

DAILY NEWSP APER ANALYSIS

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Iran vows to protect its nuclear programme

Both sides are locked in a stalemate after having blocked shipping through the Strait of Hormuz

Blockade to continue until Iran agrees to a deal on the nuclear issue, says U.S. President Trump

Iran President says Persian Gulf is 'inseparable' part of Iran's identity, blockade 'doomed to fail'

Stanly Johny

Iran's Supreme Leader Mojtaba Khamenei said on Thursday that the country would "safeguard" its "nuclear and missile" capabilities and lay down new rules for managing the Strait of Hormuz, hours after U.S. President Donald Trump said a blockade of Iranian ports would remain until a nuclear deal is reached.

"A new chapter for the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz is taking shape," he said in a statement, marking Persian Gulf Day.

"The Islamic Republic will secure the Persian Gulf region and dismantle the enemies' exploitative schemes in this waterway. The legal frameworks and implementation of new management for the strait will bring peace and pro-

gress to the benefit of all the region's nations," he said.

The war on Iran, launched by the U.S. and Israel, has turned into a maritime battle of wills after Mr. Trump announced a ceasefire on April 8. While the ceasefire is still holding, Iran's chokehold of the strait, the mouth of the oil-rich Persian Gulf, remains intact. The U.S. has imposed a blockade on Iran-linked vessels in the Gulf of Oman to exert economic pressure on Tehran.

Last week, U.S. media reported that Iran made a proposal to the U.S. via Pakistan promising to ease its control of the strait in return for the U.S. lifting its blockade. Iran said it would discuss outstanding issues, including the nuclear programme, in the second round.

Mr. Trump, in an inter-



MOJTABA KHAMENEI, Iran's Supreme Leader

The Islamic Republic will secure the Persian Gulf region... The legal frameworks and implementation of new management for the strait will bring peace, progress to the benefit of all the region's nations

The [U.S.] blockade is sure to be more effective than the bombing... I don't want to lift the blockade, because I don't want them to have a nuclear weapon

DONALD TRUMP, U.S. President

view, said on Wednesday that he wanted a deal from Iran addressing America's core concerns, including the nuclear issue.

"The blockade is somewhat more effective than the bombing... They want to settle. They don't want me to keep the blockade. I don't want to lift the

blockade), because I don't want them to have a nuclear weapon," he said.

Iran has always maintained that its nuclear programme is for peaceful purposes.

Mr. Trump, who ordered U.S. bombing of Iran's nuclear facilities in June 2025, had then said

he had "obliterated" the nuclear programme.

Mr. Khamenei on Thursday said Iranians would safeguard all of the country's technological advances, including the nuclear and missile programmes. Iranians "will regard all their national identity capacities – spiritual, human, scientific, industrial, and foundational and cutting-edge technologies, from nano and bio to nuclear and missile – as their national capital, and will safeguard them just as they do their maritime, land, and air borders," he said in the statement.

"U.S. causing insecurity" He added that the U.S. presence is the "most important factor of insecurity" in the region. "America's illusory bases lack even the ability to ensure their own security, let alone any

hope that America could provide security for the region's dependents and Americanophiles."

U.S. Central Command stated on Wednesday in a social media post that it had reached a "significant milestone after successfully redirecting the 42nd commercial vessel attempting to violate the blockade".

There are "41 tankers with 69 million barrels of oil that the Iran can't sell", it said. Oil prices soared to four-year highs on Thursday, with the global benchmark Brent spiking more than 7% to \$126.41 a barrel for June delivery.

Iran's President Masoud Pezeshkian said the Persian Gulf is an "inseparable" part of Iran's identity, adding that the U.S. blockade is "doomed to fail". "As we have repeatedly announced, the presence and

interference of foreigners will not help improve security in the region but will create tension and disrupt lasting peace in the Persian Gulf," he said in a statement. Mr. Pezeshkian added that Iran would adhere to "the principles of freedom of navigation and maritime safety, except for hostile countries".

Iran's Parliament Speaker and chief negotiator Mohammad-Bagher Ghalibaf signalled that Tehran would not give up its control over the Strait of Hormuz. "Iran, by exercising control over the Strait of Hormuz, will ensure that it and its neighbours enjoy the precious blessing of a future free from the presence and interference of America," he wrote in a social media post.

SHIP HEADS TO STRAIT
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KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- Iran, led by Mojtaba Khamenei, declared it will retain its nuclear and missile capabilities and introduce new rules for managing the Strait of Hormuz.
- This follows U.S. President Donald Trump maintaining a blockade on Iranian-linked vessels in the Gulf of Oman.
- The situation escalated after U.S. and Israeli strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities (June 2025).
- Despite a ceasefire (April 8, 2026), tensions persist through maritime confrontation and economic pressure.
- Oil prices surged sharply (Brent crude crossing \$126/barrel), indicating global economic implications.

Key Points

- Strategic chokepoint: Strait of Hormuz handles ~20–30% of global oil trade (EIA estimates).
- Iran signalled conditional easing of control over the strait in exchange for lifting sanctions/blockade.
- The U.S. aims to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons capability.
- Iran asserts:
 - Nuclear programme is peaceful
 - Strait control ensures regional sovereignty and security
- U.S. claims blockade effectiveness:
 - ~41 tankers (~69 million barrels of oil) reportedly blocked
- Iran emphasizes "freedom of navigation" selectively, excluding hostile countries.

Static Linkages

- Strait of Hormuz connects:
 - Persian Gulf with
 - Gulf of Oman
- Key bordering states: Iran, Oman, UAE

Under UNCLOS:

- Strait qualifies as an international strait
- Guarantees transit passage (non-suspendable)
- India imports ~80–85% of crude oil; West Asia is a major supplier region

Critical Analysis

Pros (from Iran's perspective):

- Strategic leverage over global oil supply routes
- Strengthens bargaining power in nuclear negotiations
- Domestic political consolidation through nationalism

Pros (from U.S./global perspective):

- Economic pressure avoids full-scale war
- Limits nuclear proliferation risks

Concerns / Challenges:

- Violation of freedom of navigation principles (UNCLOS tension)
- Risk of global oil supply disruption leading to inflationary shocks
- Potential escalation into military conflict in chokepoint
- Impact on India's energy security and trade routes

Stakeholder Perspectives:

- India: Concerned about oil imports, diaspora safety, and maritime trade
- China/EU: Focus on stable energy supply chains
- Gulf States: Balance between Iran and U.S. security umbrella

Way Forward

- Promote diplomatic negotiations (revival of nuclear deal framework)
- Strengthen multilateral maritime security mechanisms
- Diversify energy sources (renewables, strategic reserves)
- India to:
 - Enhance strategic petroleum reserves
 - Invest in alternative corridors (e.g., INSTC)
- Reinforce adherence to international maritime law (UNCLOS)

States with revenue deficits may face fiscal stress: Centre

T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan
NEW DELHI

The Union Finance Ministry has warned that States with revenue deficits and high debt burdens will find it harder to deal with fiscal shocks, including from the West Asia crisis, forcing them to either reprioritise expenditure away from productive areas, or approach the Centre for more funds at a time when it is trying to consolidate its own finances.

In its Monthly Economic Review for April, the Department of Economic Affairs in the Ministry said nine of the 18 large States analysed were in revenue deficit as per their own projections for 2026-27. Seven are projected to be revenue surplus, while one is

in revenue balance.

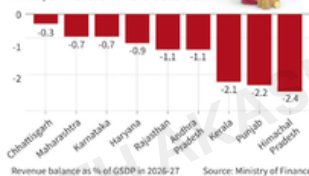
A revenue deficit is when expenditure on recurring items such as salaries, pensions, subsidies, and interest payments exceed the revenue earned from sources such as taxes and fees.

The States with projected revenue deficits as a percentage of their gross state domestic products (GSDP) are Himachal Pradesh (2.2%), Kerala (2.1%), Andhra Pradesh (-1.1%), Rajasthan (-1.1%), Haryana (-0.9%), Karnataka (-0.7%), Maharashtra (-0.7%), and Chhattisgarh (-0.3%).

Tamil Nadu and West Bengal were excluded from the analysis as they have so far presented only interim budgets for 2026-27. "Revenue-deficit States

In the red

Nine of the 18 large States analysed by the Ministry of Finance are in revenue deficit



Revenue balance as % of GDP in 2026-27 Source: Ministry of Finance

are constrained by the debt servicing obligations and carry, on average, significantly higher outstanding liabilities than revenue-surplus States, and many of them spend more than 15% of their revenue receipts on interest pay-

ments," the report noted. Of all the States analysed, Punjab has the highest projected ratio of interest payments to revenue receipts of 22.8%.

"States simultaneously running a revenue deficit and high outstanding li-

abilities have fewer degrees of freedom to respond to fiscal shocks," the report said. "Specifically, they may have to resort to expenditure restructuring or may demand higher central transfers to meet the present unforeseen shocks."

On the other hand, the report highlighted the States that were doing fiscally well. The eight States with projected revenue surpluses as a percentage of their GSDPs are Odisha (3%), Jharkhand (2.5%), Uttar Pradesh (1.6%), Goa (1.3%), Gujarat (0.8%), Uttarakhand (0.6%), Telangana (0.3%), and Bihar (0.1%). "Notably, eight States which have budgeted revenue surpluses for 2026-27, save for Telangana, have their capital out-

lay as a percentage of State GDP higher than their projected fiscal deficit," the report said.

It highlighted the example of Odisha: while the State's 3.5% fiscal deficit is higher than the 3% norm, the fact that it is in revenue surplus and its capital outlay is 6.5% of GSDP "mark it as a case of deliberate investment rather than fiscal stress".

"States that are unable to maintain the golden rule of fiscal financing, that is, zero revenue deficit, will face increased stress as a result of the present crisis," the report said. "Stressed states with compressed fiscal space make demands on the Centre at precisely the moment that the Centre is attempting consolidation."

○ Odisha Example:

- Fiscal deficit: 3.5% of GSDP
- Capital outlay: 6.5% → reflects productive investment.

- Golden Rule of Fiscal Policy:
 - Borrowing should finance capital expenditure, not revenue expenditure.

Static Linkages

- Article 293: State borrowing powers; conditional upon Centre's consent.
- Article 280: Finance Commission recommends tax devolution and grants.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- The Ministry of Finance (Department of Economic Affairs) in its Monthly Economic Review (April 2026) flagged concerns over rising fiscal stress in States.
- 9 out of 18 major States are projected to run revenue deficits in 2026-27.
- High debt and interest burdens may reduce States' capacity to respond to external shocks (e.g., West Asia crisis impacting oil prices and inflation).
- Stressed States may:
 - Cut productive expenditure, or
 - Seek higher transfers from the Union government.

Key Points

- Revenue Deficit:
 - Occurs when revenue expenditure exceeds revenue receipts.
 - Indicates borrowing for consumption (non-asset creation).
- States with Revenue Deficits (% of GSDP):
 - Himachal Pradesh (-2.4%), Punjab (-2.2%), Kerala (-2.1%)
 - Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan (-1.1%)
 - Haryana (-0.9%), Karnataka & Maharashtra (-0.7%), Chhattisgarh (-0.3%)
- Interest Burden:
 - Many deficit States spend >15% of revenue receipts on interest payments.
 - Punjab highest at 22.8% → indicator of debt stress.
- Revenue Surplus States:
 - Odisha (3%), Jharkhand (2.5%), Uttar Pradesh (1.6%), Goa, Gujarat, Uttarakhand, Telangana, Bihar.
- Capital Expenditure Insight:
 - Most surplus States maintain capital outlay > fiscal deficit, indicating growth-oriented spending.

- FRBM Act, 2003:
 - Fiscal deficit target ≈ 3% of GDP (similar benchmarks for States).
- Types of Deficits:
 - Revenue deficit
 - Fiscal deficit
 - Primary deficit
- Debt Sustainability Indicators:
 - Debt-to-GDP ratio
 - Interest Payments / Revenue Receipts ratio

Critical Analysis

Positives

- Revenue surplus States demonstrate fiscal prudence.
- Higher capital expenditure enhances:
 - Infrastructure
 - Employment
 - Long-term growth

Concerns

- Revenue deficit trap:
 - Borrowing used for salaries, subsidies → no asset creation.
- Debt overhang:
 - High interest payments crowd out development spending.
- Reduced fiscal flexibility:
 - Limits response to economic shocks.
- Centre-State tensions:
 - Increased dependence on central transfers.

Stakeholder Dimensions

- States: Demand higher borrowing limits and transfers.
- Centre: Focus on fiscal consolidation and macro stability.
- Finance Commission: Balancing equity and fiscal discipline.

Way Forward

- Adhere to zero revenue deficit (Golden Rule).
- Enhance own tax revenue (OTR) via GST compliance and tax base expansion.
- Rationalise subsidies and adopt targeted Direct Benefit Transfers (DBT).
- Prioritise capital expenditure for growth.
- Introduce performance-based fiscal incentives (Finance Commission).
- Strengthen cooperative fiscal federalism through structured dialogue.
- Develop fiscal buffers to handle external shocks.

Lift abortion time limit for minor rape survivors: SC

SC says state and doctors cannot make decisions for minor rape survivors, it should be left to the parents or survivors; CJI calls for amendment to ensure such cases are completed within a week

Krishadas Rajagopal
NEW DELHI

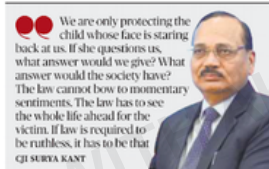
The Supreme Court on Thursday asked the Union government to amend the abortion law to remove the time limit on medical termination of unwanted pregnancies in the case of minor rape victims.

A Bench of Chief Justice of India Surya Kant and Joyimalya Bagchi made the observation while refusing to entertain a curative petition filed by the government against a recent decision of the top court allowing a 15-year-old rape survivor to terminate a 30-week pregnancy.

Additional Solicitor General Ashwarya Bhati, accompanied by specialists from AIIMS, said they were against the termination considering the health and well-being of both the teenager and the "unborn child". One of the specialist doctors said the court was wrong to consider this as a foetus-child (rape survivor) issue.

"This is a child-child issue," the doctor submitted in court.

The court said it was not for the doctors or the state



CJI Kant says the child's victimisation cannot remain with her for the rest of her life as a scar

to choose what was best for the rape survivor. The decision should be left to the parents of the survivor and the survivor herself.

"Let not medical personnel become the masters of the will of the people. The people would decide," Justice Bagchi said.

The state and the doctors could take them through the medical procedure and provide them expert help in the form of counsellors, the court said.

"You will help parents

misation cannot remain with her for the rest of her life as a permanent scar.

"We are only protecting the child whose face is staring back at us. If she questions us, what answer would we give? What answer would the society have? The law cannot bow to momentary sentiments. The law has to see the whole life ahead for the victim. If law is required to be ruthless, it has to be that," the CJI said.

Ms. Bhati said the Medical Termination of Pregnancy (MTP) Amendment Act of 2021 has increased the time limit for legal abortion from 20 to 24 weeks for survivors of rape, minors, and women with disabilities.

"You should amend the law to remove any time limit on medical termination of unwanted pregnancy caused by the rape of a minor. You should also bring an amendment not only in the MTP Act, but also in the penal law, making it mandatory to complete the trial in such cases in a week. The entire property of the accused should be given to the victim," Chief Justice Kant observed.

- Amend criminal law to ensure time-bound trial (within a week) in such cases.
- Provide compensation through confiscation of accused's property.

Static Linkages

- Article 21 – Right to life includes right to dignity, privacy, and bodily autonomy (Justice K.S. Puttaswamy case, 2017).
- Directive Principles:
 - Article 39(f): Protection of children against exploitation.
- Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012:
 - Provides stringent punishment for child sexual abuse.
- Indian Penal Code:
 - Rape provisions under Section 375–376.
- Supreme Court precedents:
 - Recognised reproductive choice as a fundamental right.

Critical Analysis

Positives:

- Reinforces bodily autonomy and reproductive rights.
- Recognises psychological trauma of minor rape survivors.
- Strengthens child rights jurisprudence.
- Limits state overreach in personal decisions.

Concerns:

- Removal of time limit may raise ethical debates on late-term abortion.
- Medical risks increase significantly after 24 weeks.
- Potential misuse or ambiguity in defining "unwanted pregnancy".
- Healthcare infrastructure may not be adequately prepared.

Stakeholder Perspectives:

- Survivor: Needs dignity, choice, and mental health protection.
- Doctors: Concerned about medical risks and ethics.
- State: Balances policy, legality, and societal implications.
- Judiciary: Expanding scope of fundamental rights.

Way Forward

- Amend the MTP Act to include:
 - Special exception clause for minor rape survivors beyond gestational limits.
- Establish specialised medical boards with rapid response mechanisms.
- Strengthen mental health counselling support systems.
- Ensure fast-track courts for rape cases involving minors.
- Develop clear medico-legal guidelines to avoid ambiguity.
- Improve public health infrastructure for safe late-term abortion procedures.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- The Supreme Court of India refused to entertain a curative petition filed by the Union government regarding termination of a 30-week pregnancy of a 15-year-old rape survivor.
- A Bench led by Chief Justice Surya Kant observed that the law must prioritise the life, dignity, and future of the minor survivor.
- The Court urged the government to amend the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971 to remove time limits for abortion in cases involving minor rape victims.
- It held that decision-making should rest with the survivor and her guardians, not the State or medical boards.

Key Points

- The MTP Amendment Act, 2021 increased abortion limit:
 - From 20 to 24 weeks for special categories (rape survivors, minors, differently-abled women).
- Beyond 24 weeks:
 - Allowed only in cases of substantial foetal abnormalities with medical board approval.
- Court observations:
 - Reproductive autonomy is part of personal liberty (Article 21).
 - A minor rape survivor cannot be forced to carry pregnancy due to psychological trauma and lifelong consequences.
 - The State has no locus standi to challenge such decisions when they concern individual bodily autonomy.
- Suggested reforms:
 - Remove gestational limits in rape cases involving minors.

On May Day, a workforce in India without a floor

This year, May Day arrives not as a commemoration, but as a diagnosis. Within a single fortnight last month, two events clarified the state of India's labour more sharply than any official review.

On April 10, thousands of garment workers in Noida's Phase 2 Hosiery Complex stepped out of nearly 300 factories and onto the streets, demanding a minimum monthly wage of ₹20,000. On April 14, a high-pressure steam tube ruptured at Vedanta's 1,200 MW Singhitara thermal plant in Chhattisgarh, killing 20 workers and injuring 15. One protest was about the price of labour; the other, about the price of being alive while performing it. Both answer the same question: what has India's labour reform actually produced?

The Noida strike began with a specific arithmetic grievance. On April 9, the Haryana government notified a 35% hike in minimum wages, raising unskilled monthly wages from ₹11,274 to ₹15,220, with effect from April 1, 2026. Across the border in Noida, unskilled workers were earning roughly ₹4,500 a day, compared to ₹585 in Haryana for identical work. Protesters at the Hosiery Complex — employees of different companies — assembled in B Block, blocked traffic, and refused to disperse without written assurances.

By April 13, the administration had deployed over 1,200 personnel, including the Provincial Armed Constabulary and Rapid Action Force, with charges and stone-pelting followed, and nearly 400 people were detained. Under pressure, the Uttar Pradesh government announced an interim 25% hike, setting wages at ₹13,690 for unskilled workers in Gazam Health Nagar and ₹16,868 for skilled workers. The workers rejected it; their demands remained ₹20,000.

Between pay and survival
The gap between ₹6,868 and ₹20,000 is not a bargaining position. It is the difference between what a family pays for rent, gas, and school fees in the NCR and what the state is willing to concede as a dignified minimum.

Four days later, the furnace at Singhitara did its own counting. A preliminary report from the Chief Boiler Inspector, backed by the Forensic Science Laboratory in Sakin, Chhattisgarh, attributed the explosion to "excessive fuel buildup inside the furnace", which produced pressure surges that displaced critical piping. The probe flagged "repeated negligence in equipment upkeep" by Vedanta and its contractor WGL. (NTPC GE Power Services Pvt. Ltd.). A first information report has been registered against Vedanta's Chairman Anil Agrawal, the plant manager, and others under Sections 106(2), 289 and 313 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita.

The dead were not Vedanta's own employees; they worked for a subcontractor. This, too, is a pattern.



Rejimon Kuttappan
A workers' rights expert

Chhattisgarh alone has recorded 296 industrial deaths over three years. Across India, the Directorate General of Factory Advice Service and Labour Institutes recorded 3,331 factory deaths between 2018 and 2020 — three a day — yet only 14 people were imprisoned under the Factories Act during the same period. The global union IndustrialALL counted over 400 workplace fatalities in India in 2024, with the chemical sector alone accounting for 220. In July 2025, an explosion at Sipachi Industries in Telangana had killed 44 people, mostly migrant workers, at a plant that the State fire department found lacked basic fire alarms and heat sensors.

A structural shift
These are not disconnected episodes. They are the operating conditions of an economy that, on November 21, 2025, formally adopted the four labour codes. In a single stroke, and without any transition period, the four codes — the Code on Wages, the Industrial Relations Code, the Social Security Code and the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions OSHWC Code — replaced 29 central labour laws. The Indian Labour Conference, the country's apex tripartite forum, had not been convened since 2025.

The new regime raises the threshold for price government permission for layoffs, retrenchment, and closure from 100 workers to 300 under the Industrial Relations Code, 2020, enabling firms below that size — an estimated majority of India's factory units — to retrench workers without administrative scrutiny. A peer-reviewed analysis in the National Library of Medicine archive notes that this merely restores the pre-1982 threshold, reversing an Emergency-era protection enacted after a wave of mass layoffs affected over half a million workers.

The OSHWC Code, 2020, simultaneously raises the statutory definition of a "factory" from 10 workers in a factory with power to 20, and from 20 workers in a factory without power to 40, lifting an entire tier of smaller workplaces — where India's textile, garment, metal, hosiery, and food processing clusters are concentrated — out of mandatory safety oversight. Labour economists warn that this technical reclassification has a profound impact on worker coverage, since a majority of India's small manufacturing units employ fewer than 20 workers.

The inspection architecture has been similarly diluted. The OSHWC Code replaces unannounced inspections with an "inspector-cum-facilitator" model, combined with randomized, web-based allocation through the Shram Suvidha portal and employer self-certification — a shift that, as the International Labour Organization's India Labour Inspection Profile notes, may contravene the requirement for independent, unannounced inspections under ILO Convention No. 81. Procedural hurdles for collective action have also stiffened. Under the IR Code, no worker may

strike without 60 days' prior notice, flash strikes are prohibited outright, and strikes are barred during and for weeks after any conciliation or tribunal proceeding. "Mass causal leave" by more than 50% of a workforce is now deemed a strike. Trade unions argue that, in combination, these provisions make lawful industrial action virtually impossible to organise, completing the regime's pro-employer tilt.

A reform that raises statutory thresholds in almost every operative clause, is not rationalising protection. It is removing it. The enforcement chapters read more like a facilitation framework than a compliance regime.

Ten central trade unions, excluding the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS), observed a "Black Day" on November 26, 2025, calling the codes a "deceptive fraud on the working class". Their objection was not sentimental. When the legal definition of a factory excludes the smallest and most dangerous workplaces, when inspectors announce their visits through a portal, when retrenchment requires no permission below 300 workers, and when strikes are bound by procedural tightropes, the predictable result is the Noida street and the Singhitara shop floor.

The wage stagnation that drove workers from Mother Sara and Richa Global into a baton charge, and the deferred maintenance that caused a boiler tube to rupture, are not separate problems. They are two ends of the same system.

Old laws, new realities
There is an honest public case for labour reform. The Factories Act of 1948 is older than most Indian States; the Workmen's Compensation Act of 1923 predates the Constitution. A regulatory architecture built for the industrial economy of late-colonial India — of jute mills, textile mills, and railway workshops — cannot plausibly govern a workforce that today includes gig workers, platform workers, and digital media workers. No serious observer, and no Indian trade union, disputes that consolidation was overdue. The question is not whether the law should have changed; it is what it changed into.

Consolidation is not dilution. Labour simplification is not exemption. On May Day, the test for any labour framework is modest: does it allow a worker to earn enough to live, and to live through the shift? In April 2026, the answer from Noida and Singhitara is the same. In Noida, police fired tear gas at factory workers protesting for a living wage as fuel-driven inflation outpaced wages. In Singhitara, a boiler tube burst at a Vedanta power plant on April 14, releasing 600°C steam onto workers eating lunch; 20 were killed, all contract workers employed through a business partner rather than as direct employees. Neither a wage that sustains life, nor a workplace that preserves it. A regime that cannot deliver the second while pricing out the first has not been rationalised. It has been rewritten against the very people it was meant to protect.

Static Linkages

- Directive Principles: living wage, humane working conditions
- Article 21: right to life includes safe working conditions
- Trade union rights and collective bargaining principles
- Concept of informal sector dominance in India (~90% workforce)
- Occupational safety standards and labour inspection mechanisms
- Wage determination: minimum wage vs living wage
- Role of tripartite institutions (government–employer–worker)

Critical Analysis

Positives of Labour Codes

- Simplification of 29 laws into 4 codes improves ease of doing business
- Encourages formalization and investment climate
- Introduces provisions for gig and platform workers under Social Security Code
- Digitization (Shram Suvidha portal) increases transparency

Concerns / Challenges

- Dilution of worker protection due to higher thresholds for layoffs
- Exclusion of small enterprises from safety regulations
- Weak enforcement due to reduced inspections and self-certification
- Wage stagnation amid inflation affecting real incomes
- Contract labour exploitation and lack of accountability
- Restrictions on strikes weaken collective bargaining power
- Non-functioning of Indian Labour Conference weakens tripartite dialogue

Stakeholder Perspectives

- Government: reform necessary for growth and employment generation
- Industry: flexibility improves competitiveness
- Trade Unions: erosion of rights and protections
- Workers: insecurity in wages and safety

Way Forward

- Ensure living wage benchmarks linked to inflation and cost of living
- Strengthen labour inspection mechanisms with accountability
- Reinstate tripartite consultations via Indian Labour Conference
- Expand coverage of safety laws to small enterprises
- Improve data transparency on industrial accidents
- Promote formalization with safeguards, not deregulation
- Ensure strict liability and penalties for industrial negligence
- Enhance social security coverage for informal and contract workers

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- Large-scale protest by garment workers in Noida demanding ₹20,000 monthly minimum wage amid interstate wage disparities.
- Industrial accident at Vedanta's Singhitara thermal plant in Chhattisgarh killed 20 workers due to boiler explosion and safety lapses.
- Implementation of four labour codes in November 2025 replacing 29 central labour laws.
- Rising concerns over dilution of labour protections, occupational safety, and wage adequacy.

Key Points

- Haryana increased minimum wages by ~35%, creating interstate wage disparities.
- Uttar Pradesh announced ~21% interim hike, but workers rejected it as insufficient.
- India recorded over 3,331 factory deaths (2018–2020); low conviction rates under safety laws.
- Industrial Relations Code raises threshold for layoffs without government approval from 100 to 300 workers.
- Occupational Safety Code raises factory threshold (10→20 workers with power), excluding many small units.
- Introduction of "Inspector-cum-Facilitator" system and self-certification reduces inspection rigor.
- Strike regulations tightened—mandatory 60-day notice and restrictions during dispute resolution.

India's sprint beyond the dairy red line to the Pacific

India concluded a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with New Zealand in December 2025, at a time marked by fractured supply chains and rising protectionist tendencies among nations. Guided by the vision of "Viksit Bharat", India has recalibrated its foreign trade policy, transitioning from a cautious, tariff-focused negotiator to a strategic, high-velocity partner. This shift characterises a clear departure from the historical "slow burn" model of trade diplomacy. There are six key wins for India in this FTA, as it aligns with the Viksit Bharat blueprint for trade policy based on strategic autonomy and global integration.



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such as IT, engineering, and health care, with a tenure period of up to three years. An annual quota of 1,000 work-and-holiday visas will also be permitted for young Indians, aligning India's workforce with New Zealand's age requirements. Most importantly, it is the first bilateral reciprocity agreement that will allow international recognition of India's Ayurveda, Yoga, Unani, Siddha, and Homoeopathy (AYUSH) system along with the native Māori health practices of New Zealand.

Third, the FTA lays down a commitment of capital inflow of around \$20 billion over a period of 15 years in high-priority sectors such as agri-tech and food processing, renewable energy, education and health-care management, wherein New Zealand's technology and capital will be the much-needed catalyst for growth. This influx will also strengthen the "Make in India" programme.

Strategically shielded

Fourth, India has been so far successful in negotiating for an agreement which protects one of the sensitive sectors of India's economy – "dairy". The mechanics of the pact include the exclusion of fluid milk, cheese, and yogurt from duty concessions. India will grant progressive market access, on a duty-free basis, for infant formula and high-value-added dairy products, over a seven-year period, allowing domestic nutritional firms access to quality raw materials. The pact proposes a "Ring Fenced Value Addition Framework" to boost downstream processing of manufacturing. Under this agreement, New

Zealand firms are permitted to import dairy products from India duty-free for manufacturing purposes, if 100% of the products are exported out of India. The pact uses an advanced tariff rate quota mechanism, providing for a minimum import price and seasonal constraints on select commodities such as apples, honey, and kiwifruit.

The fifth win is that New Zealand has pledged to change its legislation within 18 months. This change will provide Indian Geographical Indication (GI) products with protection such as that offered by the European Union. As a result, brands such as Darjeeling tea and Basmati rice will receive top-quality legal protection in Oceania.

Securing a South Pacific foothold

Last, this FTA with New Zealand is increasingly significant, as it creates a geopolitical hedge for India and opens new markets, with New Zealand serving as a gateway to Oceania and the Pacific Island countries (PICs). By adopting New Zealand's trade regulations and norms, India secures a logistical centre and "regulatory reference point" in the South Pacific. Through this trade agreement, India demonstrates its ability to meet Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) standards and sets a precedent for further negotiations with other partners. The FTA signals India's ability to open and engage in global supply chains while maintaining a balance between market access and domestic protection.

India's rapid FTA execution

First, this pact is one of India's fastest-concluded FTAs, with negotiations officially launched in March 2025 and concluded in December 2025. This gives India a first-mover advantage in Oceania while also signalling its swift institutional integration and ambitious posture to other partners. This fresh display of efficiency and the ability to compress negotiation cycle times is a new deliverable from India's trade partners.

Second, this FTA embeds talent mobility as a core economic pillar with the "Yoga and Māori" reciprocity between the two nations. There are many provisions for human capital outflow, including professional pathways, youth engagement and bi-directional exchange of traditional medicine. The FTA allows for a separate annual quota of 5,000 professional visas for skilled Indian professionals in high-skill jobs

The Free Trade Agreement with New Zealand reflects India's evolving trade diplomacy strategy

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- India concluded a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with New Zealand in December 2025.
- Negotiations were completed in a short span (March–December 2025), reflecting India's shift towards faster and proactive trade diplomacy.
- The agreement is aligned with the "Viksit Bharat" vision, emphasizing global integration with strategic autonomy amid rising global protectionism.

Key Points

- Rapid negotiation success:
 - One of India's fastest-concluded FTAs, indicating improved institutional capacity and strategic intent.
- Services and mobility provisions:
 - 5,000 annual visas for skilled Indian professionals (IT, healthcare, engineering).
 - 1,000 work-and-holiday visas for youth.
 - Mutual recognition of AYUSH systems and Māori traditional medicine (first such bilateral arrangement).
- Investment commitments:
 - Around \$20 billion investment over 15 years.
 - Key sectors: agri-tech, renewable energy, education, healthcare.
 - Supports domestic manufacturing and value addition (Make in India).
- Protection of sensitive sectors:
 - Dairy (milk, cheese, yogurt) excluded from tariff concessions.
 - Gradual access for select dairy inputs.
 - Tariff Rate Quotas (TRQs) with safeguards like minimum import price and seasonal restrictions.

Geographical Indications (GI):

- Enhanced legal protection for Indian GI products such as Darjeeling tea and Basmati rice.
- Strategic importance:
 - Strengthens India's presence in Oceania and Pacific Island Countries.
 - Positions New Zealand as a gateway for trade expansion.
 - Demonstrates India's ability to align with Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development-level standards.

Static Linkages

- FTAs aim to reduce tariffs and non-tariff barriers under WTO framework.
- Tariff Rate Quota: Lower tariff within quota, higher tariff beyond quota.
- Mode 4 under GATS: Movement of natural persons for services.
- GI protection under Geographical Indications of Goods (Registration and Protection) Act, 1999.
- Export-led growth and global value chains highlighted in Economic Survey.

Critical Analysis

Positives

- Diversifies India's export markets beyond traditional partners.
- Boosts services exports through labour mobility provisions.
- Protects sensitive sectors like dairy while allowing selective liberalisation.
- Encourages foreign investment and technology transfer.
- Enhances India's strategic footprint in the Indo-Pacific region.

Concerns

- Risk of widening trade deficit if imports increase faster than exports.
- Domestic sectors like horticulture may face competition.
- Regulatory and standards compliance challenges.
- Implementation issues in mutual recognition frameworks.

Way Forward

- Strengthen domestic competitiveness (MSMEs, agriculture).
- Improve logistics, quality standards, and export infrastructure.
- Ensure effective use of safeguard measures.
- Expand FTA network with other key regions (EU, Indo-Pacific).
- Build institutional capacity for trade negotiations and compliance.

Gulf within

Differences with Saudi Arabia and Iran's attacks led to the UAE's exit from OPEC

The UAE has withdrawn from the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), a cartel that it joined in 1967, and OPEC+. It was OPEC's fourth-largest producer (3.12 million barrels per day) and its third-largest exporter (2.88 mbd) in 2025, behind Saudi Arabia and Iraq. The Emiratis clearly sought to free themselves of production constraints set largely by the cartel's dominant producer, Saudi Arabia. With significant spare capacity, the Emiratis believe that they are better off with the autonomy to ramp up exports, a capability now constrained by the de facto closure of the Strait of Hormuz, the largest disruption to oil supply in history, following U.S.-Israel attacks on Iran. Brent crude prices barely budged on the announcement, revealing how heavily the Strait crisis weighs on the market. But once the UAE weathers this crisis, whether through the Strait's reopening, or by routing more crude through a pipeline bypassing Hormuz, analysts estimate that it could lift production by roughly a million barrels a day. While Saudi Arabia, OPEC's bellwether, has remained chary of over-supply and sought to keep prices high, the UAE has long pushed for higher production for revenues that it intends to funnel into AI infrastructure and other diversification projects.

Unsaid in the UAE's move is also its frustration with what it sees as a lack of cartel-wide coordination in responding to Iran's missile and drone attacks on Gulf oil and military facilities; Iran is also an OPEC member. The Emiratis have also differed sharply with the Saudis on external interventions: in Yemen and Sudan. The UAE also seeks closer ties with Israel than most Gulf states, which remain uncomfortable with any thaw given Israel's genocidal actions in Gaza and its attacks on Iran and Lebanon. The U.S., a non-OPEC member, and the world's largest oil producer at 13.6 mbd, has long viewed the cartel's price-setting unfavourably, and President Donald Trump has repeatedly pressed it to pump more. The UAE perhaps calculates that aligning with Washington will yield benefits for its production and pipeline ambitions, though Mr. Trump's transactional and mercurial foreign policy offers little guarantee. The UAE's exit also reflects a structural issue: OPEC's share of global crude dropped to 36.7% in 2025, and with Hormuz shut, pricing power has shifted to American producers in the short term. OPEC will continue, but with a reduced ability to set prices. For net oil-importing countries such as India, however, the immediate threat is not the cartel's unravelling but the "double blockade" in the Strait of Hormuz and the fragile Iran-U.S. ceasefire. Unless a new geopolitical détente emerges between Iran and the Gulf states, volatility will persist, threatening energy security regardless of what unfolds within OPEC.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- The UAE has withdrawn from OPEC and OPEC+, ending its long-standing membership since 1967.
- UAE was the 4th-largest producer (~3.12 mbd) and 3rd-largest exporter (~2.88 mbd) within OPEC in 2025.
- The move reflects dissatisfaction with production quotas, largely influenced by Saudi Arabia.
- Occurs amid major geopolitical disruption: de facto closure of the Strait of Hormuz following U.S.-Israel attacks on Iran.
- Oil markets remained stable initially, indicating greater concern over supply disruptions than cartel dynamics.

Key Points

- Strategic Autonomy: UAE seeks freedom to increase production beyond OPEC-imposed limits.
- Spare Capacity Advantage: Potential to increase output by ~1 million barrels/day once logistical constraints ease.
- Geopolitical Drivers:
 - Frustration over lack of unified OPEC response to Iranian attacks.
 - Divergences with Saudi Arabia on regional conflicts (Yemen, Sudan).

- Energy Market Trends:
 - OPEC's share in global crude fell to ~36.7% (2025).
 - The U.S. is the largest oil producer (~13.6 mbd), reducing cartel influence.
- Hormuz Crisis Impact:
 - Handles ~20% of global oil trade (as per EIA estimates).
 - Closure shifts pricing power temporarily to non-OPEC producers.
- Economic Strategy of UAE:
 - Revenue aimed at diversification (AI, infrastructure, non-oil sectors).

Static Linkages

- Cartel: A group of producers coordinating output/prices to maximise profits.
- Demand-supply dynamics determine price in imperfect markets.
- Strategic choke points: Strait of Hormuz, Malacca Strait, Suez Canal.
- India imports ~85% of its crude oil needs (Economic Survey).
- Energy security pillars: availability, affordability, accessibility, sustainability.
- Diversification of energy mix: renewables, strategic petroleum reserves (SPR).

Critical Analysis

Positives

- Weakening of cartel control may enhance market competition.
- UAE's higher output potential could increase global supply in the long run.
- Reflects evolving multipolar energy order (rise of U.S. and non-OPEC producers).

Negatives / Challenges

- Reduced coordination may increase oil price volatility.
- Strait of Hormuz disruption poses immediate supply risks.
- Geopolitical tensions (Iran-Gulf-U.S.) threaten global energy stability.
- Divergence within OPEC weakens its price-stabilisation role.

Implications for India

- Risk of higher import bills and inflation.
- Increased vulnerability to external supply shocks.
- Necessitates diversification of energy sources and suppliers.

Way Forward

- Strengthen energy diplomacy with Gulf countries and other suppliers.
- Diversify import basket (Russia, Africa, Americas).
- Expand Strategic Petroleum Reserves (SPR).
- Accelerate renewable energy transition (solar, wind, green hydrogen).
- Promote energy efficiency and demand management.
- Support stable geopolitical engagement in West Asia.

Embers in the air

Seasonal fires need long-term management, not just preparedness

The Nilgiris district in Tamil Nadu and the adjoining forest divisions of Mudumalai, Coimbatore and Erode have been dealing with wildfires that escalated to being a crisis requiring the assistance of the Indian Air Force. Even so, the intense fires are not anomalous, but an acute manifestation of a seasonal event. Parsons Valley and Pykara in the Nilgiris have been worst-hit while significant blazes were also reported from the Singara and Masinagudi ranges. One major blaze broke out in Wenlock Downs and spread rapidly. February to May is fire season in this region, and in April, officials said that high heat and strong winds created a "conductive environment"; the wind, in particular, carried embers over pre-existing firelines and partly explains why this season has been a breakout. Some fires also burnt hotter and for longer in Pykara because of the accumulated biomass and invasive undergrowth, and took longer to be doused. The Nilgiris feature steep terrains and limited road access, slowing the movement of crew and equipment to particular spots. This said, most fires also have a human hand. Tribespeople gather wood in the area to make brooms – an activity closely monitored by officials – and herders have also been known to burn dry grassland, forcing grasses to regrow and become fodder. The latter together with discarded smoking paraphernalia are known accidental causes. This year, one blaze entered the Coimbatore division after Kerala forest staff began a controlled burn allegedly without coordinating this with Tamil Nadu. Some officials also expressed suspicion that miscreants deliberately set fires in the Reserve, allegedly over the Forest Department's failure to address tiger-related deaths meaningfully, but local communities are usually the first-responders to these fires.

While none of these causes is new, their confluence this year with the hot summer is likely to have stoked the intense fires. Indeed, climate variability – rather than climate change alone – is also raising the baseline risk. Keeping other causes fixed, a hotter, drier summer automatically leads to fires that threaten the best-laid plans more. Even this year, authorities had begun planning in March, setting up control rooms and firelines, ensuring animals' access to water outside human-settled areas, clearing weeds, and mounting awareness campaigns. However, many activities that add to the fire risk remain tied to peoples' livelihoods and traditional practices, so they cannot be eliminated without suitable alternatives. Taken together, managing the region's seasonal fires is becoming less about what can be planned for in the short term and more about what can be factored in over the long term.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- Intense forest fires reported in the Nilgiris district of Tamil Nadu and adjoining forest divisions (Mudumalai, Coimbatore, Erode) during the 2026 fire season (February–May).
- Severely affected areas include Parsons Valley, Pykara, Singara, Masinagudi and Wenlock Downs.
- Fires escalated to a crisis level, necessitating aerial firefighting support from the Indian Air Force.
- High temperatures, low humidity and strong winds in April created highly conducive conditions.
- Instances of inter-state miscoordination (spillover from controlled burning in Kerala) were reported.

Key Points

- Seasonal Pattern: Forest fires are a recurring phenomenon in peninsular India during dry months (Feb–May).
- Major Causes:
 - Anthropogenic: grazing fires, biomass collection, discarded cigarettes, deliberate ignition.
 - Natural: high temperature, dry vegetation, wind spread.

- Aggravating Factors:
 - Invasive species such as Lantana camara increase fuel load.
 - Accumulated dry biomass leads to longer and hotter fires.
 - Difficult terrain limits rapid response.
- Climate Link:
 - Climate variability is increasing baseline fire risk (IPCC observations).
- Institutional Measures:
 - Firelines, control rooms, awareness drives by Forest Department.
 - National Action Plan on Forest Fires (NAPFF), 2018.
- Data:
 - Around 36% of India's forest cover is prone to frequent fires (Forest Survey of India).

Static Linkages

- Western Ghats: Biodiversity hotspot and UNESCO World Heritage Site.
- Forest Ecology: Role of fire in ecosystems vs destructive impacts.
- Constitutional Provisions:
 - Article 48A – Protection of environment
 - Article 51A(g) – Fundamental duty
- Legislations:
 - Indian Forest Act, 1927
 - Forest Conservation Act, 1980
- Disaster Management: NDMA guidelines on forest fires

Critical Analysis

- Strengths:
 - Pre-emptive measures like firelines and monitoring systems.
 - Use of advanced response (IAF aerial support).
 - Local communities act as first responders.
- Weaknesses:
 - Majority fires are anthropogenic in origin.
 - Invasive species management remains inadequate.
 - Inter-state coordination gaps.
 - Limited infrastructure in hilly terrain delays response.
- Key Challenges:
 - Balancing livelihood practices with conservation.
 - Predicting fires under changing climate variability.
 - Scaling up early warning and rapid response systems.

Way Forward

- Strengthen early warning using satellite-based monitoring (FSI, ISRO).
- Promote community-based fire management with livelihood alternatives.
- Large-scale removal/control of invasive species.
- Institutionalize inter-state coordination mechanisms.
- Deploy advanced technologies (AI, drones, real-time alerts).
- Integrate forest fire management into State Disaster Management Plans.
- Adopt climate-resilient forest management strategies.

Likely below-normal monsoon is a warning: India must heed water stress



V ANANTHA NAGESWARAN AND M RAVICHANDRAN

ON APRIL 14, the India Meteorological Department issued its first update for the coming monsoon season. The monsoon season is expected to be mostly below normal. The probability of being even above normal to excess is almost ruled out. More importantly, many of the rainfall deficits will face below-normal rains. Very few areas of the country will receive normal to above-normal rainfall.

This is mainly due to the El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO) effect. El Niño and La Niña are two weather patterns that occur in the Pacific Ocean. They are part of a larger climate phenomenon called the El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO). Both have significant effects on global weather, influencing rainfall and temperatures. El Niño typically leads to reduced monsoon rainfall, while La Niña tends to strengthen the monsoon.

ENSO is expected to set in, in June. But the effect will begin to be felt in July. So, the current expectation is that ENSO will have its effect in the second half of the monsoon season rather than the full monsoon. However, as we write this, ENSO is developing rapidly in the Pacific. It may occur even earlier.

A couple of other minor considerations are the negative correlation between the Northern Hemisphere and Eurasian snow cover and

the rainfall in the subsequent monsoon season. Between January and March 2026, Eurasian snow cover was below normal. That augurs better for the precipitation during the monsoon season. Of course, that has been factored into the seasonal forecast. Second, the IOD — Indian Ocean Dipole — counter-part to ENSO, but in the Indian Ocean, will also be counteracting the effect of ENSO on India's Southwest Monsoon. But IOD is expected to have effect only in the second half of the monsoon season. This has already been factored into the rainfall assessment.

Another rainier relief is that the Super ENSO phenomenon, which has an even greater impact on the monsoon rainfall, is expected that this year's ENSO phenomenon will have a bigger impact on Southeast Asia, Indonesia and Australia. The ENSO effect usually lasts nine to 12 months.

It will be good to treat this year's ENSO effect as yet another warning sign for the country to get it act together on water. In the past, ENSO occurred once every two to seven years. Now, the gap between two ENSOs appears to have narrowed, and its intensity is also increasing. That is not good news. Second, while India's average rainfall is expected to hold up reasonably well in the year to come, notwithstanding this year's ENSO, at least until the end of the decade, it is widely known that precipitation will become narrower in both spatial and temporal scales. That is, rainfall may have a concentrated geographic footprint and occur in shorter intervals. The occurrence of recent years' rainfall and this year's forecasts also reflect this.

The image of a steady drizzle throughout the day, empty lakes and

an atmosphere that lends itself to quiet contemplation and relaxed minds over a cup of chai and a hot samosa or pakora while watching the monsoon rain has given way to concerns about the damage that fast, furious downpours will cause. It is all about deluge and not drizzle. That means taking water management more seriously than we have done so far.

Civilisations have flourished and perished because of water. India has been witness to that itself. Therefore, we will be doing ourselves a big favour if we do not treat water conservation and management as an available luxury but an existential necessity. There was a sound reason why the rulers of year-civilisations, besides, reservoirs and numerous other water bodies. All these structures enabled the harvesting of rain-water. Now, we have built over them. India has to conserve water more than ever since brief but massive rain deluges do not allow the soil to retain water. Worse, the water runs off too quickly, taking the top and fertile soil with it. Therefore, capturing it is more important than before.

Barely a month before the IMD released its monsoon update, three experts published their book on water. They were not shy of sounding dire. Parameswaran Iyer, Anurag Ghosh and Richard Dumania, in their book *Water: Nature and Progress: Solutions for a New India*, call for a circular water-economy mission that treats used water as a resource rather than a liability, with realistic targets and financing models. India reuses only 3 per cent of its treated used water, while cities like Singapore meet 40 per cent of their water demand through reuse. The mission proposes staggered targets by 2026, 100 per cent by 2035, 50 per

Civilisations have flourished and perished because of water. India has been witness to that. We will be doing ourselves a big favour if we treat water conservation and management as an existential necessity

cent reuse by 2035 — along with a framework for public-private partnerships that draws on successful models from Surat, Thane, Taiwan and Jordan.

One of the pillars on which India's aspiration of becoming a developed society and economy rests is water. If that pillar is corroded by pollution and the under-appreciation of its role in sustaining civilisation, the edifice will struggle to rise and remain vulnerable to collapse.

Water is a scarce commodity that will become increasingly so, and its price must reflect that. Right now, that scarcity value is captured by unregulated water tankers. That shows that people are willing to pay a price for water that they resist paying a water tax to the state because they are not sure of service quality. So, the ability to change a water tariff follows, rather than precedes, improvements in state capacity and service delivery. But governments across the country cannot provide an assured, reliable water supply, nor can they build the infrastructure to do so without the financial capacity to fund it. Therefore, an honest conversation between the governing and the governed on water pricing and service commitments is overdue.

India is not the only water-stressed society, but, as with every other problem — employment or energy transition, to name just two — the challenge is greater and more urgent for India given its sheer size. Its reactive approach to invidious challenges such as water stress may be both inadequate and too late. This year's likely below-normal monsoon has served us one more warning. We will be helping ourselves if we pay heed to it.

V Anantha Nageswaran and M Ravichandran are, respectively, the Chief Economic Advisor and Secretary, Ministry of Earth Sciences, Government of India. Views are personal

- Weak water governance, poor pricing mechanisms, and declining traditional water systems (tanks, reservoirs).

Static Linkages

- Monsoon mechanism: differential heating of land and sea; role of ITCZ
- Walker circulation and trade winds in Pacific Ocean
- Types of rainfall: convective, orographic, cyclonic
- Groundwater recharge and watershed management
- Traditional water conservation systems: stepwells, tanks, johads
- Climate change and hydrological cycle intensification
- Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 6 – Clean Water and Sanitation)

Critical Analysis

Positives / Opportunities

- Early forecast enables proactive drought mitigation planning
- Encourages policy push for water reuse and efficiency
- Highlights urgency of climate-resilient agriculture

Concerns / Challenges

- Agricultural distress due to rainfall deficiency
- Increased urban water scarcity and tanker dependence
- Poor institutional capacity in water governance
- Climate variability causing unpredictable crop cycles

Stakeholder Perspectives

- Farmers: vulnerable to crop failure and income shocks
- Urban households: rising water costs and supply insecurity
- Government: fiscal stress due to relief measures
- Industry: water-intensive sectors face production risks

Way Forward

- Expand micro-irrigation (drip, sprinkler) and crop diversification
- Implement circular water economy (reuse, recycling targets)
- Revive traditional water bodies and watershed systems
- Strengthen IMD forecasting + local dissemination systems
- Introduce rational water pricing with improved service delivery
- Promote climate-resilient agriculture (millets, drought-resistant crops)
- Enhance inter-state water governance frameworks

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- The India Meteorological Department has forecast a likely below-normal Southwest Monsoon (2026).
- A major driver identified is the evolving El Niño–Southern Oscillation, expected to impact rainfall particularly in the second half of the monsoon season.
- While mitigating factors such as the Indian Ocean Dipole and lower Eurasian snow cover exist, their influence is limited and delayed.
- The forecast signals rising water stress, uneven rainfall distribution, and climate variability, reinforcing concerns over India's water security.

Key Points

- ENSO Impact:
 - El Niño phase typically leads to weakened monsoon rainfall in India.
 - Increasing frequency and intensity of ENSO events observed in recent decades.
- Rainfall Pattern Changes:
 - Shift from steady rainfall to short, intense bursts (cloudbursts/deluges).
 - Increasing spatial and temporal variability of precipitation.
- Water Stress Indicators:
 - India reuses only ~3% of treated wastewater, compared to ~40% in countries like Singapore.
 - Rapid runoff reduces groundwater recharge and causes soil erosion.
- Climate Interactions:
 - IOD may partially offset ENSO but mainly in later monsoon phase.
 - Eurasian snow cover shows inverse relation with monsoon strength.
- Policy Concern:

Plan for early summer, extreme heat

TRADITIONALLY, IN large parts of the country, the April weather was a prelude to the scorching summer. However, it's increasingly becoming clear that extreme heat is no longer a May-June phenomenon. According to the India Meteorological Department (IMD), at least 11 states are in the grip of a heat wave. Though temperatures are expected to fall next week, the relief is likely to be temporary. The Centre's decision to issue a heat advisory to states is, therefore, a much-needed step. It has urged state governments to shift work hours, mandate rest breaks, and ensure cooling arrangements for workers exposed to the sun. Hospitals have been directed to set up dedicated heatstroke units, stock oral rehydration solutions, and train staff for rapid response. These advisories reflect some lessons learned from recent heat waves. But they are not enforceable. Much more needs to be done to protect the vulnerable from the elements.

Most states in the country have heat action plans (HAPs). They list standard procedures for individual departments — from public health and education to agriculture and electricity. However, implementation has been an Achilles' heel of most HAPs. Chronic underfunding, weak institutional capacity, and poor interdepartmental coordination have limited their effectiveness. Heat stress is not classified as an emergency like floods, earthquakes or cyclones in the country's disaster management framework. Some states have categorised heat waves as a state-specific disaster — this allows them to use up to 10 per cent of their annual State Disaster Response Fund for relief. The 16th Finance Commission, which submitted its report earlier this year, recommended that a heat wave be notified as a disaster at the national level as well. Such recognition will enable states to access central relief funds and institutionalise long-term resilience-building measures.

More than half of India's districts are prone to heat-related stress, according to a study conducted last year by the Centre for Energy, Environment and Water. Urban areas face an additional challenge. Concrete and asphalt store vast amounts of heat during the day and release it at night. The built environment keeps the air warm even after sunset. This disproportionately impacts low-income communities living in dense settlements with limited access to cooling. Conversations on heat, therefore, need to go beyond reactive advisories to adaptation strategies — expanding green cover, promoting heat-proofing infrastructure and labour protection. The early onset of summer should be seen as a warning — the country needs to align climate science with public health, urban planning, and social security.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- Early onset of extreme heat in April indicates a shift in India's heatwave pattern.
- India Meteorological Department reported heatwave conditions across multiple states.
- The Union government issued a national heat advisory focusing on labour protection and health preparedness.
- Rising frequency and intensity of heatwaves linked to climate change trends.

Key Points

- Government Advisory Measures:
 - Rescheduling of working hours for outdoor workers.
 - Mandatory rest intervals and cooling provisions.
 - Hospitals directed to set up heatstroke units and ensure ORS availability.
- Heat Action Plans (HAPs):
 - Prepared by most states covering health, power, water, and agriculture sectors.
 - Implementation gaps due to weak funding and coordination.
- Disaster Management Issues:
 - Heatwaves not classified as a national disaster.
 - States can use SDRF funds if declared state-specific disasters.
 - Sixteenth Finance Commission recommended national-level inclusion.

- Vulnerability:
 - Over 50% of districts vulnerable (as per Centre for Energy, Environment and Water).
 - Urban Heat Island effect increases heat stress in cities.

Static Linkages

- Article 21 – Right to Life (includes health and environmental safety).
- Article 47 – State's duty to improve public health.
- Disaster Management Act, 2005 – Disaster classification and response.
- Urban Heat Island Effect – NCERT Geography (Climatology).
- Climate Change – IPCC reports on extreme events.
- Labour Welfare – Occupational safety provisions.
- SDGs – SDG 3, SDG 11, SDG 13.

Critical Analysis

- Strengths:
 - Recognition of heatwaves as a major public health issue.
 - Multi-sectoral approach through Heat Action Plans.
- Weaknesses:
 - Non-binding advisories limit effectiveness.
 - Lack of national disaster status restricts funding.
 - Poor urban planning aggravates heat stress.
- Challenges:
 - Informal labour sector exposure.
 - Weak institutional capacity at local levels.
 - Limited climate-resilient infrastructure.

Way Forward

- Notify heatwaves as a national disaster.
- Provide statutory backing and funding to Heat Action Plans.
- Integrate climate adaptation in urban planning (cool roofs, green cover).
- Strengthen early warning systems and public awareness.
- Ensure labour protection under extreme weather conditions.