

'Kashmir has been transformed' Says Modi on first visit since autonomy removed

REUTERS, Srinagar

The Himalayan region of Jammu and Kashmir has been transformed and integrated with the rest of India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said yesterday, crediting the change to his government's contentious decision to revoke its special status.

Visiting the Muslim-majority Kashmir Valley for the first time since 2019 - the year the status was revoked - Modi said Kashmir's development was a priority for India as it sits like a crown in the country's north.

"This new Jammu-Kashmir has the courage to overcome any challenge," Modi told thousands of people attending a public meeting at a stadium in Srinagar, the region's summer capital, amid tight security.



"The country is seeing these smiling faces of yours ... (and) feeling relieved to see you all happy."

Modi's visit to a region roiled for decades by militant violence, and which is also claimed by nuclear-armed rival Pakistan, comes weeks before general elections in which he will seek a rare third term.

Although his nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is not a key player in Kashmir, the visit is seen as a signal to its voters that the party has fulfilled a core promise to end Kashmir's special status.

"This is the new Jammu and Kashmir we had been awaiting for decades," Modi added, listing achievements and investments made during the last five years.

Kashmir would become a global success story, he said, as he launched a series of tourism and farm projects.

Kashmiri politicians who opposed revocation of special status criticised Modi's visit.

"This visit is only meant to ... drum up support amongst the BJP's core constituency in the rest of India for the upcoming parliament elections," Mehbooba Mufti, a former chief minister and former BJP ally, posted on social network X.



A woman cooks, as displaced Palestinians, who fled their houses due to Israeli strikes shelter in a tent camp in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip on Wednesday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

UKRAINE WAR

Russia can fight on for at least 2 years

Says Lithuania; rocket hits close to Zelensky, Greek PM in Odesa

REUTERS, Vilnius

High oil prices, sanctions evasion and state investment are providing Russia with enough resources to fight on in Ukraine at the current intensity for at least two more years, Lithuanian intelligence agencies said in a report yesterday.

Meanwhile, a top Ukrainian presidential adviser said it could not be ruled out that a Russian missile strike on Odesa port a day earlier had targeted the delegations of Volodymyr Zelenskiy or Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, said Ihor Zhovkva.

The leaders were inspecting the Ukrainian grain export corridor in the Black Sea port when the missile hit port infrastructure less than 500 metres away.

"It really was less than 500 meters from us. What was that? ... You cannot exclude it was directed at the delegation of my president or the delegation of foreign guest," Ihor Zhovkva, a top diplomatic adviser, told CNN Live in an interview.

Elsewhere, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen yesterday won the backing of the EU's leading political group, the centre-right European People's Party, to head the bloc's powerful executive for another five years.

The only candidate in the party's ballot, Belgian-born von der Leyen vowed to advance EU economies, clamp down on smugglers driving irregular immigration to the bloc, strengthen competitiveness and businesses, as well as supporting farmers as costs of living rise. Von der Leyen also promised more financial and military aid to Ukraine.

Both Zelenskiy and Mitsotakis appeared at a press conference on Wednesday to say they had witnessed the missile strike. Five people were killed in the attack, the Ukrainian military said.

Russia reformed and strengthened its battle-torn army in Ukraine in 2023 and is on track to expand its military capabilities along its border with Nato, including next to Finland, which joined the alliance last

year, Lithuanian intelligence agencies said in their annual assessment of threats facing the Baltic country.

"Moscow is able to evaluate the lessons learned and improve its combat effectiveness", the Lithuanian agencies added in the report that was embargoed for release last morning.

The joint report is the work of two agencies: the counter-intelligence State Security Department and the military's Defence Intelligence and Security Service under the Ministry of National Defence.

The agencies wrote that Russian intelligence is driving efforts to evade the sanctions imposed on the country's defence industry after it invaded Ukraine.

While Russia is openly supplied with weapons and ammo by only Iran and North Korea, China has become its largest supplier of microchips and the yuan has become the main currency for Russia's international transactions, Lithuania's agencies said.

China will be global 'force for peace'

Says Chinese FM

AFP, Beijing

China will be a global force for peace and stability, the country's foreign minister Wang Yi said at a press conference in Beijing yesterday. "In the face of complex turmoil in the international environment, China will persist in being a force for peace, a force for stability, and a force for progress in the world," Wang told reporters. Wang made his comments at China's largest annual political gathering, which opened in Beijing earlier this week. The "Two Sessions" - parallel meetings of China's rubber-stamp parliament and political consultative body - offer a rare glimpse into the strategy of the Communist Party-led government for the year ahead. This year's gathering is being closely watched for signals as to Chinese leaders' confidence in current geopolitical conditions, as tensions persist across the Taiwan Strait and Russia's war in Ukraine enters its third year. "We resolutely oppose all acts of hegemony and bullying, and will strongly uphold national sovereignty and security as well as development interests," Wang said yesterday. He also called Israel's war in Gaza a "disgrace for civilisation" and reiterated Beijing's calls for an "immediate ceasefire". "It is a tragedy for humankind and a disgrace for civilisation that today, in the 21st century, this humanitarian disaster cannot be stopped," Wang told journalists at a press conference.

Israeli killing of reporter in Lebanon likely deliberate

Report finds

REUTERS, Beirut/The Hague

An Israeli tank crew killed a Reuters reporter in Lebanon in October by firing two shells at a clearly identified group of journalists and then "likely" opened fire on them with a heavy machine gun in an attack that lasted 1 minute and 45 seconds, according to a report into the incident published yesterday. The report by the Netherlands Organisation for Applied Scientific Research (TNO) - which was contracted by Reuters to analyse evidence from the October 13 attack that killed visuals journalist Issam Abdallah - found that a tank 1.34 km away in Israel fired two 120 mm rounds at the reporters. The first shell killed Abdallah, 37, and severely wounded Agence France-Presse (AFP) photographer Christina Assi, 28. TNO revealed that audio picked up by an Al Jazeera video camera at the scene showed the reporters also came under fire from 0.50 calibre rounds of the type used by the Browning machine guns that can be mounted on Israel's Merkava tanks. "It is considered a likely scenario that a Merkava tank, after firing two tank rounds, also used its machine gun against the location of the journalists," TNO's report said. Reuters could not independently determine if the Israeli tank crew knew it was firing on journalists, nor whether it also shot at them with a machine gun and, if so, why.

Mobile court jails journo

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Shila Akter's room [in the UNO office] and demanded documents. When she refused to provide them without authorisation, he began shouting at her."

The UNO further alleged that the situation had escalated when others arrived at the scene and Rana misbehaved with them too.

"When I went to calm him down, he began misbehaving with me as well. We then called the police and he was arrested."

A mobile court, led by assistant commissioner (land) and executive magistrate Md Shihabul Arif then

sent Rana to jail.

"Rana had been disturbing Shila for long and making posts on Facebook in this regard on various occasions for his personal gain. We avoided it," Sadia added.

Meanwhile, the Information Commission of Bangladesh yesterday issued a notification assigning Information Commissioner Shahidul Alam to investigate the incident and submit a report.

The notification stated that the journalist may have faced such a situation while seeking information under the Right to Information Act.

Speaking to this correspondent yesterday, Rana's wife, Bonna Akter, said her husband had gone to the UNO office to submit a paper and had taken their son with him.

Denying the UNO's allegation, she said her husband did not misbehave with anyone.

"He only entered the CA's room to submit the paper and repeatedly requested her to forward it to the UNO... This may have caused some misunderstanding."

"However, sending him to jail for six months is unacceptable, illogical and unjust. We demand a fair trial."

India opens new naval base near Maldives

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President Mohamed Muizzu was elected in October on a promise to end the country's pro-India stance.

India's new base on Minicoy is around 125 km (78 miles) from the Maldives.

The region is important to New Delhi for securing the passage of maritime traffic through the Indian Ocean, and the new base

will help in its surveillance efforts in the region.

The Indian Navy said in a statement on Wednesday that the base will strengthen its "foothold in the Lakshadweep island while extending capacity building, operational reach and sustenance in the region."

The navy also commissioned a new squadron of American MH-

60R "Seahawk" helicopters in Kochi, also on India's western coast. The squadron, it said, will "augment our maritime surveillance and anti-submarine warfare capabilities".

Male has signed a new agreement on receiving military assistance from Beijing, "fostering strong bilateral ties", its defence ministry announced on social media platform X on Monday.

Sweden finally joins Nato

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of the Union address by Biden, who has been struggling to persuade Trump's Republican Party to approve new aid to Ukraine.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that few would have expected Sweden as well as Finland to join Nato before Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

There is "no clearer example than today of the strategic debacle that Putin's invasion of Ukraine has become for Russia," Blinken said.

Sweden has not been involved in a war since the Napoleonic conflicts of the early 19th century.

Sweden and Finland, while militarily intertwined with the United States and both members of the European Union, had historically steered clear of officially joining Nato, formed in the Cold War to unite against the Soviet Union.

Finland and Sweden launched a joint bid quickly after the invasion of Ukraine, which itself had unsuccessfully sought to join Nato - an alliance that under Article 5, considers an attack on one member an attack on all.

Finland successfully joined in April 2023, but Sweden's membership was stalled by Turkey.

Russia has vowed "countermeasures"

over Sweden's entry into Nato, especially if the alliance's troops and assets deploy in the country.

Sweden's blue and golden-yellow flag is expected to be hoisted on Monday at the Brussels headquarters of the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance.

Nato Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, who is from neighbouring Norway, hailed a "historic day."

"After over 200 years of non-alignment Sweden now enjoys the protection granted under Article 5, the ultimate guarantee of allies' freedom and security," he said in a statement.

Chinese firm resumes work after 25 days

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revision of the project.

The Chinese Exim Bank was supposed to lend Tk 21,036.69 crore. The contractor is China Railway Group Ltd, better known as CREC.

The Dhaka-Bhanga section of the rail line was opened in October last year.

Project Director Afzal Hossain said on February 10 the contractor stopped working at the sites of the third line between Kamalapur and Gendaria, a junction at Bhanga, and the station at Singia.

"It is true that there were some pending payments. For a project, it is normal. But it is not rational to stop working," he told this correspondent, adding that the contractor resumed work on Wednesday.

Quamrul Ahsan, director general of railway, said Bangladesh Railway had earlier written to the contractor asking it to resume work.

Asked whether the issue was

discussed at yesterday's meeting between the Chinese ambassador and the railways minister, Quamrul replied in the negative.

Contacted, Li Lin, director (public relations and administration) of CREC for the project, said, "It is true that we had stopped work on the project, but the extent of the works was very small, not any major work. Besides, we have already resumed the works from March 5."

"We did not get our payment since October last year, though we have been requesting BR and the project authority to clear our dues. Since they did not pay our dues, we stopped some small works."

Replying to another question, he said although BR did not give any assurance about paying the dues soon, the contractor resumed work considering the friendly relationship between Bangladesh and China.

The issue over payment surfaces at a time when the project authority has

returned Tk 700 crore from its total allocation of Tk 5,500 crore in the Annual Development Programme (ADP) for this fiscal year.

"We would not be able to spend the money this fiscal year," said Afzal, the project director.

TIME EXTENSION

As of last month, physical work made 91 percent progress, said Afzal.

Trains can be operated from one end to another after June, he said, adding that all the stations would not be ready by then.

The work will be fully complete by December this year, he said, adding that the one-year defect liability period would start then. The contractor will fix the defects that appear within this period for free.

This is why they have sought time up to June 2026 for completion of the project, he added.

The cost of the project would not be increased due to the time extension, he said.

Gaza offensive to continue

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Hamas officials have said a ceasefire must be in place before the hostages are freed, Israeli forces must leave Gaza and all Gazans must be able to return to homes they have fled.

Hamas has said it can't provide a list of the hostages who are still alive without a ceasefire as the hostages are scattered across the war zone.

News that the Hamas delegation had left Cairo without an accord was met with despair in Gaza, which is in the grip of a deep humanitarian crisis after five months of war.

The US Central Command and Royal Jordanian Air Force continued yesterday with joint efforts to get food and other aid to the north of the enclave, where UN aid agencies say a large proportion of the population is on the brink of famine.

C-130s planes dropped more than 38,000 meals into the area, in their third

such operation, though US officials say the process is costly and insufficient, compared to aid trucked in.

Elsewhere, a UN expert said yesterday that Israel was destroying Gaza's food system as part of a broader "starvation campaign" in its war against Hamas.

Aid officials have warned of looming famine five months into the campaign against the Islamist Palestinian group, while hospitals in the isolated northern part of the enclave say children have started dying from malnutrition.

"Israel is not only denying and restricting the flow of humanitarian aid into Gaza. Israel is destroying the food system in Gaza," Michael Fakhri, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, said in a speech to the UN Human Rights Council.

"Israel has mounted a starvation campaign against the Palestinian people in Gaza," he added, saying

that included targeting small-scale fishermen.

Fakhri, a Lebanese-Canadian law professor, is one of dozens of independent human rights experts mandated by the United Nations to report and advise on specific themes and crises.

Grameen Kalyan

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2012 to 2016-2017.

Grameen has paid Tk 436.65 crore, and as per the verdict, it must pay the rest, she said.

The deputy commissioner of taxes will issue a notice with a deadline to Grameen in this regard.

Grameen Kalyan's lawyer Sarder Jinnat Ali told this correspondent that his client would decide whether it would move an appeal before the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court.