

W Asia crisis: MEA establishes control room to assist Indians

NEW DELHI, Mar 4 (PTI)

THE Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) has set up a control room to assist those affected by the escalating crisis in West Asia.

The MEA has said almost one crore Indian citizens live in West Asia and their safety and well-being is of "utmost priority" for New Delhi. As the Iran-US conflict widened, the Indian embassy in Iran moved hundreds of Indian students from the Iranian capital of Tehran to safer locations.

"A Control Room has been set up in the Ministry of External Affairs in view of the current situation in West Asia and the Gulf region," the MEA said on

Wednesday. "The Control Room can be contacted from 9 am to 9 pm at: 1800118797 (Toll Free) +91 11 2301 2113, +91 11 2301 4104, +91 11 2301 7905," it added.

The MEA on Tuesday noted that almost one crore Indian citizens live and work in the Gulf region, and their "safety and well-being is of utmost priority."

"We cannot be impervious to any development that negatively affects them," it said.

The MEA said New Delhi will continue to closely monitor the evolving situation and take relevant decisions in the national interest, adding it is in touch with the Governments in the region as well as other key partners.

Safety mechanisms activated for seafarers: Sonowal

NEW DELHI, Mar 4 (PTI)

THE Government is closely monitoring the evolving situation in the Middle East, Union Minister Sarbananda Sonowal said, adding that all necessary mechanisms have been activated to ensure the safety and welfare of seafarers and maritime assets.

Minister for Ports, Shipping and Waterways Sarbananda Sonowal on Tuesday chaired a review meeting to assess the

prevailing security environment in the Persian Gulf and examine its implications for Indian maritime assets and personnel.

"We are closely monitoring the evolving situation and have activated all necessary precautionary, monitoring and coordination mechanisms to ensure the safety and welfare of our seafarers and the security of our maritime assets. We remain in constant touch with relevant national and international agencies and are prepared to

respond swiftly to any emerging development," Sonowal said. He said the Government stands firmly with its seafarers and maritime stakeholders.

Sonowal said his ministry is prepared to extend all necessary operational, diplomatic and humanitarian support to safeguard Indian vessels and personnel and will continue active coordination with domestic and international stakeholders to protect India's maritime interests.

Finnish President Stubb on 4-day India visit to shore up ties



NEW DELHI, Mar 4 (PTI)

FINNISH President Alexander Stubb began a four-day visit to India on Wednesday to shore up bilateral cooperation across a wide spectrum of areas, including trade, investment and critical technology.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, welcoming Stubb, said his visit will take India-Finland relations to “new heights”

Finnish President Alexander Stubb being accorded a Guard of Honour upon his arrival at the Palam Air Force Station, in New Delhi. (PTI)

Stubb will hold talks with Prime Minister Modi on Thursday following which the two sides are expected to firm up a number of Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) to boost cooperation in a number of sectors. The crisis in West Asia is likely to feature prominently in the meeting. “The visit will further strengthen the relations between Finland and India, including in the area of trade,” Stubb said on social media before leaving for New Delhi.

Pakistan targets Bagram airbase in Afghanistan

ISLAMABAD, Mar 4 (PTI)

PAKISTAN targeted the famed Bagram airbase in Afghanistan as its operation was going against the Afghan Taliban over their alleged failure to stop terrorist attacks from their soil, media reports said on Wednesday.

Pakistan launched Operation Ghazab lil Haq (Righteous Fury) on the night of February 26, following alleged Afghan Taliban attacks on 53 locations along the over 2,600 km border.

State-run PTV in a post on X said that Pakistan carried out a "major attack on Bagram Air Base" as it was giving a "befitting response to Afghan Taliban aggression".

"Pakistan continues to conduct vigorous ground and air operations against the unprovoked aggression of the Afghan Taliban," it said.

Nepal votes for general elections today

■ By Shirish B Pradhan
KATHMANDU, Mar 4 (PTI)

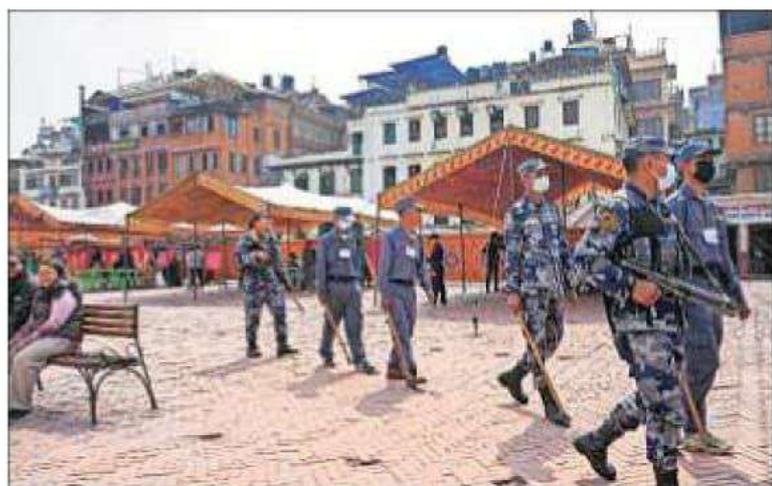
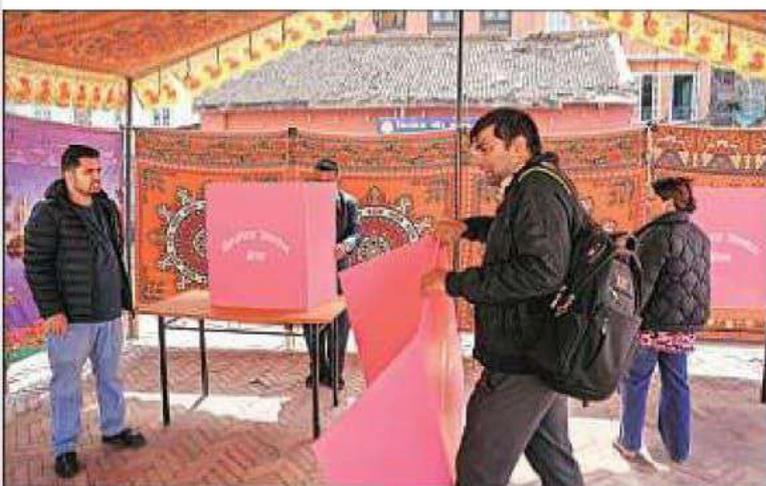
VOTING will be held on Thursday for the general elections, the first one to be held after a Gen Z youth led protest toppled the K P Sharma Oli-led Government in

Nepal last year. More than 18.9 million eligible Nepalese will exercise their franchise to elect 275 member House of Representatives (HoP) from among the 3,406 candidates vying for 165 seats under direct voting and 3,135 candidates

vying for 110 seats through proportionate voting. The election campaign concluded mid-night of Monday, March 2. The voting will start at 7 am on Thursday, March 5, and conclude at 5 pm.

Acting Chief Election

Commissioner Ram Prasad Bhandari told media persons on Wednesday, "This time the voting percentage will increase and the percentage of invalid ballot papers will also decline due to improved voter education launched by the commission."



Polling officials make final arrangements at a polling station ahead of Nepal's parliamentary elections, at Durbar Square in Kathmandu on Wednesday. (R) Security personnel keep a vigil as Nepal is holding the elections on Thursday, a year after a youth-led uprising forced out the Government chosen in the last elections. (PTI)

Israel forces target Iran, Lebanon

Israeli's F-35 shot down a piloted Iranian Air Force YAK-130 fighter over Tehran

DUBAI, Mar 4 (AP)

THE United States and Israel hit Iran's capital and other cities in multiple airstrikes on Wednesday, the fifth day of the war with Iran. Israel targeted the Iranian leadership and security forces as the Islamic Republic responded with missile barrages and drone attacks on Israel and across the region.

Tehran residents woke to dawn blasts, and Iranian state television showed the ruins of a building in the centre of the capital. The Shiite seminary city of Qom and multiple other cities were also



Smoke rises following an Israeli airstrike in Dahiyeh, Beirut's southern suburbs in Lebanon on Wednesday. (Below) A man carries an Iranian flag to place on the rubble of a police facility struck during the US-Israeli military campaign in Tehran, Iran on Wednesday. (AP/PTI)



Iran attacks Israel, Bahrain, Qatar

Iran attacks regional infrastructure. Saudi Arabia's Ras Tanura oil refinery targeted

targeted.

With fighter jets roaring overhead, those still in Tehran looked anxiously to the skies. One man, who ran a clothing shop, said he didn't know what to do.

"If I leave the city, how am I supposed to earn money and survive?" he said, speaking on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisals.

The Israeli military said one of its F-35 stealth fighter jets shot down a piloted Iranian Air Force YAK-130 fighter over Tehran on Wednesday. It also said Israeli air defences were activated to

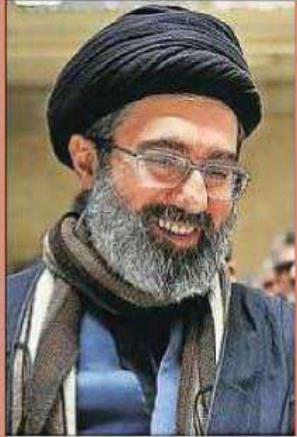
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Khamenei's son Mojtaba likely to be Iran's new supreme leader

■ By Jon Gambrell

DUBAI, Mar 4 (AP)

MOJTABA Khamenei, a son of Iran's late Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has long been considered a contender to the post of the country's next paramount ruler - even before



an Israeli strike killed his father at the start of the war last week and despite the fact he's has never been elected or appointed to a government position.

A secretive figure within the Islamic Republic, Mojtaba Khamenei has not been seen publicly since Saturday, when the Israeli airstrike targeting the supreme leader's offices killed his 86-year-old father. Also killed were the younger Khamenei's wife, Zahra Haddad Adel, who came from a family long associated with the country's theocracy. Mojtaba is believed to still be alive and has likely

gone into hiding as American and Israeli airstrikes continue to pound Iran, though state-run Iranian media have not reported on his whereabouts. Mojtaba Khamenei's name continues to circulate as a possible candidate to replace his father,

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Leader will be appointed at the earliest: Iran Leadership Council

TEHRAN, Mar 4 (ANI)

IRAN'S leadership council on Wednesday told state media that a leader to succeed the late Ayatollah Khamenei would be appointed at the earliest.

In a video posted by News Agency Tasnim, an official told state Television, "I bring good news to the people that no problem has arisen in the field of leadership. The leadership council is currently running the country and, God willing, at the earliest opportunity, a leader will be appointed. Praise be to God, we have come closer, but the situation is one of war. Sometimes some loved ones ask how did you choose the Supreme Leader immediately after the Imam (Ayatollah Khomeini)? Our answer is that the situation was not a war situation. Now the situation is one of war, we are all striving. The Assembly of Experts is striving; no one is resting."

Earlier, the Iranian Government via the Consulate General in Mumbai had rubbished reports that Mojtaba Khamenei was named as his late father Ayatollah Khamenei's successor.

Next supreme leader will be a 'target for elimination': Israel

JERUSALEM, Mar 4 (PTI)

ISRAELI Defence Minister Israel Katz on Wednesday threatened that any leader appointed by the Iranian regime, who would continue to lead with the plans to destroy Israel, will be a target for elimination by the Jewish state.

Katz's comments came on a day Iran is set to choose a Supreme Leader, the second time since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The joint US-Israel strikes killed Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on Saturday, prompting the Islamic nation to vow revenge on Sunday.