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GS 2: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE : 1

KUWAIT REFINERY HIT BY DRONES, ISRAEL KILLS IRGC OFFICER; MOJTABA HAILS IRAN 'RESISTANCE'

Iran now unable to enrich uranium, says Netanyahu; US looks at control of Kharg

More Marines, assault ship being deployed, Trump calls his NATO allies 'cowards'

Alexander Cornwell, Jana Choukeir & Trevor Hunnicutt
Tel Aviv, Dubai, Washington, March 20

THE US military is deploying a large amphibious assault ship with thousands of additional Marines and sailors to the Middle East, three US officials told Reuters Friday, as Iran's new supreme leader hailed Iran's "unity" and "resistance". Reuters had reported that Washington, desperate to reopen the Gulf oil bottleneck of the Strait of Hormuz, shut by Iran since the US and Israel attacked almost three weeks ago, was considering deploying thousands of more troops to the Middle East, potentially even landing on Iran's shore or its Kharg Island oil export hub. Oil prices have risen around 50% since the start of the war.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu promised to heed US President Donald Trump's instruction not to repeat the attack on Iran's gas field, but also said Iran was now unable to enrich uranium, which can be used in nuclear warheads, or make ballistic missiles.

Netanyahu said Israel had acted alone in bombing Iran's South Pars gas field. Iran was being "decimated" and "does not have a future".

»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2



During the funeral procession of Iran's intelligence minister Esmail Khatib in Tehran, Friday. AP

We turned down US request to let jets land in Sri Lanka: President

Says also declined Iranian request for visit by 3 ships returning from India

Uditha Jayasinghe
Colombo, March 20

SRI LANKA declined permission for two US combat aircraft to land at a civilian airport earlier this month, President Anura Kumara Disanayake told parliament Friday.

The US had requested permission for the two aircraft to land at the Mattala Rajapaksa International Airport in the southern part of the country

from March 4-8, Disanayake told lawmakers.

"They wanted to bring two warplanes armed with eight anti-ship missiles from a base in Djibouti," he said during a statement.

"We turned down the request to maintain Sri Lanka's neutrality," he added to applause from parliamentarians. The US had made the request on February 26.

»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

Another Indian killed in missile attack on Riyadh, toll up to six

Shubhajit Roy
New Delhi, March 20

ANOTHER INDIAN national was killed in an Iranian attack on Riyadh Wednesday — the sixth Indian to be killed in the ongoing conflict in West Asia so far.

The Indian Embassy in Riyadh Friday confirmed the death, but didn't share other details. "The Embassy of India expresses its deepest condolences on the tragic demise of an Indian national in Riyadh due to recent events on March 18th. The Embassy is in touch with the family and local authorities. We remain committed to extending all possible assistance in this matter," it said in a post on X.



The War
DAY 21

- As energy crisis deepened, Kuwait's Mina Al-Ahmadi, which can process 730,000 barrels of oil per day, came under Iranian drone attacks.
- A spokesperson for Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Ali Mohammad Naini, was killed in US-Israel strikes
- French Foreign Minister Jean-Noel Barrot, who met Israeli counterpart Gideon Saar in Tel Aviv, said Friday

he did not see an obvious end to conflict in the short-term.

• Ukraine has deployed military units to UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, and Jordan to help protect critical and civilian infra.

• French Navy, in an operation carried out with the British, Friday seized the Deyna vessel, a member of the Russian shadow fleet, Emmanuel Macron said in a post on X.

MORE REPORTS, PAGE 16

EXPLAINED PAGE 15

AS U.S. WEIGHS IRAN OIL RELIEF, THE POSSIBILITY FOR INDIA

Sources said that as per available information, the Indian national died following a missile attack on Riyadh on Wednesday.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Narendra Modi spoke to King Hamad Bin Isa Al Khalifa of Bahrain Friday. "Had a fruitful discussion with the King of Bahrain... Conveyed warm greetings on the occasion of Eid

al-Fitr to him and the people of Bahrain. We discussed the current situation in the West Asian region. Condemned attacks on the energy and civilian infrastructure in the region, underscoring their adverse impact on global food, fuel and fertiliser security," Modi said in a post on X.

"Reiterated the importance of ensuring freedom of navigation and keeping shipping lines open and secure. Thanked His Majesty for his continued support for the well-being of the Indian community in Bahrain," he said.

External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar also spoke to Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong.

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GS 3: SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE : 1

HIGH-LEVEL COMMITTEE MEETING

Govt asks WhatsApp to block device IDs used in digital arrest scams

Platform to implement suggestions, some already being put in place

EXPRESS
exclusive

Mahender Singh Manral
New Delhi, March 20

BLOCKING DEVICE IDs involved in cases of digital arrest, introducing safety features similar to those on Skype, and strengthening technology to detect and block harmful APKs, the file formats used in Android systems.

These are some of the key measures WhatsApp has been asked to implement by a high-level Inter-Departmental Committee (IDC) constituted by the Union Home Ministry to tackle the threat of digital arrest, including the impersonation of law enforcement officers to perpetrate the scam. *The Indian Express* has learnt.

Sources said that the Meta-owned messaging service has agreed to implement these measures and is already in the

● ON THE TABLE

- Evaluate blocking device IDs to stop repeat scam accounts.
- Explore Skype-like protective features.
- Retain deleted user data for 180 days for investigations.
- Improve detection and blocking of harmful APKs.
- Enhance AI/ML to detect impersonation and fake content.

process of putting in place some of them. It is learnt that the interaction with representatives of WhatsApp took place earlier this month during the third meeting of the IDC, which was constituted in December 2025.

According to officials, the representatives made extensive submissions regarding the platform's detection mechanisms, enforcement actions and platform safeguards during the meeting. "Based on the

»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

WhatsApp

deliberations, the platform agreed to several commitments that are aimed at improving user security and aiding law enforcement investigations," a senior Government official said.

Sources said the key measures discussed include:

- Assessing the feasibility of identifying and blocking device IDs involved in digital arrest scams to prevent repeat offenders from creating new accounts.

- Exploring protective features similar to those deployed by Skype

- Ensuring retention of user data from deleted accounts for at least 180 days, as mandated by the IT Rules, 2021, to support law enforcement investigations.

- Strengthening technological mechanisms to detect and block harmful APKs, and similar content.

- Expanding AI and machine learning systems to detect impersonation, abuse of official logos and synthetic or AI-generated content.

To prevent the use of logos and official insignia of law enforcement agencies, such as Delhi Police, Mumbai Police, CBI and ATS, WhatsApp is also learnt to have conveyed during the meeting that it has deployed logo detection and media matching systems that will compare profile photos and remove accounts engaged in impersonation.

The Union Home Ministry and Meta did not respond to requests for comment from *The Indian Express*.

According to the official, the representatives of WhatsApp conveyed that the platform is introducing several safety features similar to those on Skype, which is Microsoft's video-calling platform: more information on callers, warning signals for suspicious accounts and better detection of scam networks. WhatsApp has been asked to present a proposal on these measures within 30 days, the official said.

The platform has also been asked to submit a separate proposal within 45 days on the introduction of mechanisms to block device IDs involved in digital arrests, the official said.

"In a bid to curb the spread of malicious files, WhatsApp has been asked to strengthen its technological mechanisms to detect and block harmful APKs and similar content. They have been asked to develop safeguards to identify and mitigate prolonged scam calls commonly seen in digital arrest cases, with proposed technical measures expected within a month," the official said.

"The company assured the IDC that it continues to expand its AI and machine learning sys-

tems to detect impersonation, abuse of official logos, and synthetic or AI-generated content, with periodic progress updates to be shared going forward," the official said.

In typical digital arrest scams, fraudsters impersonate law enforcement officers on video calls with victims, claim that they are being investigated for serious crimes and coerce them to transfer large sums to various bank accounts to avoid arrest.

In June 2025, an investigation by *The Indian Express* uncovered how these scamsters move crores of rupees in minutes across banks and state borders using and reusing mule accounts, or third-party accounts, which are difficult to trace. This newspaper also reported that 1.23 lakh cases of digital arrest, involving Rs 1,935 crore, were logged in 2024 – almost thrice the number recorded in 2022.

With nearly Rs 3,000 crore estimated to have been lost to digital arrest scams overall, the Supreme Court took suo motu cognizance of the menace last October while expressing "grave concern" over the rising cases.

On November 28 last year, the Department of Telecommunications (DoT) issued a directive requiring application-based communication services, including WhatsApp, Telegram, Signal and Snapchat, to implement active SIM linkage for user access.

During the three-hour-long IDC meeting this month, the representatives of WhatsApp conveyed that they would implement the DoT directive within four-six months and submit an Action Taken Report (ATR), likely by March-end.

"This measure, known as SIM binding, mandates that these platforms can only be used with a specific, active SIM card, effectively eliminating anonymous or multi-device usage. The directive aims to strengthen user traceability and enhance compliance with national security and data protection norms," the official said.

"WhatsApp will also enhance its cooperation with investigative agencies, ensuring timely response to flagged signals relating to fraud networks, impersonation of law enforcement officers, and misuse of government symbols. The platform also committed to complying with updated IT Rules provisions related to identification and labelling of synthetically generated information, which is a growing concern in cases involving AI-generated or deep fake video calls used in digital extortion attempts," the official said.

GS 3: INDIAN ECONOMY

INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE : 15

As US weighs Iran oil relief, the possibility for India

Amid the oil supply crunch, the US removed sanctions on Russian crude at sea. It may now be forced to do the same with Iranian crude



SUKALP SHARMA

AS THE war in West Asia crimps the global supply of oil and sends its prices soaring, the US is considering removing sanctions on Iranian crude that is already at sea.

If the US indeed moves in this direction, India could very well be among the major beneficiaries. Iran was once a major oil supplier for India. But New Delhi halted these imports after the first Donald Trump administration imposed heavy sanctions on Tehran and removed the sanction waivers enjoyed by major Iranian crude buyers.

Seven years later, the US may now be forced to 'unsanction' — even if partly and temporarily — Iranian oil sales to bring down oil prices. Such a move looks all the more likely considering that the US had also announced a similar month-long universal waiver on sanctioned Russian crude already in tankers at sea.

In response to the US and Israel's offensive that began on February 28, Iran effectively checked vessel movements through the Strait of Hormuz. The passage accounts for one-fifth of global oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG) flows. Its effective closure, along with attacks on energy infrastructure in the region by all sides, have caused a surge in global oil prices. While some oil volumes are being evacuated from West Asia through a couple of other alternative routes that bypass the Strait, a bulk of the supply through the narrow waterway has effectively gone offline.

"We unsanctioned Russian oil. We knew that there were about 130 million barrels on the water and we created supply that is beyond the straits of Hormuz... In the coming days, we may unsanction the Iranian oil that's on the water. It's about 140 million barrels. So, depending on how you count it, that's 10 days to two weeks of supply that the Iranians had been pushing out that would have all gone to China." US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent said Thursday on Fox Business Network. "In essence we will be using the Iranian barrels against the Iranians to keep the price down... for the next 10 or 14 days as we continue this campaign."

India's considerations

It remains to be seen whether the US goes ahead and suspends the sanctions on Iranian oil already on water. Asked whether India would be keen on importing Iranian crude if Washington indeed announced a

How Trump turned off the tap

Iran was a key oil supplier to India, especially after an Obama-era sanctions waiver — until Trump rolled it back



SOURCE: MINISTRY OF COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY

waiver, Petroleum Ministry Joint Secretary Sujata Sharma said Friday that it was a hypothetical question at this stage. Nonetheless, industry analysts say that such a move could see Indian refiners capitalize on the opportunity, just like they did by ramping up imports of Russian crude in recent weeks.

"Recent market chatter around a potential easing or restructuring of US sanctions on Iranian crude... has reintroduced a key swing factor in global crude flows. India could emerge as a key demand centre to watch, alongside Chinese buyers and other Asian countries. Historically, India was a major buyer of Iranian crude, importing significant volumes of Iranian Light and Heavy grades due to strong refinery compatibility and favourable commercial terms. Following sanctions tightening in 2018, imports ceased from May 2019, with volumes replaced by Middle Eastern, US and other grades," said Sumit Ritolia, lead research analyst, refining & modeling, at Kpler, a commodity market analytics firm.

Currently, Iranian crude availability is high, with an estimated 170 million barrels on the water, including floating storage and cargoes in transit, as per Kpler data.

While part of these volumes is committed, a portion remains unsold, representing potential incremental supply if sanctions ease or enforcement weakens. Ritolia said. The analyst said that Indian refiners retain the ability to re-integrate Iranian barrels with minimal operational adjustments at their refineries, given their prior experience in processing Iranian oil and the presence of established trading setups.



A file photo of an oil facility in UAE's Fujairah that was attacked by Iran on March 14.

Key considerations for Indian refiners to tap into Iranian barrels, if made available, would primarily include the scope and durability of sanctions relief, pricing structure, and the availability of payment, insurance, and logistics mechanisms. "If these conditions align, a ramp-up in Indian imports of Iranian crude could be significant, similar to the rapid increase observed in Russian crude intake following the easing of Western sanctions," Ritolia said.

According to tanker data from Kpler, India's Russian oil imports so far in March have surged to 1.8 million barrels per day (bpd), from 1 million bpd in February. The pre-war expectation for India's Russian oil imports in March was around 0.8-0.9 million bpd. Now they could reach 2-2.2 million bpd — the peak levels of 2025. This ramp-up was necessitated by the Strait of Hormuz's effective closure. Washington's waiver on purchases of sanctioned Russian crude on water also supported this shift.

Around 2.5-2.7 million bpd of India's crude imports — around half of the overall oil imports — have transited the Strait in recent months. The longer-term average is around 40%. India depends on imports to meet over 88% of its requirement of crude oil. At the global level, around 20 million barrels a day of crude oil usually passes through the Strait of Hormuz.

India-Iran oil trade

India has not imported any oil from Iran since May 2019, after the expiration of the sanctions waiver that the US had provided to major buyers of Iranian oil. Not comply-

ing with American sanctions would have made Indian oil companies vulnerable to secondary sanctions from Washington. Prior to that, India had been a regular buyer of Iranian oil, even during previous sanctions periods of the pre-Trump era, when import volumes of Iranian crude declined, but were still not insignificant.

Back in 2009-10, India imported 22.1 million tonnes of crude oil from Iran and it accounted for 14.4% of India's overall oil import of 153.6 million tonnes in that year, according to data from the Ministry of Commerce and Industry. But as international sanctions on Iran intensified, hitting payment channels and creating other logistical hurdles, the volumes declined — to 16.1 million tonnes in 2010-11, 14.9 million tonnes in 2011-12, 13.2 million tonnes in 2012-13, 11.3 million tonnes in 2013-14 and 11.2 million tonnes in 2014-15.

During the peak sanctions period — 2012 to 2015 — India was buying Iranian oil through a mutually-agreed payment mechanism. Under that system, Indian refiners paid 45% of the oil payments in rupees into an account held by Iranian banks in India, and Iran used that money to buy Indian goods. The remainder of the payments were deferred until sanctions were lifted. The sanctions were formally lifted as part of the Iran nuclear deal, after which pending oil payments by Indian refiners were cleared. Major Indian buyers of Iranian oil in this period were Essar Oil (now Nayara Energy) and Mangalore Refinery and Petrochemicals (MRPL).

With the sanctions effectively withdrawn, Indian refiners started ramping up oil imports from Iran. India imported 136 million tonnes of Iranian oil in 2015-16, and the volumes shot up to 27.1 million tonnes in 2016-17, making Tehran the third-largest source of India's oil imports behind Saudi Arabia and Iraq. Iran also did its bit to boost India's purchases of its oil by offering discounted shipping and extended credit periods to Indian refiners. In 2016-17, Iranian oil made up 12.6% of India's total crude oil imports of almost 215 million tonnes.

In 2017-18, the Iranian oil volumes declined to 22.6 million tonnes due to a few reasons — tensions between New Delhi and Tehran over the development rights of a gas field in Iran, India's diversification of its supply and the first Donald Trump presidency. The last factor was the defining one over the next two years as Trump walked away from the Iran nuclear deal and re-imposed sanctions. A waiver was given by US to major buyers of Iranian oil, which expired in 2019. In 2017-18, India's Iranian oil imports were at 23.9 million tonnes, and crashed to just 2 million tonnes in 2019-20. No Iranian oil came to India after May 2019.

Sanctions effect

India imported 27.1 million tonnes of Iranian oil in 2016-17, making Tehran its third-largest source of imports behind Saudi Arabia and Iraq

After the US waiver on buying Iranian oil expired in 2019, India completely stopped imports from the country

GS 2: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE : 16

NATO HAS withdrawn all of its troops from an advisory mission in Iraq, the military alliance said Friday, as repercussions of the war spread across West Asia.

AL-AQSA Mosque compound closed for Eid prayers for the first time in decades, marking its first full shutdown since the 1967 war.

SPAIN'S GOVERNMENT on Friday proposed measures worth \$5.8 bn to counter the economic impact of the war on local energy prices.

THE NETHERLANDS is stepping up security for Iranian dissidents after a man known to be critical of authorities in Tehran was shot.

Kyiv deploys anti-drone units across West Asia; UAE busts Hezbollah-linked network



An armoured personnel carrier (APC) and a self-propelled artillery unit at the Israeli side of the border with Lebanon on Friday. REUTERS

Ukraine exploring role in securing Strait of Hormuz, says Zelenskyy

Associated Press
Kyiv, March 20

UKRAINE HAS deployed specialist teams to five Middle Eastern countries to help intercept drones and advise on air-defence measures, with officials saying they expect to conclude several significant agreements.

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said teams had been sent to the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, and Jordan, countries that have come under fire during the Iran war.

He said that local air defence units were dealing with ballistic missiles, while Ukrainian specialists were focused on the waves of Iran's Shahed drones.

"I believe no one has experience comparable to ours," Zelenskyy told journalists in audio messages on a WhatsApp chat, adding that 228 Ukrainian specialists were now in the region. "We are working with the Middle East - with leaders, at the technical level, and with ministries of defence. In general, we are preparing serious arrangements and agreements," he said.

His security council secretary Rustem Umerov has visited

all five of those countries this week, and said earlier on Friday that further steps for "long-term security cooperation" had been outlined with each.

Kyiv has said nearly a dozen countries have sought its help and advice in defending against cheap kamikaze drones, which Iran is using against its Gulf neighbours.

Earlier on Friday, United Arab Emirates security authorities have dismantled a "terrorist network" allegedly funded and operated by Lebanon's Hezbollah and its backer Iran, arresting its members, its state news agency said. It said the network, which had been operating under a fictitious cover, was involved in "money laundering, financing terrorism and threatening national security", and sought to undermine financial stability.

Lebanon's Foreign Ministry strongly condemned what it described as a "terrorist plot" against the UAE, denounced Hezbollah's alleged involvement, and offered cooperation by Lebanese authorities to ensure those responsible are held accountable.

In a post on X, it also reiterated a Lebanese government decision issued earlier this month banning Hezbollah's military and security activities.

Hezbollah denied on Friday what it called "fabricated" accusations by UAE authorities, saying it has no presence or operational networks in the country.

Iran scrambles to stabilise its power structure after killings of top leaders

Associated Press
Athens, March 20

ONE AFTER another, Israel has taken out Iran's top leaders.

First it was Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, killed in the opening shots of the war. Now Ali Larjani, the secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council who was considered one of the most powerful figures in the country, has also been killed. As have a raft of other top-ranking military and political leaders.

Ultimate authority in Iran rests with the country's supreme leader, who has sat at the apex of power since the creation of the Islamic Republic in 1979 after the revolution that overthrew the shah. After Khamenei was killed, his son, 56-year-old Mojtaba Khamenei, was quickly named to replace him as Iran's new supreme leader. A secretive figure, the younger Khamenei has not been seen in public since the airstrike killed his 56-year-old father.

The cleric had long been considered a contender for the post, despite never having been elected or appointed to a government position. The younger Khamenei maintains close ties to the country's powerful paramilitary Revolutionary Guard.

"I'm not sure who's running Iran right now," Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said during a news conference Thursday night. "Mojtaba, the replacement ayatollah, has not shown his face. Have you seen him? We haven't, and we can't vouch for what exactly is happening there." US and Israeli officials have suggested he was wounded in the same attack.

"Iran's command and control structure is in utter

• IRAN'S LEADERSHIP CRISIS

AYATOLLAH ALI KHAMENEI, who as Supreme Leader since 1989 built an iron grip over Iran while entrenching hostility towards the US and Israel, was killed aged 86 in a US-Israeli air strike on his compound on February 28.



ALILARIJANI, secretary of the Supreme National Security Council and a veteran power broker, was killed at 67 in a US-Israeli air strike in the Pardis area on March 17, along with his son and one of his deputies.



ESMAIL KHATIB, Iran's intelligence minister, was killed in an Israeli strike on March 18. A hardliner cleric and politician, he worked in Khamenei's office and was mentored by him.



ALISHAMKHANI, a close adviser to Khamenei and a key figure in Iran's security and nuclear policymaking, was killed in US-Israeli strikes on Tehran on February 28.



MOHAMMAD PAKPOUR, commander-in-chief of the IRGC, was killed in the February 28 strikes in Tehran. He rose through the ranks to lead IRGC after his predecessor was killed in the 12-day war.



AZIZ NASIRZADEH, Iran's defence minister and a career air force officer, was killed in the same wave of strikes targeting senior leadership in Tehran on February 28. Nasirzadeh played a key role in military planning and defence policy.



ABDOLRAHIM MOUSAVI, chief of staff of armed forces, was killed in the February 28 strikes during a meeting of senior leadership. He was responsible for coordinating military branches & overseeing conventional forces.



GHOLAMREZA SOLEIMANI, commander of the Basij paramilitary force, was killed in the US-Israeli strikes on March 17. A senior officer of the Revolutionary Guards, he led the force central to Iran's internal security and authority.

chaos," Netanyahu said.

BURCU OZCELIK, senior research fellow for Middle East security at the Royal United Services Institute, a United Kingdom-based defence and security think tank, said the elimination of so many of Iran's top leaders will alter its theocracy — but that the change

could be a gradual one. "Leadership matters, and the loss of key decision-makers spanning politics, intelligence, internal security and (the) army will have transformative consequences," Ozcelik said.

"We need to be prepared for change that may take years, not weeks or months." Early on in the war, Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi suggested

the country's military units were acting independently from central government control.

"Our ... military units are now in fact independent and somehow isolated and they are acting based on instructions — you know, general instructions — given to them in advance," Araghchi had said on Al Jazeera on March 1.

GS 2: SOCIAL JUSTICE

THE HINDU PAGE : 6

Restoring rights

Adoptive mothers have the same rights as biological mothers

Courts with a tinge of judicial activism have expansively interpreted the Constitution to secure fresh rights for citizens, over the years. In the latest instance, a view that encompasses evolving social systems, and a keen feminist perspective, taken by the highest court in the land, has recognised maternity leave for working women as a basic human right. The Court ruled that adoptive mothers are entitled to 12 weeks of paid maternity leave, regardless of the child's age at the time of adoption, thus striking down a previous restriction allowing maternity leave only for women who had applied for adopting children less than three months of age. The judgment, delivered by Justices J.B. Pardiwala and R. Mahadevan, came in response to petitioner Hamsaanandini Nanduri challenging this provision in the Maternity Benefit Act, recently replaced by the Code on Social Security. She also pointed out that the legal process of adoption itself took over three months to be completed. The judges observed that an adoptive mother had the same rights and obligations towards the child as a biological mother. Reading adoption as an 'expression of reproductive autonomy', the Court said that the emotional bond with the child has to be consciously nurtured through time, presence and sustained caregiving. "Adoption is an equally valid pathway for the creation of a family. It is not biology that constitutes a family of a mother, father, and children, rather, it is the shared meaning, responsibility, and emotional bonds that sustain such a relationship," it explained. Maternity benefit is extended to working women during the early phase of motherhood to support them financially and provide economic security without them having to depend on family members. This equally applies to biological and adoptive mothers. Further, the judges urged the government to legally recognise paternity leave as a social security benefit, noting that parenthood is not a solitary function performed by one parent alone.

The judges have, with one judgment, conferred equal rights to adoptive parents, and restored child rearing to a gender-neutral parenting paradigm. The patriarchal enabling system has feminised raising children, leading to it being undervalued or inadequately compensated, if it ever is. Nobel winner Claudia Goldin's work has identified that the gender pay gap often emerges with the birth of a first child. The top court has given India an opportunity to set right the inadequate laws governing maternity leave in adoption, and to a large extent, the gender imbalance in society. It is the duty now of the state to make sure that this progressive judgment finds effective implementation in every corner of the country.

GS 2: POLITY

THE HINDU PAGE : 3

CJI shifts petitions against CEC selection law to another Bench

The Hindu Bureau

NEW DELHI

On Friday, the Chief Justice of India (CJI) Surya Kant expressed his reluctance to continue hearing a series of petitions challenging a law that replaced the CJI with a Union Minister in the selection panel for the appointments of the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) and Election Commissioners (ECs).

Chief Justice Kant said that as the petitions challenging the Chief Election Commissioner and other Election Commissioners (Appointment, Conditions of Service, and Term of Office) Act of 2023 relate to the office of the CJI, he would not like a Supreme Court Bench headed by him to hear the case as that

would expose his office to criticism of conflict of interest. Advocate Prashant Bhushan, appearing for one of the petitioners, the Association for Democratic Reforms, suggested the case be shifted to a Bench which does not have a prospective CJI either as the lead or associate judge.

Acknowledging Mr. Bhushan's recommendation, the Chief Justice said, "I should mark this matter to a Bench where the judge may not be in line to become the CJI. Then nobody can say anything." The Bench listed the case on April 7 before an appropriate Bench.

The main contention

The petitioners argued that the 2023 law was introduced to dilute a Consti-

tution Bench ruling delivered in March 2023 in *Anoop Baranwal vs Union of India*, which had included the CJI as a member of the high-powered selection committee involved in the appointments of the CEC and the ECs.

The bone of contention is the validity of Section 7(1) of the statute. The provision mandated that the President would appoint the CECs and ECs on the recommendation of a selection committee comprising the Prime Minister, the Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha and a Union Cabinet Minister to be nominated by the Prime Minister. The statute, in short, gave the government an upper hand in appointments to the Election Commission of India.