familiar with the financing networks that are important to the official Iranian power structure.

The Mostazafan Foundation, where Mokhber worked in the early 2000s, is officially a charity but is described by the US treasury as "a key patronage network for the supreme leader" that includes holdings in key sectors of Iran's economy, including finance, energy, construction and mining. It is the subject of sanctions by the US treasury because it is controlled by Khamenei, and the treasury said it was created in part "to confiscate and manage property, including that originally belonging to minorities" in Iran, including Baha'is and Jews. The Sina Bank has faced sanctions by the US treasury and the EU for financing Iran's nuclear and ballis-

tic missile programme.

Mokhber appears to have risen to the top of Iran's political leadership in part because of the close relationship he developed with Khamenei, dating from at least 2007 when he joined the leadership of Setad. Within a few months of his appointment, Mokhber had founded the Barakat Foundation, which has a number of companies under its aegis including a major medical and pharm company. NYT

## N-negotiator Ali Bagheri named acting foreign min

Iran's veteran nuclear negotiator Ali Bagheri, a harsh critic of the West, was named acting foreign minister to replace Hossein Amir Abdollahian. Bagheri, 56, had served as deputy to Abdollahian. Bagheri is considered close to Iran's ultra-conservatives and a member of the inner circle of supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who is the father-in-law of Bagheri's brother. AFP



Mohammad Mokhber

# Indian warships reach Philippines on SCS tour

X/@indiannavy

## Comes Amid Manila Tensions With Beijing

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

**New Delhi:** Amid heightened tensions between an aggressive China and the Philippines, three Indian warships have now reached Manila as part of the ongoing long-range deployment to the South China Sea to strengthen maritime partnerships with friendly countries.

Guided-missile destroyer INS Delhi, fleet tanker INS Shakti and anti-submarine warfare corvette INS Kiltan, under the command of Eastern Fleet chief Rear Admiral Rajesh Dhankhar, docked at Manila on Sunday after similar goodwill visits to Singapore, Malaysia and Vietnam in the region.

The visit comes soon after India began deliveries of three anti-ship coastal batteries of the 290-km BrahMos supersonic cruise missiles to the Philippines last month, under the \$375 million contract in Jan 2022, which New Delhi hopes will pave the way for more such deals with ASEAN countries.

"India and the Philippines share common interests particularly in maintaining peace and order in the Indo-Pacific region. The two navies share strong



Indian naval ship INS Delhi in Manila

bonds of friendship, and both have endeavored to participate in maritime partnership exercises at every available opportunity," said Rear Admiral Dhankhar.

Personnel from the two navies will take part in an exercise as well as engage in a wide range of professional interactions, including subject matter expert exchange, cross-deck visits, cultural visits, and collaborative community outreach programmes, during the visit. "We are visiting friendly foreign countries to share our experiences and best practices with their navies," Rear Admiral Dhankhar said.

The deployment to the South China Sea, where China is locked in territorial disputes with its neighbours, is also taking place when the Indian Navy is closely moni-

toring expanding operations of Chinese satellite and missile tracking ships in the Indian Ocean Region. Such dual-use ships map oceanographic and other data useful for navigation and submarine operations of the Chinese Navy.

India has been steadily upgrading defence ties with ASEAN countries like Singapore, Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines through regular joint exercises, military exchanges and training programmes.

Towards this end, the first-ever ASEAN-India maritime exercise (AIME) was also conducted in May last year. Warships from India, the Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Brunei and Vietnam had then conducted joint drills in the South China Sea.

# Wildfire doused after coming close to Ranikhet golf course

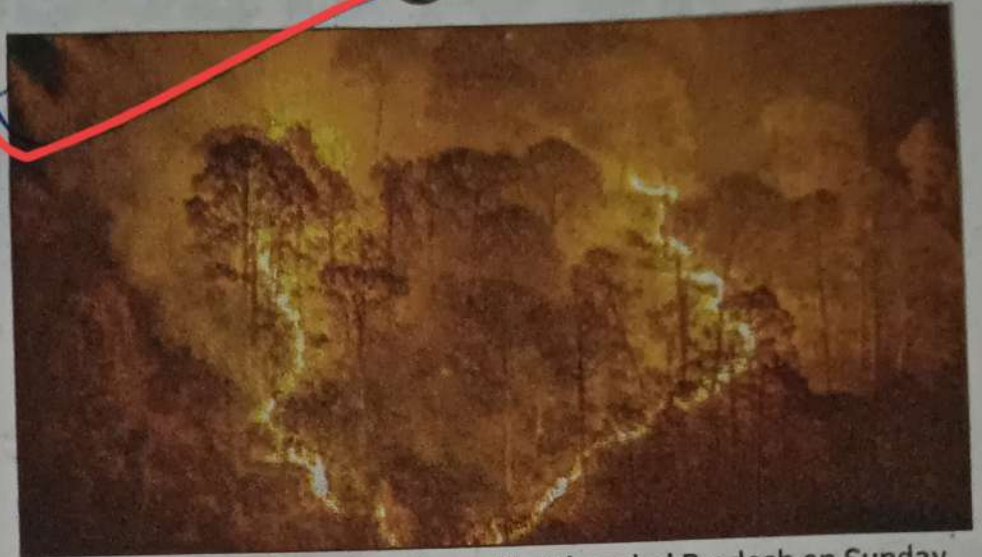
Shivani Azad &  
Yogesh Nagarkoti | TNN

**Dehradun/Almora:** After a brief lull, Uttarakhand is again witnessing a surge in forest fires. Over the past weekend, the blaze reached dangerously close to the Army golf course in Ranikhet, a historic colonial-era putting ground. According to local officials, the blaze could be controlled "after a two-hour intense struggle", and "thankfully, not much damage was reported".

On Saturday, the fires also reached Military Hospital in Ranikhet. Lt Col Manish Shrivastava, PRO (Defence), said: "The flames reached the hospital's family ward, after which the commandant and hospital staff rushed to combat the blaze. Simultaneously, it spread to a civilian's house adjacent to the hospital."

Around 130 Army personnel were engaged in battling the blaze along with local fire fighting teams for several hours. Ranikhet fire service officer Vansh Narayan said, "Army and our team managed to control the fire before a big mishap could happen."

On Sunday evening, a blaze was also reported in the



A forest fire breaks out near Kasauli in Himachal Pradesh on Sunday

forests housing the Army's firing range in Ranikhet. It was brought under control after over an hour of fire-fighting efforts. Similarly, a forest fire in Bagwalipokhar area affected a govt school.

Quick action from teachers and students averted significant damage to the building. In Lamgada forest, again in Kumaon, a blaze on Sunday evening reached a BSNL tower and nearby residential houses, sparking panic among residents before being contained by the fire brigade, forest department, and villagers. In Bageshwar, the blaze had reached the chief education officer's residence.

Divisional forest officer Deepak Singh, overseeing Al-

mora and Bageshwar, said, "The forest department is working diligently to prevent further incidents. We urge the public to report any wildfires immediately to help avert casualties and damage to property and forest land."

Besides Kumaon, which has recorded 592 forest fire incidents, damaging over 834 hectares of land till now, the recent fires have also affected many places in the Garhwal region, with Mussoorie, Narendernagar, Kalsi, Lansdowne, and Rudraprayag forest divisions reporting blazes.

On Monday, 23 incidents were reported, scorching around 36 hectares of land.

(With inputs from Kalyan Das in Dehradun)

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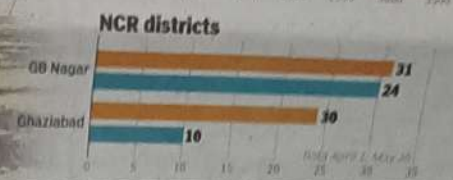
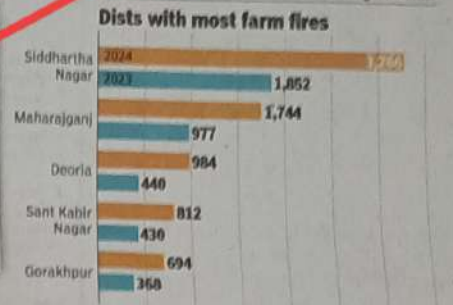
# Stubble burning count doubles in state

## 13,727 Incidents Reported So Far In April-May; Up In Hry & Delhi Too, Says IARI Data

Shafiqe Alam  
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### FARM FIRES ROSE 3 TIMES IN GZB IN A YEAR

Photos: Yogesh Kumar



**Noida:** Data from Indian Agricultural Research Institute (IARI) shows farm fire incidents in Uttar Pradesh have doubled this season compared to the previous year. From April 1 to May 20 this year, a total of 13,727 farm fire incidents were reported, compared to 6,426 in the same period last year.

Rabi crops such as wheat, oat, and mustard are planted between Oct and Nov and harvested in the spring. According to IARI data, the maximum farm fires this year were reported in Siddharthnagar (3,266 incidents), followed by Maharajganj (1,744), Deoria (984), Sant Kabir Nagar (812), and Gorakhpur (694). Gautam Budh Nagar and Ghaziabad reported 31 and 30 farm fires, respectively.

In April-May 2023 too, Siddharthnagar (1,852) had the maximum cases of stubble burning, followed by Maharajganj (977), Deoria (440), Sant Kabir Nagar (430), and Gorakhpur (368). Last year, GB Nagar recorded 24 such incidents, while Ghaziabad witnessed 10 farm fires. The data also shows an increase in farm fire cases in neighbouring Delhi and Haryana as well.

Sunil Pradhan, a farmer in Jewar, said most of the agricultural land in GB Nagar and Ghaziabad has been acquired by development authorities here, and hence there are no big farmers or farming activities even in rural areas. "So, the number of farm fires is less here as compared to other districts. Also, we rely on manual harvesting instead of using machines. In manual harvesting, the crops are cut properly

and no residue is left on farm land. After harvesting, the crop is collected and the stem is used as fodder for cattle, so there is no need for burning stubble," he said. Vikrant Tongad, a Noida-based environmentalist, said farm fires are mostly reported in Dadri, Dankaur, and Jewar areas of the district. "A few days ago, someone had set crop residue ablaze in Dadri's Khandera G-

rirajpur village. This time, farm fires have seen a rise in the state as farmers have started using machines for harvesting, which harvest crops but leave behind stems and roots. Since often farmers have to prepare the soil for the next crop in a hurry, they burn the residue," he said. Delhi, meanwhile, reported 32 farm fire incidents from April 1 to May 20 this ye-

ar — the maximum in North Delhi district (17), followed by South West Delhi (12), and North West Delhi (3) — compared to only five incidents reported last year (2 each in North and South West districts, and 1 in West Delhi). Neighbouring Haryana reported 3,077 farm fire incidents this year — Karnal saw the most farm fires at 392, followed by Rohtak (320), Jind (317), Sonapat (269), and Kait-

hal (269). Gurgaon recorded 10 fires. Last year, Haryana reported 1,900 cases in this period. The maximum incidents were recorded in Fatehabad (268), followed by Sirsa (259), Karnal (227), Kaithal (190), and Jind (156). Gurgaon reported 9 farm fires last year.

Asked what is being done to prevent stubble burning, Rajeev Kumar, deputy director of agriculture (GB Nagar) said the department issues notices to farmers if such incidents are reported. "We impose a fine of Rs 2,500 on the first such violation and Rs 5,000 on the next violation," he said. He said that usually people burn crop residue in the kharif season.

Kharif crops such as rice, maize, and millet are cultivated when the monsoon begins and harvested between Sept and Nov. The data indicates that between Sept 15 and Nov 30 last year, UP recorded 3,996 farm fire cases, with the highest incidents reported in Maharajganj (224), Siddharthnagar (172), Jhansi (172), Kanpur (145), and Gorakhpur (143). Ghaziabad reported 31 such occurrences, while GB Nagar had 15 incidents. In the same period in 2022, UP registered 3,027 farm fire cases, with Gautam Budh Nagar accounting for 11 and Ghaziabad for 13 incidents.

# Container ship involved in Baltimore bridge collapse



Crews work to move the cargo ship Dali in Baltimore on Monday. (AP/PTI)

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BALTIMORE, May 20 (AP)

**THE** container ship that caused the deadly collapse of Baltimore's Francis Scott Key Bridge was refloated on Monday and has begun slowly moving back to port.

The Dali has remained at the collapse site since it lost power and crashed into one of the bridge's supporting columns on March 26, killing six construction workers and snarling traffic into Baltimore Harbour.

The ship appeared to start moving shortly after 6 am as crews started to maneuver it out of the wreckage. It started and stopped a few times before slowly backing away from the collapse site.

Officials said it would move at about 1 mph on the roughly 2.5-mile (4-km) trip, a fraction of the speed it was traveling when it lost power and crashed into the bridge. Pieces of the bridge's steel trusses pro-

truded from its bow, which remained covered in concrete from the collapsed roadway.

Officials have said they plan to unload the ship's containers and complete some short-term repairs while it's docked in Baltimore. Monday morning's high tide had been expected to bring the best conditions for crews to refloat and start moving the ship, according to a statement from the Key Bridge Response Unified Command. Several tugboats were escorting the Dali on its path to the marine terminal. The work is expected to last at least 21 hours. Crews conducted a controlled demolition on May 13 to break down the largest remaining span of the collapsed bridge.

The Dali experienced four electrical blackouts within about 10 hours before leaving the Port of Baltimore for Sri Lanka and hitting the bridge, a preliminary report said.

# Agniveers Not just soldiers but leaders, innovators, defenders of nation's sovereignty: CDS

BENGALURU, May 20 (PTI)

CHIEF of Defence Staff General Anil Chauhan on Monday visited the Maratha Light Infantry Regimental Centre in Belagavi to address the Agniveers, as they embark on their military journey, an official said.

In his address, he underscored the noble purpose of military service and its pivotal role within the military framework. He said the Agniveers are not only soldiers but also leaders, innovators and defenders

of the nation's sovereignty.

In a statement, the Defence PRO said, "Addressing the evolving nature of warfare, he underscored the complexity and unpredictability of future conflicts to include cyber warfare, Artificial Intelligence and asymmetric threats which are now an integral part of the battlefield."

The CDS also spoke about technology integration and continuous learning and mentioned that in addition to staying abreast with the latest



advancements, there is also a need to showcase innovative approach towards combat.

He expressed his gratitude for the commitment made by Agniveers by choosing the Armed Forces as a profession which is a testament to their exceptional duty towards the nation.

The CDS acknowledged the personal challenges faced by the soldiers and their families and the hardships they endure while operating in challenging environments.

He assured that despite the challenges, the Agniveers will find their journey immensely rewarding and each step, will lead to their personal growth and deep sense of pride in serving the nation.

The CDS lauded the Regimental Centre and the team of instructors for creating a conducive environment for training and ensuring that best of the training is being imparted to the Agniveers.

He also emphasised the critical role of professional instruc-



tors in shaping the future of the Armed Forces.

Chauhan also emphasised that the quality of training directly impacts the operational readiness and urged to be honest towards it.

The CDS encouraged Agniveers to continue striving for excellence, to uphold the values of integrity and honour, and to serve as role models for their peers.

# China must stop military intimidation: Taiwan's Lai

TAIPEI, May 20 (AP)

TAIWAN'S new President, Lai Ching-te, said in his inauguration speech on Monday that he wants peace with China and urged it to stop its military threats and intimidation of the self-governed island that Beijing claims as its own territory.

"I hope that China will face the reality of Taiwan's existence, respect the choices of the people of Taiwan, and in good faith, choose dialogue over confrontation," Lai said after being sworn into office.

Lai pledged to "neither yield nor provoke" Beijing and said he sought peace in relations with China. But he emphasised



the island democracy is determined to defend itself "in the face of the many threats and attempts at infiltration from China."

Lai's party doesn't seek independence from China but maintains that Taiwan is already a sovereign nation.

Lai, 64, takes over from Tsai Ing-wen, who led Taiwan through eight years of economic and social development despite the COVID-19 pandemic and China's escalating military threats.

Taiwan's new President Lai Ching-te waves during his inauguration ceremonies in Taipei, Taiwan, on Monday. (AP/PTI)

## Lai sent a dangerous signal: China

■ By K J M Varma  
BEIJING/TAIPEI, May 20 (PTI)

CHINA on Monday denounced Taiwan's new President Lai Ching-te for his assertion that the self-ruled island is sovereign and vowed to uphold the status quo, saying that he has sent "a dangerous signal" of seeking "Taiwan independence".

Taiwan's sovereignty is a red rag for China as President Xi Jinping has been consistently maintaining that Taiwan will eventually be part of China. Much on the expected lines, China hit back with its Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin countering Lai by saying: "Taiwan independence is a dead end". "Regardless of the pretext or the banner under which it is pursued, the push for Taiwan independence is destined to fail," Wang said. No matter how the political situation changes, it will not change the historical and legal facts that both sides of the Taiwan Strait belong to one China, and the historical trend that China will eventually be reunified, Wang said.

# Iran President, Foreign Minister, Governor, others killed in chopper crash



President of Iran Ebrahim Raisi

By Jon Gambrell  
DUBAI, May 20 (AP)

IRANIAN President Ebrahim Raisi, the country's Foreign Minister and several other officials were found dead on Monday, hours after their helicopter crashed in a foggy,



Last seen, the helicopter carrying Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi takes off at the Iranian border with Azerbaijan in Azeri, Iran, on Sunday. The helicopter crashed later. (AP/PTI)

mountainous region of the country's northwest, State media reported.

The crash comes as the Middle East remains unsettled by the Israel-Hamas war, during which Raisi, who was 63, under Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei

launched an unprecedented drone-and-missile attack on Israel just last month.

During Raisi's term in office, Iran enriched uranium closer than ever to weapons-grade levels, further escalating tensions with the West as Tehran also supplied bomb-carrying



Rescue teams members on Monday carry body of a victim after a helicopter carrying Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi crashed in Varzaghan, northwestern Iran. (AP/PTI)

drones to Russia for its war in Ukraine and armed militia groups across the region.

Meanwhile, Iran has faced years of mass protests against its Shiite theocracy over its ailing economy and women's rights — making the moment that much more sensitive for

Tehran and the future of the country.

Khamenei hours later announced Iran's first Vice President, Mohammad Mokhber, would serve as the country's acting President until elections are held.

(Cont'd on page 5)

## Iran announces 5 days of mourning

TEHRAN, May 20 (ANI)

FOLLOWING the demise of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi in a helicopter crash on Sunday afternoon, country's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, has announced five days of national mourning in Iran, according to Press TV.

## One-day state mourning in India

NEW DELHI, May 20 (PTI)

A ONE-DAY state mourning will be observed across India on Tuesday as a mark (Cont'd on page 5)



# Prachanda wins 4th vote of confidence in Nepal Parlt



Nepalese Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal waves to media after winning a vote of confidence in Parliament in Kathmandu on Monday. (AP/PTI)

KATHMANDU, May 20 (PTI)

NEPAL Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda' on Monday won a vote of confidence in Parliament, the fourth within 18 months of taking office, amidst sloganeering by the main Opposition Nepali Congress that abstained from the voting.

Prachanda, 69, a former guerrilla leader from the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre) -- the third largest party in the House of Representatives (HoR) -- received 157 votes in the 275-member House of Representatives.

In total, 158 lawmakers took part in the voting. The main Opposition Nepali Congress boycotted the voting process

and chanted slogans against Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister Rabi Lamichhane, accused of misappropriation of cooperative funds, leading to the delay in the session. One HoR member remained neutral. Speaker Dev Raj Ghimire announced that Prachanda had won the floor test as he got a majority in the Parliament.

The vote comes days after one of the coalition partners, Janata Samajbadi Party (JSP), withdrew its support last week for his Government while quitting the coalition Government.

The Government required at least 138 votes to win the vote of trust.

Earlier, the voting had to be delayed due to obstructions

caused by the Nepali Congress, which has been demanding the formation of a Parliamentary probe committee to investigate Lamichhane's alleged involvement in the scam.

This was the fourth time that Prachanda sought a vote of confidence in the House in less since he assumed Prime Ministership in December 2022.

According to constitutional provisions, a Prime Minister has to take a vote of confidence after an ally withdraws support to the ruling coalition.

Earlier on March 13, Prime Minister Dahal won his third consecutive vote of confidence. Prachanda faced a floor test after CPN-UML withdrew its support to the Government following a rift over backing.

# 59% Voter turn-out in 5th phase of LS polls

Maharashtra recorded lowest voter turn-out with 53%, W Bengal recorded highest voting percentage of 73%.

NEW DELHI, May 20 (PTI)

**OVER** 59 per cent voter turnout was recorded on Monday in 49 constituencies in six States and two Union territories in the fifth phase of Lok Sabha elections, with Baramulla in Jammu and Kashmir recording its highest-ever voting percentage.

There were sporadic incidents of violence in West Bengal, besides EVM glitches at some booths in the State and neighbouring Odisha and complaints of slow voting in Maharashtra.

West Bengal recorded the highest polling percentage at 73.14, while Maharashtra recorded the lowest at 53.51 per cent, with six Lok Sabha constituencies of Mumbai witnessing voting between 46 per cent to around 54 per cent per cent.

Thane recorded a turnout of 49.81 per cent, according to the EC's voter turnout app.

The EC had on Sunday flagged urban voter apathy in Mumbai, Thane and



Indian cricket legend Sachin Tendulkar and his son Arjun Tendulkar show their fingers marked with indelible ink, in Mumbai, on Monday. (PTI)

Lucknow and had urged people to come out and vote.

Jammu and Kashmir's Baramulla Lok Sabha Constituency, which was once mil-



Maharashtra Chief Minister Eknath Shinde and his family members show their fingers marked with indelible ink after voting in LS polls in Thane, Monday. (PTI)

itancy-infested, recorded its highest-ever voter turnout on Monday at 59 per cent, J&K Chief Electoral Officer P K Pole said.

(Contd on page 5)