

NATIONAL/INTERNATIONAL

CBI Questions Anil Ambani For Second Day In Connection With 2,929-Cr RCom Case

NEW DELHI, MAR 20: The CBI on Friday questioned industrialist Anil Ambani for the second consecutive day in connection with a Rs 2,929-crore cheating case, registered against Reliance Communications Ltd and him on a complaint by the State Bank of India, officials said.

Ambani arrived at the agency headquarters at around 10 am, they said.

On Thursday, the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) sought his responses on alleged fund diversion, misappropriation and other irregularities in the loan funds issued to the company by the bank, they said.

"The appearance is in furtherance to Mr Ambani's commitment to extend full cooperation in the matter with all agencies," Anil D Ambani's Spokesperson had said in a statement on Thursday.

The CBI had booked Ambani in August last year for



allegedly defrauding the SBI to the tune of Rs 2,929 crore, officials said.

According to the SBI complaint, now part of the FIR, the company had an outstanding of over Rs 40,000 crore to various lenders, with the public sector bank alone facing a loss of Rs 2,929 crore, according to 2018 figures.

The CBI booked Ambani

and RCom for allegedly committing offences of criminal conspiracy, cheating and criminal breach of trust.

"It is alleged that the accused persons, in criminal conspiracy, misrepresented and got sanctioned credit facilities from SBI in favour of Reliance Communication Ltd," a CBI spokesperson said in a statement in August last year.

Ambani's spokesperson responded, "Anil D Ambani denies all allegations and charges, and will duly defend himself." According to sources, the agency also searched the Ambani residence 'Sea Wind' at Cuffe Parade in Mumbai.

The complaint filed by SBI pertains to matters dating back more than 10 years, according to Ambani's spokesperson.

At that time, Ambani was a non-executive director of the company, with no involvement in the day-to-day management, a statement from his spokesperson then said.

"The matter remains sub-judice, pending before the NCLT (National Company Law Tribunal) and other judicial forums, including the Supreme Court, for the past six years," it said.

Anil Ambani has duly challenged SBI's declaration before the competent judicial forum, it said.

Navigational rights and freedoms of merchant and commercial vessels must be respected: India

LONDON, MAR 20: Voicing deep concern over the evolving situation in West Asia, India has called for de-escalation through dialogue while asserting that the navigational rights and freedoms of merchant and commercial vessels must be respected in accordance with international law.

Addressing the 36th Extraordinary Session of the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) Council here Wednesday, Indian High Commissioner to the UK Vikram Doraiswami also said that targeting commercial ships, endangering civilian crews and impeding safe and free navigation through international waters, including the Strait of Hormuz, are "unacceptable".

The extraordinary two-day session of the IMO Council discussed the impacts on shipping and seafarers of the situation in the Arabian Sea, the Sea of Oman and the Gulf region, particularly in and around the Strait of Hormuz, amid the US-Israel war against Iran.

"India remains deeply concerned about the evolving situation and continues to call for de-escalation through dialogue and diplomacy with utmost restraint and priority being given to the safety of civilians," Doraiswami said.

"Targeting of commercial shipping and attacks on civil-



ian maritime infrastructure is unacceptable. Such attacks have resulted in the loss of innocent lives, injuries and heightened risks, including to seafarers," he added.

At present, 24 Indian flag vessels are operating in the Persian Gulf region, including 22 vessels west of the Strait of Hormuz with 611 Indian seafarers on board, and two vessels east of the Strait of Hormuz, with 47 seafarers on board, the High Commissioner said.

"We reiterate that targeting commercial shipping, endangering civilian crews and impeding safe and free navigation through international waters, including the State farmers, are unacceptable," he said.

Doraiswami said the safety and welfare of seafarers, the security of international shipping, energy supply chains that sustain nations and humanitarian supply chains that ensure the survival and welfare of seafarers

must remain paramount.

He conveyed India's deepest condolences to the families of seafarers injured or killed in the ongoing conflict in West Asia, and informed the IMO Council that of the seven fatalities mentioned by the Secretary General, three are Indian seafarers; four more are injured, and one is missing.

Doraiswami further said that India is among the top three seafarers supplying nations, contributing approximately 13 per cent of the global seafaring workforce.

"We remain deeply concerned about the safety and welfare of all seafarers. An estimated 23,000 Indian seafarers have been impacted by the current crisis," he said.

Elaborating on the government of India's "robust response mechanisms," the envoy said there is a 24/7 helpline for all seafarers, irrespective of nationality, and a quick response team set up

by India's Director General of Shipping, apart from a dedicated control room by the Ministry of External Affairs to assist affected seafarers and their families.

Asserting that India has also strengthened maritime monitoring and preparedness measures, including through enhanced information sharing mechanisms, Doraiswami pointed out "with grave concern" the grave risk of marine pollution arising from attacks on commercial vessels in these waters.

He then pushed for the information network architecture and the role of India's Information Fusion Centre for the Indian Ocean Region, which he said, "should be further promoted by its inclusion in the IMOMSC environmental monitoring and coordination with other significant information sharing centres."

IMO's Maritime Safety Committee (MSC) deals with all matters related to maritime safety and maritime security which fall within the scope of IMO. The Information Fusion Centre for the Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), hosted by the Indian Navy, was established by India in December 2018 to promote collaboration for maritime safety and security. Since its inception, the Centre has established 76 linkages in 28 countries.

US Pentagon seeks USD 200 billion for war in Iran amid Congressional scrutiny

WASHINGTON, MAR 20: The Pentagon has requested USD 200 billion in supplemental funding for the ongoing war against Iran, sending the proposal to the White House three weeks after hostilities began.

The White House will be reviewing the request before formally submitting it to Congress. The sum, nearly a quarter of the United States' annual defense budget, has already drawn scrutiny from moderate Republicans who would play a key role in approving the funds.

"Obviously, it takes money to kill bad guys," Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said during a news conference Thursday, adding that "as far as the USD 200 billion, I think that number could move."

The request comes on top of the Pentagon's annual budget of \$838.7 billion, approved by Congress in January. Pentagon officials told lawmakers last week that the first six days of the war alone had cost more than \$11.3 billion, The Hill reported.

On Capitol Hill, Republicans are debating how to handle the request, balancing support for the president with concerns from fiscal conservatives. Democrats have largely opposed addi-



tional war funding, prompting Republicans to consider using the budget reconciliation process, which would bypass the 60-vote threshold in the Senate.

"It's considerably higher than I would have guessed, but I don't know how it's broken down," said Senator Susan Collins, a Republican from Maine and head of the Appropriations Committee. She noted that the White House had not yet sent a request to Congress.

President Donald Trump defended the need for the funds on Thursday, citing ammunition and supply needs depleted by the conflict and prior aid to other countries. "This is a very volatile world," he said. "We want to have vast amounts of ammunition, which we have right now - we have a lot of am-

munition, but it was taken down by giving so much to Ukraine."

US lawmakers have previously debated the costs of foreign conflicts. The Congressional Research Service estimated that direct costs of the Iraq War totaled \$815 billion over 13 years, while a report by the Council on Foreign Relations found that \$188 billion had been provided to support Ukraine since Russia's 2022 invasion.

Speaker of the House Mike Johnson, a Republican, said Thursday the \$200 billion figure was "not a random number" and emphasised the need to adequately fund defense during "a dangerous time in the world."

The war with Iran has also had economic effects domestically, including a spike in oil prices that has hiked the inflation adding to economic uncertainty.

Federal Reserve chair Jay Powell warned that the war in Iran was likely to drive up inflation, as oil prices surged above \$110 a barrel following attacks on Gulf energy infrastructure.

"Higher energy prices will push up overall inflation, but it is too soon to know the scope and duration of the potential effects on the economy," Powell said.

Expert committee formed to review revised NCERT chapter on judiciary: Centre to SC

NEW DELHI, MAR 20: The Centre on Friday informed the Supreme Court that it had constituted an expert committee comprising two former apex court judges and an ex-attorney general to review the class 8 NCERT book with a chapter on corruption in the judiciary.

Solicitor General Tushar Mehta told a bench of Chief Justice Surya Kant and Justices Joymalya Bagchi and Vipul M Pancholi that the committee comprises senior advocate and former Attor-

ney General KK Venugopal, former top court judge Justice Indu Malhotra, and former Supreme Court judge and current National Judicial Academy director Justice Aniruddha Bose, along with a vice chancellor.

"We have formed the committee to draft the chapter. Mr KK Venugopal will be a member of the committee. Justice Indu Malhotra will also be a part. We have also requested Justice Aniruddha Bose from the National Judicial Academy to be there,"

Mehta said.

The top court was hearing a petition by former NCERT member Pankaj Pushkar against a passage in an older class 8 textbook that read, "recent judgments tend to view the slum dweller as an encroacher in the city." The top court refused to entertain the petition, observing that the judiciary should not be oversensitive about a healthy criticism.

"It's a viewpoint about a judgment. That's a healthy criticism. Why the judiciary

should be so oversensitive about that. This part of the book points out what is the structure of the judiciary, how they work, what they have done, some good has also been highlighted.

"Then they say, however, there are also Court judgments that people believe work against the best interests of common persons ... This is a viewpoint about a judgment, people have a right to criticise our judgments," the CJI observed orally. (Agencies)

Union minister receives death threat, caller traced to Bengal's Murshidabad

NEW DELHI, MAR 20: Union minister Jayant Chaudhary allegedly received a death threat from an unknown caller, triggering a review of his security and a police probe based on a complaint lodged in the matter, officials said on Friday.

Police said the caller has been traced to Murshidabad in West Bengal.

Chaudhary, the minister of state (Independent Charge) for skill development and entrepreneurship, received the threat call around 11 am on March 18 from an unidentified number, the officials said.

According to the complaint lodged on Chaudhary's behalf at Tughlak Road police station, the caller threatened to kill the minister and referred to weapons such as MP5 guns.

The caller also asked the minister whether he had



seen certain documents sent to him and repeatedly threatened him before disconnecting the call, the complaint stated.

The officials said subsequent messages received from the same number showed threatening remarks written on an itinerary of a "tour programme" of the minister.

The messages also contained location details and voice notes reiterating the threats.

During further communication, the caller claimed that the information had been "sent from above", raising further concern. All relevant evidence, including call details, messages and screenshots, has been shared with

police, the complaint stated.

The complaint also mentioned suspicious activity near Chaudhary's residence, including alleged surveillance by unidentified persons.

A white car with tinted windows was seen stationed near Chaudhary's residence for a considerable period of time a few days ago, with its occupants allegedly monitoring movement in the area, it claimed.

Police said that according to preliminary investigation, the caller has been identified as Mohammad Ismail, a resident of Murshidabad in West Bengal. Efforts are being made to apprehend him and ascertain the motive behind the threat.

They said they are verifying all angles, including the reconnaissance activity, and have stepped up security. (Agencies)

14 arrested in Varanasi for eating chicken biryani on boat in Ganga sent to judicial custody

VARANASI (UP), MAR 20: A Varanasi court has sent 14 people, who had allegedly hosted an Ifar party and eaten chicken biryani on a boat in Ganga river, to judicial custody, an advocate in the case said on Friday.

Additional Civil Judge (Sr.Div.)/ACJM Amit Kumar Yadav on Thursday sent all the accused to the 14-day judicial custody after rejecting the bail applications of the accused.

According to advocate Shashank Shekhar Tripathi, representing complainant Rajat Jaiswal, the accused

had threatened a boatman and forcibly taken him along before holding the party on his boat in the river.

The 14 individuals were booked after a video of the incident surfaced online on Monday, and a written complaint was filed on the same day by Jaiswal, BJP Yuva Morcha's city unit chief.

The police also submitted a report to the court, citing the boatman's statement and eyewitness accounts. Consequently, a plea was filed to add several additional charges against the accused, including kidnapping.

On Jaiswal's complaint,

the accused were booked and arrested on charges of defiling a place of worship and hurting religious feelings. "The Ganga holds deep and unshakeable faith for the followers of Sanatan Dharma. Thousands of devotees from across the country and the world visit Kashi every day to perform rituals and offer prayers using Ganga water," Jaiswal said.

"In such a situation, eating biryani on a boat in the middle of the river and throwing its leftovers into the water is completely inappropriate. This act appears to have

been done with the intention of hurting the religious sentiments of Hindus," he added.

The case has been registered under BNS sections 298 (injuring or defiling a place of worship with intent to insult the religion of any class), 299 (deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings), 196(1) B (promoting enmity between different groups on grounds of religion, race, place etc), 270 (public nuisance), 279 (fouling water of public spring or reservoir) and Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1974. (PTI)

Iran hits Kuwaiti oil refinery and explosions boom over Tehran from Israeli attack

DUBAI, MAR 20: A Kuwaiti oil refinery came under Iranian drone attack early Friday and sirens in Israel warned of incoming fire, while explosions boomed over Tehran from Israeli strikes as the country marked the Persian New Year.

The war that has rocked the global economy neared the end of its third week with Iran showing no signs of letting up on its attacks on Gulf region energy structure. Kuwait said two waves of drone strikes at its Mina Al-Ahmadi oil refinery sparked a fire and crews were working to control the blaze.

The refinery, which can process some 730,000 barrels of oil per day, was already damaged Thursday in another Iranian attack. It is one of three oil refineries in Kuwait, a tiny, oil-rich nation on the Persian Gulf.

Iran stepped up its attacks on energy sites in Gulf Arab states after Israel on Wednesday bombed Iran's massive South Pars offshore natural gas field in the Persian Gulf.

Loud explosions could also be heard in Jerusalem after the Israeli army warned of incoming Iranian missiles.

In a rare statement, the country's new Supreme Leader Ayatollah Mojtaba Khamenei said Iran's enemies need to have their "security" taken away. Khamenei hasn't been seen since he succeeded his father, the 86-year-old Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who was killed in an Israeli airstrike on the first

day of the war.

His remarks came in a statement issued on his behalf and sent to President Masoud Pezeshkian, after Israel killed Intelligence Minister Esmail Khatib earlier this week.

Heavy explosions shook Dubai as air defenses intercepted early incoming fire over the city, where people were observing Eid al-Fitr, the end of the holy Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, and mosques made the day's first call to prayers.

Bahrain's Interior Ministry said a fire broke out after shrapnel from an intercepted projectile landed on a warehouse, and Saudi Arabia reported shooting down multiple drones targeting its oil-rich Eastern Province.

The renewed attacks came after an intense day that saw Iran hit energy infrastructure around the region and launch more than a dozen missile salvos at Israel following the attack on South Pars.

South Pars, the Iranian part of the world's largest gas field, is located offshore in the Persian Gulf and owned jointly with Qatar. With some 80% of power generated in Iran coming from natural gas, the attack posed a direct threat to the country's electricity supplies.

Late Thursday, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said the country would hold off on any further attacks on the gas field at the request of U.S.

President Donald Trump after the Iranian response sent oil prices skyrocketing.

The Israeli prime minister also claimed Iran's capability to produce ballistic missiles had been taken out, but the paramilitary Revolutionary Guard insisted Friday that they were still in production.

"We are producing missiles even during war conditions, which is amazing, and there is no particular problem in stockpiling," spokesman Gen. Ali Mohammad Naeini was quoted as saying in Iran's stat-run IRAN newspaper.

He added defiantly that Iran had no intention of seeking a quick end to the war. "These people expect the war to continue until the enemy is completely exhausted," he said. "This war must end when the shadow of war is lifted from the country." Beyond Iran's attacks on its Gulf Arab neighbors, its stranglehold on shipping through the Strait of Hormuz, a strategic waterway through which a fifth of the world's oil and other critical goods are transported, has caused rising concerns of a global energy crisis.

Brent crude oil, the international standard, which spiked to more than \$119 a barrel during Iran's attacks Thursday, was around \$107 in morning trading on Friday, up more than 47% since Israel and the United States attacked Iran on Feb. 28 to start the conflict.