

# NATIONAL/INTERNATIONAL

## Japan demands swift release of Japanese national detained in Iran

**TOKYO, FEB 25:** Japan's government said Wednesday that a Japanese national has been detained in Tehran since January and demanded the Iranian authorities release them swiftly.

Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary Masanao Ozaki, asked about foreign media reports on the case, confirmed only that the Japanese citizen was taken into custody on Jan 20 but gave no further details, citing privacy issues.

Ozaki said the govern-



ment is in contact with the detainee and their family members, while providing necessary support.

Foreign Ministry officials said the detainee is believed to be in good health, although Japanese officials have not been granted a meeting in person.

The ministry declined to comment when or on what charges the detainee was arrested.

About 200 Japanese nationals are in Iran, 150 of them in Tehran, according to the Foreign Ministry. (AP)

## US, SK militaries will have joint drills in March as tensions with NK escalate

**SEOUL, FEB 25:** The US and South Korean militaries said on Wednesday they will conduct their annual springtime exercises next month to bolster their countries' combined defence capabilities against a backdrop of a deepening diplomatic freeze with nuclear-armed North Korea.

The Freedom Shield drills is set for March 9-19, according to the announcement.

North Korea has long described the allies' joint exercises as invasion rehearsals and used them as a pretext to dial up its own military demonstrations and weapons testing activity. The allies say the drills are defensive in nature.

The announcement came as North Korea is holding a major political conference where authoritarian leader Kim Jong Un is expected to outline his key domestic, foreign policy and military goals for the next five years.

North Korean state media have not so far reported any direct comments by Kim on relations with Washington and Seoul at the ruling Workers' Party congress, which began last week.

Based on recent public comments, experts say Kim could use the congress to further entrench his hard-line stance toward South Korea, and announce steps to simultaneously strengthen and integrate his nuclear and



conventional forces.

Freedom Shield is one of two "command post" exercises that the allies conduct each year; the other is Ulchi Freedom Shield, held in August.

The drills are largely computer-simulated and designed to test the allies' joint operational capabilities while incorporating evolving war scenarios and security challenges.

As usual, the March drill will be accompanied by a field training program called Warrior Shield to enhance "training realism and combat readiness," Col Ryan Donald, public affairs director of US Forces Korea, told a news conference.

South Korean and US officials have not said how many troops will participate. The exercises typically involve thousands.

There has been speculation that the allies are seeking to tone down the drills to create conditions for dia-

logue with North Korea.

Liberal South Korean President Lee Jae Myung has expressed a desire for inter-Korean engagement, and some of his top officials have voiced hope that President Donald Trump's expected visit to China in late March or April could open the door to renewed talks between Washington and Pyongyang.

Col Jang Do-young, public affairs director of South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff, said the March exercises will not involve scenarios of a possible response to a North Korean nuclear attack but will include training aimed at "detering nuclear threats".

He said the allies were still discussing the specifics of the field training programme.

The rapid expansion in recent years of Kim's nuclear weapons programme – now featuring systems capable of threatening US allies in Asia, as well as long-range missiles that could potentially reach the American homeland –

has heightened South Korea's security concerns while its diplomacy with Pyongyang remains stalled.

South Korea is also grappling with intensifying US-China competition in the region, which has prompted Washington to press its ally to assume a greater share of the defence burden against North Korea as it focuses more on China.

North Korea has repeatedly rejected Washington and Seoul's calls to resume diplomacy aimed at winding down its nuclear programme, which derailed in 2019 following the collapse of Kim's second summit with Trump during the American president's first term.

Kim has now made Russia the priority of his foreign policy, sending thousands of troops and large amounts of military equipment to support Moscow's war in Ukraine, possibly in exchange for aid and military technology. (AP)

## Sri Lanka arrests former intelligence chief over 2019 Easter Sunday bombings

**COLOMBO, FEB 25:** Sri Lanka's criminal investigators on Wednesday arrested the country's former intelligence chief in connection with the 2019 Easter Sunday bombings that killed 279 people, including 45 foreigners.

Police said retired Major General Suresh Sallay was taken into custody at dawn in a suburb of Colombo, marking the most high-profile arrest in the long-running investigation. The local media reported.

There have been accusations that Sri Lanka's former government, led by strongman president Gotabaya Rajapaksa, obstructed the investigation into the country's deadliest terrorist attack, amid claims that they may have exploited the crisis to aid their return to power.

The Rajapaksa family had dominated Sri Lankan politics for nearly a decade from 2005. While they were cred-



ited with ending the nation's 26-year civil war, their tenure was also marked by authoritarian tactics, including the alleged use of "death squads" to silence critics and journalists.

Mahinda Rajapaksa was removed from office in 2015

following allegations of corruption, but the family sought a political comeback in 2019.

Sallay was appointed head of the State Intelligence Service (SIS) in 2019 after Gotabaya Rajapaksa became president, has been accused

of involvement in the coordinated suicide bombings, a charge he denied.

On Easter Sunday 2019, six suicide bombers struck churches and luxury hotels across Sri Lanka, killing 269 people, including eight British tourists (UNI)

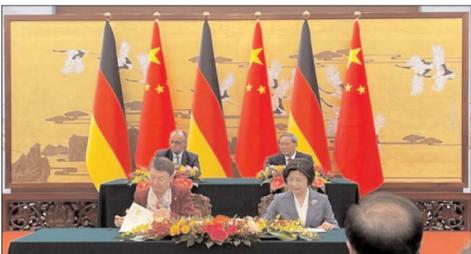
## German leader presses China for fair trade, help ending Ukraine war

**BEIJING, FEB 25:** German Chancellor Friedrich Merz called Wednesday for deepening ties with China, while pushing for fairer trade rules between the two countries and seeking Chinese help on Ukraine.

Merz, who arrived in Beijing late morning for a whirlwind two-day visit, acknowledged differences during meetings with the country's top leaders and called for collaboration "wherever possible."

"We have a few issues that we need to talk about today in the course of my visit," he told Chinese Premier Li Qiang. "But I think there is also great potential for further growth of both our economies."

Both Europe and China have been buffeted by US President Donald Trump's tariffs, and Europe further by his demands that it take more responsibility for its own security and cede con-



tributions to the US.

Merz, on his first trip to China since taking office last May, has championed building a stronger Europe both economically and militarily to assert itself in an emerging new world order.

Before landing in the Chinese capital, Merz indicated he would press for a fair economic playing field for German companies and China's assistance in bringing about an end to Russia's four-year-old war in Ukraine.

He stressed that for all the differences Europe has with China, "the big global political

problems can no longer be tackled today without involving Beijing." Cooperation is needed to resolve crises and wars, including that in Ukraine, he said, noting that "Beijing's voice is heard, including in Moscow."

Many European governments have been frustrated that China hasn't done more to pressure Russia to end the fighting. It has maintained trade and close diplomatic ties with Russia and said its position on the conflict is impartial and objective.

"We hope all parties will seize the opportunity to

reach a comprehensive, lasting and binding peace agreement," Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said earlier this week.

Merz is the latest in a parade of world leaders to visit Beijing as China seeks support from other nations to push back against Trump's use of tariffs to demand concessions from trading partners, and his challenges to the United Nations and the global order that has governed international and economic relations in the post-World War II era.

In his predeparture remarks, Merz also emphasised the importance of placing Germany's China policy in a European context, saying it was no coincidence that he is visiting not long after French President Emmanuel Macron and British Prime Minister Keir Starmer and ahead of a planned trip by US President Donald Trump in early April.

## UK enforces digital travel system, mandatory eVisas for Indians

**LONDON, Feb 25:** New rules in force from Wednesday will see the UK transition to a digital transit system, including mandatory eVisas for Indian travellers and Electronic Travel Authorisation (ETA) for non-visa requiring visitors.

The new procedure will replace paper-based visa stickers as part of a phased programme over recent years. While the new system will still involve a physical visit to the application centre for biometric registration, it will do away with the need to leave behind the passport document during the processing period.

"I'd urge anyone wanting to travel to the UK to ensure they are travel-ready and have the right permission, to make their journey much smoother," said Mike Tapp, UK Minister for Migration and Citizenship.

It will be mandatory for visitors to the UK to have obtained digital permission to travel, which means airlines can prevent passengers from boarding planes if they do not have an eVisa, ETA or

other valid documentation.

The UK government had launched the eVisa system last year, with physical documents being accepted during the transition phase up until this week.

"An eVisa cannot be lost, stolen or tampered with, and allows visa holders to instantly and securely prove their immigration rights. Switching won't change, impact or remove a customer's current rights or immigration status," the Home Office said at the time.

As part of the plans to fully digitise the UK border and immigration system, all those using a physical biometric residence permit (BRP), a passport containing a visa vignette sticker or ink stamp confirming their "indefinite leave to enter/remain" in the country, or biometric residence card (BRC) as evidence of their immigration rights have been switched over to an entirely online UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) system.

The Home Office said it has been phasing out physical documents for several years

through this transition to eVisas, with over 10 million issued to date.

All eVisa holders, including those with EU Settlement Scheme status, need to keep their UKVI account up to date with their most recent passport details to avoid travel disruption, it said.

Visitors of 85 nationalities, including nationals of the United States, Canada and France, who do not require visas, are now legally required to have an ETA when travelling to the UK.

An ETA costs 16 pounds, permits multiple journeys, and lasts for two years or until the holder's passport expires. "whichever is sooner."

"The ETA scheme is a vital part of our work to strengthen the UK's border security, helping to deliver a more efficient and modern service that works for both visitors and the British public," said Minister Tapp.

The Home Office said the UK's cost of an ETA is competitive and in line with other countries, including the US ESTA, which costs 40 dollars

and the European Union's (EU) ETIAS, which is expected to cost 20 euros when it is implemented.

British and Irish citizens, including dual citizens, are exempt from needing an ETA but will be required to present either a valid British passport or Certificate of Entitlement when travelling to the UK.

"This is the same approach taken by other countries, including the US, Australia and Canada. At their own discretion, carriers may accept some expired British passports as alternative documentation," the Home Office said.

ETAs are also mandatory for visitors who travel to the UK to take connecting flights and go through passport control.

According to official data, since ETA was introduced in October 2023, over 19 million visitors have successfully applied, and over 383 million pounds in revenue have been raised to be reinvested in the UK's border and immigration system.

## Delhi HC seeks police stand on Alka Lamba's plea in police assault case

**NEW DELHI, FEB 25:** The Delhi High Court on Wednesday sought the stand of the city police on a plea by Congress leader Alka Lamba challenging an FIR and charges against her in a case related to an assault on police personnel during a protest at Jantar Mantar here in 2024.

Justice Swarana Kanta Sharma issued notice to the police on Lamba's plea seeking a direction to quash the FIR and all consequential proceedings, including the chargesheet and framing of charges, and asked it to file a response.

The prosecution has accused the Congress leader of obstructing police and block-

ing a public road while holding a protest in support of women's reservation at Jantar Mantar on July 29, 2024.

On December 19, 2025, the magistrate had ordered framing charges for the offences of assault or criminal force to deter public servant from discharge of duty, obstruction of a public official, disobedience to an order duly promulgated by a public servant and danger or obstruction in a public way.

The counsel for the petitioner, advocate Abhik Chimni, urged the court to list the matter on a "short date" to enable him to press for interim relief of stay on the proceedings. "FIR is registered in 2024.

You are coming in 2026 and saying there is urgency," the court remarked while turning down the request.

The matter was listed for hearing on September 3.

In her petition, Lamba said the present FIR was a "classic case of over-criminalisation of a peaceful protest" and continuation of the proceedings would result in grave miscarriage of justice.

"The prosecution is vitiating by arbitrariness and selective attribution, inasmuch as a peaceful protest has been converted into a prosecution against a single public figure without legally reliable and specific particularisation of overt acts attributable to the Petitioner,

thereby undermining fairness in criminal process," the plea said.

"The continuance of the present proceedings would result in grave miscarriage of justice, as the petitioner would be compelled to undergo the rigours of criminal trial for conduct which, in substance, constitutes peaceful political expression and assembly protected by the Constitution and not intended to be criminalised by the penal law," it added.

On February 6, the sessions court ruled that the magisterial court exercised its judicial mind in concluding that a prima facie case was made out against Lamba.

## Ex-Branch Manager, 3 More Nabbed In Rs 590-Cr IDFC First Bank Case In Haryana

**CHANDIGARH, FEB 25:** Haryana's State Vigilance and Anti-Corruption Bureau has arrested four people, including the masterminds behind the Rs 590-crore IDFC First Bank fraud, officials said on Wednesday.

Of the four arrested, two are ex-IDFC First Bank employees and two are private persons who own a partnership firm, they said.

The arrests were made on Tuesday evening as part of the ongoing investigation of the IDFC First Bank fraud case, they said.

Speaking to the media in Panchkula, ACB director general AS Chawla identified the arrested individuals as Ribhav Rishi, Abhay Kumar, Swati Singla, and Abhishek

Singla.

While Rishi and Abhay are former employees of the IDFC First Bank, Swati and Abhishek are siblings who ran a firm called the Swastik Desh Project.

Rishi was the head of the bank's Sector 32 branch till six months ago when he left the job.

Abhay, the bank's relationship manager, quit the job around August last year, Chawla said.

Rishi and Abhay masterminded the fraud, he said. He said that, in all, Rs 300 crore was transferred to the Swastik Desh Project's bank account.

The officer said the firm's main owner is Swati Singla, who holds 75 per cent shares

in it, while her brother Abhishek Singla holds the remaining 25 per cent.

"Swati Singla is Abhay's wife. We have arrested all four," Chawla said.

Earlier, the ACB registered an FIR in connection with the fraud, while the state government constituted a committee to probe it.

A Special Investigation Team was constituted under the overall supervision of senior IPS officer Ganga Ram Punia, Chawla said.

On Sunday, the IDFC Bank disclosed that a Rs 590-crore fraud was committed by its employees and others in accounts held by the Haryana government.

On Tuesday, Chief Minister Nayab Singh Saini said in

the Assembly that the government will spare no one involved in the fraud.

Leader of Opposition Bhupinder Singh Hooda and Haryana Congress chief Rao Narender Singh have demanded a CBI probe in the matter.

On Tuesday, IDFC First Bank said it had paid out 100 per cent of the principal and interest to the defrauded Haryana government departments, releasing a total of Rs 583 crore.

Earlier, Saini, in the Assembly, said that the irregularities were primarily related to the bank's Chandigarh branch and involved alleged collusion at the middle and lower levels.