

Day 5 of Poonch operation: Security forces intensify hunt for terrorists

JAMMU, Apr 18 (PTI)

WITH the operation to track down terrorists who escaped after an encounter in Poonch district entering the fifth day on Friday, a senior police official said security agencies have formulated an action plan by identifying areas with suspected terrorist presence.

He said terrorism, which has re-emerged over the past one-and-a-half to two years, remains a reality in the region.

"The combing operation at the Lasana belt of Poonch district has entered its fifth consecutive day on Friday," said Jammu region Inspector General of Police (IGP) Bhim Sen Tuti.

Troops of counter-insurgency force 'Romeo', Special Operations Group of the police, and Central Reserve Police Force are conducting search operations supported by sniffer dogs and aerial surveillance equipment, he



Jammu & Kashmir Police and Special Operations Group personnel during a mock drill in Kathua district on Friday. (PTI)

said.

A brief exchange of fire took place between terrorists and security forces in Lasana village in the district on Monday.

IGP Tuti, who toured Poonch, said the district has been deal-

ing with a new wave of terrorism.

"Terrorism is a stark reality here. It has resurfaced over the past one-and-a-half to two years. We have enhanced our capacity," he told reporters.

Tuti said all necessary steps are being taken to combat terrorism and the police force is performing commendably.

He said a few days ago an incident occurred in Lasana, and a coordination meeting was held with security forces to formulate an action plan.

"Areas with suspected terrorist presence have been identified. We are taking action. You will see the results in the coming days," he said.

The IGP maintained that infiltration routes are under constant monitoring. He further emphasised that intelligence inputs and ground assessments are utilised to realign operational strategies, and there is heightened surveillance and enhanced coordination among all agencies.

Stressing that terrorists aim to create fear through selected targets, Tuti said that the security grid remains robust, alert and responsive.



President Donald Trump meets with Italy's Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni in the Oval Office of the White House, on Thursday in Washington. (AP/PTI)

■ By Yoshita Singh

NEW YORK/WASHINGTON, Apr 18 (PTI)

TAKING note of the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor, a US-Italy joint statement on Friday termed it as one of the "greatest economic integration and connectivity projects of this century" that will connect part-

ners and stimulate economic development and integration from India onward to the United States.

The United States-Italy Joint Leaders' Statement was issued after US President Donald Trump and Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's first official meeting in Washington, DC.

"The US and Italy will work

India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor

'One of the greatest economic integration of this century: US-Italy joint statement

together to develop the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), one of the greatest economic integration and connectivity projects of this century, connecting partners by ports, railways, and undersea cables and stimulating economic development and integration from India, to the Gulf to Israel, to Italy, and onward to the United States," the joint statement issued Friday said.

The two leaders, during their meeting on Thursday, confirmed their resolve to promote a mutually beneficial relationship and further strengthen the US-Italy strategic alliance across security, economic, and technological issues. The IMEC is noted under

the 'US-Italy Cooperation for Shared Prosperity' in the joint statement where US and Italy "agree to work to ensure that trade between the United States and Europe is mutually beneficial, fair, and reciprocal."

Earlier this year, the United States-India Joint Leaders' Statement, issued after Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Washington in February this year also noted that the "leaders resolved to increase cooperation, enhance diplomatic consultations, and increase tangible collaboration with partners in the Middle East. "They highlighted the importance of investing in critical infrastructure and economic corridors to advance

peace and security in the region. The leaders plan to convene partners from the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor and the I2U2 Group within the next six months in order to announce new initiatives in 2025," it said.

The heads of Government of India, Israel, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and the United States convened the first leaders' summit on July 14, 2022 to establish the I2U2 Group.

The leaders of India, European Union, France, Germany, Italy, Saudi Arabia, UAE and US announced an MOU on September 9, 2023 -- on the sidelines of the G20 Leaders' Summit -- committing to work together to develop a new India-Middle

East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). The IMEC will comprise two separate corridors, the east corridor connecting India to the Gulf and northern corridor connecting Gulf to Europe.

"The corridor will provide reliable and cost-effective cross-border ship to rail transit networks to supplement existing maritime routes. It intends to increase efficiency, reduce costs, secure regional supply chains, increase trade accessibility, enhance economic cooperation, generate jobs and lower greenhouse gas emission, resulting in a transformative integration of Asia, Europe and the Middle East," Ministry of External Affairs told Rajya Sabha in February 2024.

'Time to move away from taking incremental steps to leapfrog in Atmanirbharta quest'

NEW DELHI, Apr 18 (PTI)

MODERNISATION demands speed while indigenisation will take time and managing this contradiction is the key, former army chief General Manoj Pande (ret'd) said on Thursday and asserted it is time to move away from taking incremental steps to "leapfrog and perhaps pole-vault" in the quest for 'Atmanirbharta' in defence.

In a special address at The Week Defence Conclave hosted at Manekshaw Centre here, he also said that a "path-breaking reform" in the human resource management has been implemented by the Services in the form of Agnipath scheme.

"Its evolution, planning and implementation required extensive inter-ministerial and inter-departmental consultations and coordination of a very complex nature. I believe this process must

continue, for further consolidation and refinement to the scheme," General Pande said.

He also spelt out the core dif-



General Manoj Pande (ret'd)

ference between reforms and transformation being sought in

the sector.

In order to give impetus to the ongoing and future reforms, the Government has declared 2025 as the 'Year of Reforms' in the Ministry of Defence, aiming at transforming the armed forces into a technologically-advanced combat-ready force capable of multi-domain integrated operations.

Reforms are about changes and making the system more efficient and it deals with finite issues, while transformation involves a fundamental change which has to do with attitude, mindset and is broader in scope, involves long-term actions, is organisation-wide and deals with more than one function of a department or an agency.

"Transformation, therefore, can achieve better results for a multi-agency or the multi-disciplinary organisation such as the Ministry of Defence. They say

the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, so in this case, reforms are the part, the transformation is the whole," he added.

In his address, General Pande also touched upon the aspect of achieving self-reliance in defence sector while working towards modernisation.

"While modernisation will demand speed and is the need of the hour, indigenisation will take time. Managing this contradiction in my opinion is the key. And, I also believe it is time, we moved away from taking incremental steps to leapfrog and perhaps pole-vault in our quest for 'Atmanirbharta'," he said.

General Pande had superannuated in June 2024 after more than four decades of service to the nation as the 29th Chief of the Army Staff (COAS).

Under his leadership, year 2024 was declared 'Year of Technology Absorption' for the Indian Army.

After 40 years, Indian astronaut to travel into space in May: Minister

NEW DELHI, Apr 18 (IANS)

INDIA will send an astronaut to space next month, a feat to be repeated 40 years after Rakesh Sharma's iconic 1984 flight aboard a Soviet Soyuz spacecraft, Union Minister of State for Science and Technology Jitendra Singh said on Friday.

Singh said Group Captain Shubhanshu Shukla of the Indian Air Force is all prepared to fly to the International Space Station (ISS) next month as part of Axiom Space's Ax-4 mission.

"India is ready for its next space milestone," said Singh, underscoring the significance of the upcoming human spaceflight and a series of critical ISRO missions. He said the mission will mark the visit of the first Indian



Group Captain Shubhanshu Shukla of the Indian Air Force.

to the ISS and make Shukla the first Indian to travel into space in over four decades after Rakesh Sharma. The Minister made the announcement after a high-level meeting held to review major future plans of the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) in

the coming months.

Singh said that the collaboration with international partners and the strategic momentum of projects like Gaganyaan reflect India's commitment to becoming a global leader in space technology. The Minister emphasised that these efforts are not only scientific in nature but also aligned with the vision of a developed and self-reliant India.

ISRO Chairman Dr V. Narayanan said Shukla is fully prepared for the mission, which is expected to provide valuable hands-on experience for India's future crewed missions, including the Gaganyaan project.

A decorated test pilot with the IAF, Shukla was shortlisted under ISRO's HSP and is among the top contenders for the Gaganyaan

mission, India's first indigenous crewed orbital flight.

His journey aboard the Ax-4 mission is expected to provide critical hands-on experience in spaceflight operations, launch protocols, microgravity adaptation, and emergency preparedness — all essential for India's crewed space ambitions.

What sets Shukla's mission apart is its strategic importance. Unlike the symbolic undertones of India's first human spaceflight, this time the focus is on operational readiness and global integration. His participation underscores India's growing engagement with public-private international partnerships in space and its resolve to emerge as a serious contender in human space exploration.

Plan to hold naval drill between Pak, SL in Trincomalee shelved following India's concerns

NEW DELHI, Apr 18 (PTI)

A PLAN to hold a military exercise between the navies of Pakistan and Sri Lanka in the strategic waters of Trincomalee was shelved weeks back after New Delhi conveyed its concerns to Colombo over the proposed drills, multiple sources have said.

Trincomalee is situated on Sri Lanka's northeastern coast and is considered a significant hub in the Indian Ocean region, especially for India's maritime security interests.

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The sources said the navies of the two countries planned to carry out the exercise off Trincomalee in line with their regular engagements.

The plan did not go through after India apprised its apprehensions over the planned exercise to the Sri Lankan side, they told PTI.

The navies of Pakistan and Sri

Lanka are known to have cordial relations and warships from both countries visit each other's ports regularly, besides carrying out wargames.

There was no official word on the plan either from Sri Lanka or from Pakistan.

Military experts, explaining Trincomalee's strategic importance for India, said it has the

potential to dominate the Bay of Bengal and much of the north-east Indian Ocean, and New Delhi was right in expressing concerns over the proposed exercise. The Pakistani Navy operates in close cooperation with China's PLA Navy and New Delhi has reasons to have concerns over any visit by Pakistani warships to Trincomalee, said one of the experts.

The docking of Chinese missile and satellite tracking ship "Yuan Wang" at the Hambantota port in August 2022 had triggered

a diplomatic row between India and Sri Lanka.

Another Chinese warship docked at the Colombo port in August 2023 had also triggered some concerns in New Delhi.

In the last few years, India has been focusing on extending assistance to Sri Lanka in developing Trincomalee's energy infrastructure.

India is especially looking at revitalising oil tank farms in Trincomalee that has one of the finest natural harbours in the world.

'Will drop Ukraine-Russia peace efforts'

US may move on if there is no progress in coming days, says US Secretary of State Rubio

PARIS, Apr 18 (AP)

US SECRETARY of State Marco Rubio said on Friday that the US may "move on" from trying to secure a Russia-Ukraine peace deal if there is no progress in the coming days, after months of efforts have failed to bring an end to the fighting.

He spoke in Paris after landmark talks among US, Ukrainian and European officials produced outlines for steps toward peace and appeared to make some long-awaited progress. A new

deal was expected next week in London, and Rubio suggested that could be decisive in determining whether the Trump administration continues its involvement.

"We are now reaching a point where we need to decide whether this is even possible or not," Rubio told reporters upon departure. "Because if it's not, then I think we're just going to move on."

"It's not our war," Rubio said. "We have other priorities to focus on." He said the US administra-

tion wants to decide "in a matter of days".

His comments came as the US and Ukraine are nearing a long-delayed deal granting the US access to Ukraine's vast mineral resources, which has been intertwined with President Donald Trump's peace push.

Trump said on Thursday, "We have a minerals deal," and Ukraine's economy minister said Friday that the two countries signed a memorandum of intent ahead of a possible fuller agreement later.

The deal, which Ukrainian Economy Minister Yuliia Svyrydenko said she signed with US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent, is expected to pave the way for significant investments, infrastructure modernisation and long-term cooperation.

The framework of the mineral deal had stalled in February following a contentious Oval Office meeting between Trump, US Vice President JD Vance, and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

Negotiations have since

resumed.

Despite apparent growing US impatience with the peace efforts, Rubio called Thursday's Paris talks constructive. "Nobody rejected anything, nobody got up from the table or walked away."

Rubio didn't single out Russia or Ukraine as blocking peace efforts. He said he informed Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov about the outlines that emerged when they spoke after the Paris talks, but wouldn't say how Lavrov reacted.

74 killed in US strikes on Yemeni oil port

DUBAI, Apr 18 (AP)

US AIRSTRIKES targeting an oil port held by Yemen's Houthi rebels killed 74 people and wounded 171 others, the group said Friday, marking the single-deadliest known attack under President Donald Trump's new campaign targeting the rebels.

Assessing the toll of Trump's campaign, which began on March 15, has been incredibly difficult as the US military's Central Command so far has not released any information on the campaign, its specific targets and how many people have been killed.

Meanwhile, Yemen's Houthi rebels strictly control access to areas attacked and don't publish information on the strikes, many of which likely have targeted mil-



A burning oil tanker after US airstrikes targeted the Ras Isa oil port held by Houthi rebels in Hodeida, Yemen on Friday. (AP/PTI)

itary and security sites. But the strike on the Ras Isa oil port, which sent massive fireballs shooting into the night sky, rep-

resented a major escalation for the American campaign. The Houthis immediately released graphic footage of those killed in

the attack. In a statement, Central Command said that "US forces took action to eliminate this source of fuel for the Iran-backed Houthi terrorists and deprive them of illegal revenue that has funded Houthi efforts to terrorise the entire region for over 10 years."

"This strike was not intended to harm the people of Yemen, who rightly want to throw off the yoke of Houthi subjugation and live peacefully," it added. It did not acknowledge any casualties and declined to comment when asked by The Associated Press regarding civilians reportedly being killed. The Iranian-backed Houthis later Friday launched a missile toward Israel that was intercepted, the Israeli military said. Sirens sounded in Tel Aviv and other areas.

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Naxalites surrender in Sukma

Surrendered Naxals cited disappointment with 'HOLLOW' and 'INHUMAN' MAOIST IDEOLOGY and atrocities on local tribals, says SP Kiran Chavan

SUKMA, Apr 18 (PTI)

AT LEAST 33 Naxalites, 17 of them carrying a cumulative bounty of Rs 49 lakh, surrendered before security forces in Chhattisgarh's Sukma district on Friday, police said. While 22 cadres, including nine women, turned themselves in before senior officials of the police and Central Reserve Police Forces (CRPF) earlier in the day, later 11 others, including two women, surrendered before police officials, they said.

The surrendered cadres cited disappointment with "hollow" and "inhuman" Maoist ideology and atrocities on local tribals, Sukma Superintendent of Police Kiran Chavan said.



The official said they were also impressed by the State Government's 'Niyad Nellanar' (your good village) scheme, aimed at facilitating development works in remote villages,

and the new surrender and rehabilitation policy.

As many as 22 surrendered Naxalites were active in the Maad (Chhattisgarh) and Nuapada (Odisha) divisions of Maoists, he

said. Chavan said the cadres included Muchaki Joga (33), deputy commander in PLGA (people's liberation guerrilla army) company no. 1 under the Maad division of Maoists, and his wife Muchaki Jogi (28), a member of the same squad, who carried a reward of Rs 8 lakh each.

Among the others were Kikid Deve (30) and Manoj alias Dudhi Budhra (28), both area committee members of Maoists carrying a reward of Rs 5 lakh each, he said. The official said seven surrendered cadres carried a bounty of Rs 2 lakh each, while another Naxalite carried a reward of Rs 50,000.

He said the other surrendered

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Rs 6 lakh cash, 11 laptops, explosives seized from Narayanpur encounter site

NARAYANPUR, Apr 18 (PTI)

THE security forces have recovered Rs 6 lakh cash, 11 laptops and explosives belonging to Naxalites from the site of an encounter in Chhattisgarh's Narayanpur district, police said on Friday.

According to the police, the gunfight took place on April 15 on a forested hill between Kasod and Kumuradi villages under the Kohkameta police station area where a joint team



of the District Reserve Guard (DRG) and 41st battalion of the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) was out on an anti-Naxal operation.

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