

Israel plans to double popn in Golan, cites threats from Syria

Strengthening Golan Is Strengthening State Of Israel, Says Netanyahu

Jerusalem: Israel agreed on Sunday to double its population on the occupied Golan Heights while saying threats from Syria remained despite the moderate tone of rebel fighters who ousted President Bashar al-Assad a week ago. "Strengthening the



Golan is strengthening the State of Israel, and it is especially important at this time. We will continue to

hold onto it, cause it to blossom, and settle in it," PM Benjamin Netanyahu said in a statement.

Israel captured most of the strategic plateau from Syria in the 1967 Six-Day War, annexing it in 1981. In 2019 then-President Trump declared US support for Israeli sovereignty over the Golan, but the annexation has not been recognised by most countries. Syria demands Israel withdraw but Israel refuses, citing security concerns.

"The immediate risks to the country have not disappeared and the latest developments in Syria increase the strength of the threat — despite the moderate image that the rebel leaders claim to present," defence minister Israel Katz told officials examining Israel's defence budget, according to a statement. Netanyahu's office said the govt unanimously approved a more than 40-million-shekel (\$11m) plan to encourage demographic growth in the Golan. It said Netanyahu submitted the plan to the govt "in light of the war and the new front facing Syria, and



An Israeli army jeep drives in the buffer zone which separates Israeli and Syrian forces on the Golan Heights near the Druze village of Majdal Shams

US in direct contact with rebels behind Assad exit

US secretary of state Antony Blinken revealed Saturday that Washington had made direct contact with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham rebels, despite previously designating the group as "terrorists". Blinken would not discuss details of talks with HTS, which led a coalition of armed opposition groups that drove Assad into asylum in Russia. Blinken said the easing of sanctions on Syria would depend on "sustained action" by the rebel-installed interim govt. AP

Racy pix of Assad go viral, spark ridicule

Beirut: Bizarre and personal photos of ousted Syrian President Bashar Assad have surfaced from his abandoned residences, sparking ridicule among Syrians who only until recently were persecuted for criticising his leadership.

The images, reportedly discovered in photo albums from Assad's mansions in the hills of Damascus and Aleppo, painted an unflattering portrait of Bashar and his father, Hafez Assad, who had governed Syria with an iron grip for decades. They stripped away the carefully constructed image that the Assad family had cultivated.

One photo featured Hafez Assad in his underwear, striking a bodybuilder-like pose.

out of a desire to double the population of the Golan".

Some 31,000 Israelis have settled there, said analyst Avraham Levine of the Alma Research and Education Center specialising in Israel's security challenges on its northern border. The Golan is home to 24,000 Druze, an Arab minority who

Other images showed Bashar Assad in a Speedo flexing his biceps; astride a yellow motorcycle in his briefs; perched on a handcycle, also in his briefs; and staring blankly in a kitchen, wearing only white underwear and a sleeveless undershirt.

Social media footage showed Syrians touring the Assads' opulent estates, revealing extravagant decor, jacuzzis and other lavish possessions out of reach of ordinary people living amid civil war since 2011. Fuelled by decades of persecution and a desire for vengeance, people stripped the mansions of valuables and exposed Assad's private world, including some of his photo collections.

The unbecoming images of

practice an offshoot of Islam, he said. Most identify as Syrian.

Syria's de facto leader, Abu Mohammed al-Jolani who leads HTS, said on Saturday that Israel was using false pretexts to justify its attacks on Syria, but that he was not interested in engaging in new conflicts as his country focuses on rebuilding.

Assad in various states of undress and odd scenarios quickly went viral, turning into an object of mockery. "What is it with the Assad family and being photographed in their underwear? Highly interested in knowing the fantasy behind," journalist Hussam Hammoud wrote on X.

One particularly peculiar shot showed Bashar in a Speedo aboard a boat, surrounded by other people. Another depicted him on a balcony overlooking the sea, teasing a girl sitting on his shoulders. In one photo, taken in a mountainous setting, Bashar is seen with a group, which included his reportedly maternal cousin, Ihab Makhoul, who is wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with an image of Hitler. AP

Since Assad's fall, Israel has moved into a demilitarised zone inside Syria and carried out hundreds of strikes on strategic weapons stockpiles. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said Israel struck Syria 75 times in attacks that began Saturday night near Damascus, and cities of Hama and Homs. REUTERS

Tibet govt in exile: Our issue central to India-China peace

'Arunachal Inseparable Part Of India'

Pradeep.Thakur
@timesofindia.com

Dharamshala: The Sino-Indian talks on peaceful resolution of border issues will "never" achieve its intended goal unless the two sides first decide to resolve the 'Akhand Tibet' issue, restoring freedom of life and liberty to millions of Tibetans, Dolma Gyari, acting Sikyong (president) of the Tibetan Govt in exile, said last week.

Gyari, who is also minister of department of security (defence minister) of Central Tibetan Administration, says for permanent peace with China, the only option is recognition of a unified Tibet as



Dharamshala is preparing for the celebrations next year of Dalai Lama's 90th birthday as the 'global year of compassion'

an independent state.

"In 1914 Shimla accord, it was Tibet which had signed the pact with India where it acknowledged Arunachal as part of India. For a permanent resolution of the border conflict, China must recognise Tibet as an independent state," she said on Tuesday.

The Tibetan acting presi-

dent's comments came during an interaction with a media delegation where she emphasised that the Tibet issue was central to all dialogues between India and China on the disputed borders.

On Tuesday, she also hosted a delegation of MPs from New Zealand and Fiji, celebrating 35th anniversary of

conferment of Nobel peace prize to HH Dalai Lama. Former Union minister Suresh Prabhu was a special guest on the occasion, where the foreign delegation expressed solidarity with the Tibetan cause and also criticised human rights violations by China in the occupied territory.

"Central Tibetan Administration believes that Arunachal Pradesh and any other territories disputed by China are inseparable and integral parts of India," said Gyari.

Expressing her confidence of resolution of Tibet issue under PM Modi, the minister observed that "India is going in the right direction. Today's South Block (ministry of external affairs) understands better than what they did 10 years ago."

Dharamshala is also preparing for the celebrations next year of Dalai Lama's 90th birthday as the "global year of compassion".

Ousted PM Sheikh Hasina involved in enforced disappearance: Bangladesh commission

DHAKA, Dec 15 (PTI)

AN INQUIRY commission set up by the interim Government in Bangladesh has said that it found evidence implicating deposed Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and top-ranking military and police officials from her regime in alleged incidents of enforced disappearance.

The five-member Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances submitted an interim report titled "Unfolding The Truth" to Chief Advisor Professor Muhammad Yunus on Saturday. The commission estimated that there would be more than 3,500 enforced disappear-

ances.

According to the statement, retired supreme Court judge Manul Islam Chowdhury, the chairman of the commission, told Yunus that during investigations they found a "systematic design" that allowed incidents of enforced disappearances to go undetected. "Individuals carrying out enforced disappearance or extrajudicial killing (even) lacked knowledge about victims," Chowdhury said.

The report said the police's elite anti-crime Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), which draws men from the Army, Navy, Air Force, regular police and other law enforcement agencies had

collaborated with each other to pick up, torture and keep victims in detention and deliberately segmented the operations.

The commission simultaneously proposed the abolition of the RAB alongside scrapping or thoroughly amending the Anti-Terrorism Act, 2009.

Rights activist and commission member Sajjad Hossain said they recorded 1,676 complaints of enforced disappearances and, so far, have examined 758 of them. Of these, 200 people or 27 per cent of the victims never returned while those who returned were mostly shown on records as arrested. Besides the chairman, the commission com-

prises Justice Farid Ahmed Shibli, rights activist Nur Khan, private BRAC University teacher Nabila Idris and rights activist Sajjad Hossain. At a press conference earlier, the commission announced that they had found eight secret detention centres in Dhaka and its outskirts.

The panel chairman on Saturday informed Yunus that they would deliver another interim report in March and would require at least another year to complete the scrutiny of all allegations they had received. "You are doing a really very important job. We are ready to give you all kinds of support that you need," Yunus was quoted as saying.

Lankan President Dissanayake begins 3-day India visit

NEW DELHI, Dec 15 (PTI)

SRI Lankan President Anura Kumara Dissanayake arrived in India on Sunday on a three-day visit in his first foreign trip after assuming the top office in September. Prime Minister Narendra Modi will hold wide-ranging talks with the Sri Lankan leader on Monday that is expected to focus on trade, investment, energy and maritime security.

The Indian side is also likely to convey to the Sri Lankan leader New Delhi's expectations from Colombo to fulfil the aspirations of the Tamil community in the island nation. Dissanayake was received at the Delhi airport by Union Minister of State for Information and Broadcasting L. Murugan. In a post on 'X', External Affairs Ministry

spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said Dissanayake's visit will be an opportunity to further deepen India-Sri Lankan ties and add momentum to the people-centric partnership. "Warm and special welcome!" he said along with photos of the Union minister receiving Dissanayake. The Sri Lankan leader will also meet President Droupadi Murmu.

Dissanayake is also scheduled to attend a business event in Delhi to promote investment and commercial linkages between India and Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka is India's closest maritime neighbour in the Indian Ocean Region and holds a central place in Prime Minister Modi's vision of 'SAGAR' (Security and Growth for All in the Region) and India's 'Neighbourhood First' policy, the (MEA) said on Friday.

India sends 60 tonnes of medical aid to disaster-hit Jamaica

NEW DELHI, Dec 15 (IANS)

A FRESH consignment of around 60 tonnes of emergency medical equipment, generators, and other utilities have been sent by India to Jamaica to support the country's healthcare needs and enhance their disaster preparedness.

Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) spokesperson, Randhir Jaiswal, shared the details of the humanitarian assistance on Saturday.

"India sends Humanitarian Assistance to Jamaica. A consignment of around 60 tonnes of emergency medical equipment, Gensets & other utilities has departed for Jamaica.

This assistance will support health care needs and rehabilitation of medical infrastructure as well as strengthen the disaster preparedness against Hurricanes," Jaiswal said in a post on X.

India and Jamaica share strong historical and cultural linkages, reflected in their shared colonial past, values of democracy and freedom, and passion for cricket.

Recently, at the invitation of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Jamaican Prime Minister, Andrew Holness paid his first-ever visit to India from September 30-October 3.

Both leaders held a bilateral meeting in New Delhi.

India's import of Russian oil drops in Nov on shrinking discounts

NEW DELHI, Dec 15 (PTI)

INDIA'S import of Russian crude oil dropped in November to its lowest level since June 2022 but the Kremlin continues to be the biggest source of oil for India, according to a monthly tracker report of a European think tank.

India became the second biggest buyer of Russian crude oil since Moscow invaded Ukraine in February 2022, with purchases rising from less than one per cent of the total oil imported to almost 40 per cent of the country's total oil purchases. The rise was primarily because the Russian crude oil was available at a discount to other internationally traded oil due to the price cap and the European nations shunning purchases from Moscow.

"India's imports of Russian

crude oil dropped by a massive 55 per cent in November - the lowest figure since June 2022," the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air (CREA) said in its latest report.

Russia remained India's top oil supplier, followed by Iraq and Saudi Arabia.

"China has bought 47 per cent of Russia's crude exports, followed by India (37 per cent), the EU (6 per cent), and Turkey (6 per cent)," CREA said without giving absolute numbers.

In November, there was a 17 per cent month-on-month increase in the discount on Russia's Urals grade crude oil to an average of USD 6.01 per barrel compared to Brent crude oil. The discount on the ESPO grade narrowed by a massive 15 per cent and was traded at an average discount of USD 3.88 per bar-



rel while that on the Sokol blend narrowed by 2 per cent to USD 6.65 per barrel, it said. Russia predominantly sells ESPO and Sokol grades of crude oil to India. Besides crude oil, India bought smaller quantities of coal from Russia. "From December 5, 2022 until the end of November 2024, China purchased 46 per cent of all Russia's coal exports - India (17 per cent), Turkey (11 per cent), South Korea (10 per cent), and Taiwan (5 per cent) round

off the top five buyers list," according to CREA.

All fossil fuels taken together, "India dropped to third in the list of largest buyers of Russian fossil fuels in November, contributing 17 per cent (EUR 2.1 billion) to Russia's monthly export earnings from its top five importers. There was a significant 22 per cent drop in Russian revenues from crude oil exports to India in November," it said.

While there was an 11 per cent month-on-month decline in the total volume of India's imports of crude oil in November, Russian volumes suffered most, dropping by a massive 55 per cent. India imports more than 85 per cent of its crude oil, which is refined into fuels like petrol and diesel refineries.

In an attempt to restrict funds

for Russia's war machine, The Group of Seven (G7) rich nations, the European Union and Australia put an embargo on Russian crude and introduced a USD 60 per barrel price cap in December 2022. Over the next 12 months, the price cap and embargo had a significant impact on revenues, and forced Russia to find new markets and ways to transport its oil.

Russia did this by offering deep discounts on its Urals grade crude. "It has been two years since the imposition of the price cap. CREA estimates that in this period, sanctions have forced Russia to drop the price of Urals by an estimated 15 per cent. Since the sanctions, Russia has lost an estimated EUR 14.6 billion in revenues from Urals grade crude exports," the report said.