

NATIONAL/INTERNATIONAL

Nepal's PM Balendra Shah says 'eager to work closely' with India

KATHMANDU, MAR 28: Nepal's newly elected Prime Minister Balendra Shah on Saturday said he is "eager to work closely" with India while thanking PM Narendra Modi for his greetings after the oath-taking ceremony.

Prime Minister Modi greeted Shah shortly after the swearing-in ceremony on Friday and said he was looking forward to working closely with his Nepalese counterpart to take forward India-Nepal ties.

Replying to Modi's post, Nepal's Prime Minister's office posted on X, "Thank you, PM @narendramodi for your kind words and



warm wishes. I am eager to work closely with you to advance the multifaceted relations between our two coun-

tries for the common prosperity of our people." Nepal is important for India in the context of its over-

all strategic interests in the region.

Nepal relies heavily on India for the transportation of goods and services. Landlocked Nepal's access to the sea is through India, and it imports a predominant proportion of its requirements from and through India.

Balen is the first democratically elected prime minister to be sworn in since the coalition government led by former prime minister Oli was ousted in September last year, following the youth-led Gen Z protest against corruption, nepotism, and a social media ban that escalated into violence. (PTI)

Pope XIV visits Monaco; urges citizens to use their faith, wealth for good

MONACO, MAR 28: Pope Leo XIV on Saturday urged residents of the cosmopolitan Mediterranean principality of Monaco to use their wealth, influence and Catholic faith for good, especially to uphold Catholic teaching on protecting the sanctity of life.

Leo made a one-day trip to the glitzy enclave, becoming the first pope to visit Monaco since Pope Paul III came in 1538. As a cannon boomed, Prince Albert and Princess Charlene met Leo at the Monaco heliport, just down the coast from the marina — home to the yachts of the rich and famous.

At the palace, members of the royal family stood in the courtyard waiting for Leo, the women dressed in black and with lace head coverings. Charlene wore white — a protocol privilege granted by the Vatican to Catholic royal sovereigns when meeting popes, known in diplomatic terms as "le privilege du blanc."

In his opening greeting



from the palace balcony, Leo urged Monaco to use its wealth, influence and "gift of smallness" for good.

It was important, he said, "especially at a historical moment when the display of power and the logic of oppression are harming the world and jeopardising peace."

Speaking in French, Leo urged Monaco's people to use their faith and be "always ready to protect every human life with love, at any time and in any condition, so that no one is ever excluded from the table of fraternity."

European countries where Catholicism is the official state religion. Prince Albert recently refused a proposal to legalise abortion, citing the important role Catholicism plays in Monaco society.

The decision was largely symbolic, since abortion is a constitutional right in France, which surrounds the coastal principality of 2.2 sq km.

But in refusing to allow it in Monaco, Albert joined other European Catholic royals who have taken a similar stand over the years to uphold Catholic doctrine on an increasingly secular conti-

nent. When Pope Francis visited Belgium in 2024, he announced he was putting the late King Baudouin on the path to possible sainthood because he abdicated for a day in 1990 rather than approve legislation to legalise abortion.

A coastal playground for the rich and famous, Monaco is renowned as much for its tax-friendly incentives and Formula 1 Grand Prix as its glamorous royal family. The son of the late American actress Grace Kelly, Albert spoke in perfect, unaccented English when he greeted Leo at the heliport. Leo was heard noting that he landed three minutes late.

Leo's one-day visit includes a meeting with Monaco's Catholic community in the cathedral and Mass in the sports stadium.

Monaco's population of 38,000 is heavily Catholic and also multinational, with only a fifth of the population actually citizens of the principality. (AP)

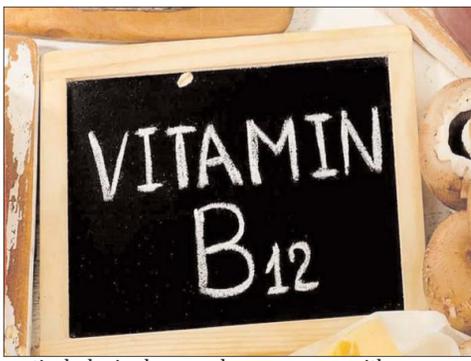
Higher Vitamin B12 intake by pregnant women can aid early brain development in babies: Study

NEW DELHI, MAR 28: Improving Vitamin B12 supplementation during pregnancy in vegetarian women can benefit early brain development in babies, a new study has found.

The study, published in the journal *BMJ Paediatrics Open*, was conducted in two centres located in India and Nepal by a joint team of researchers from both these countries and the UK.

According to Dr Jitender Nagpal, Deputy Medical Director of Sitaram Bhatia Institute of Science and Research in Delhi, who led the study in India, the findings provide strong evidence that improving Vitamin B12 intake during pregnancy in vegetarian mothers can benefit early brain development in babies while substantially reducing maternal Vitamin B12 deficiency.

Vitamin B12 deficiency is common in populations with limited animal source foods and has been linked to delayed infant neurodevelopment and adverse pregnancy outcomes, the study said. Evidence on the benefits of maternal Vitamin B12 supplementation for improving infant neurodevelopment remains mixed,



particularly in low- and middle-income countries where deficiency is prevalent, the study said. The Vitamin B12 deficiency affects a large proportion of women in South Asia, particularly in populations with low consumption of animal source foods and predominantly vegetarian communities, Dr Nagpal said.

"Despite this high burden, Vitamin B12 remains poorly addressed in routine antenatal care, which continues to focus largely on iron and folic acid. Routine Vitamin B12 supplementation is not currently included in government antenatal guidelines or expert body recommendations in India. As a result, many women enter

pregnancy with unrecognised and untreated B12 deficiency, at a time when early brain development is highly sensitive to maternal nutrition," he said.

In a multicentre, double-blind, randomised controlled trial, vegetarian women in their first trimester of pregnancy were enrolled. They received either a higher daily dose of Vitamin B12 (250 micrograms) or a lower dose (50 micrograms) from early pregnancy until six months after delivery.

Among 531 mother-infant pairs followed up, women in the higher dose group showed markedly greater improvement in Vitamin B12 status, with a relative

reduction in biochemical Vitamin B12 deficiency exceeding 30 per cent compared to the lower dose group, Dr Nagpal said.

Crucially, these maternal improvements were accompanied by developmental benefits in infants. "Babies born to mothers receiving the higher dose scored significantly higher on early mental development assessments at 9-12 months of age, while motor development was similar between groups," Dr Nagpal stated.

Although the individual effect size was modest, even small gains in early cognitive development can translate into substantial population-level benefits in learning potential, educational attainment, and long-term human capital, he emphasised.

Together, these findings suggest that optimising Vitamin B12 intake during pregnancy could represent a simple, safe and low-cost refinement of antenatal nutrition strategies to reduce deficiency, and translate into important population-level gains in learning potential and long-term human capital, Dr Nagpal said. (Agencies)

Foreign ministers of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkiye to visit Pakistan for talks on West Asia

ISLAMABAD, MAR 28: Pakistan is set to host the foreign ministers of Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkiye for discussions on a wide-range of issues, including efforts to de-escalate tensions in West Asia amid the war in Iran, the Foreign Office said on Saturday.

At the invitation of Pakistan's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar, Saudi Arabia Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud, Turkiye Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan and Egyptian Foreign Minister Badr Abdelatty, will visit Islamabad on Sunday and Monday, the Foreign Office said.

During the visit, the foreign ministers will hold "in-depth discussions on a range of issues, including efforts to de-escalate tensions in the region", it added.

The visiting leaders will also meet Prime Minister



Shehbaz Sharif, the Foreign Office said.

It added that Pakistan "highly values its relations with the brotherly countries of Saudi Arabia, Turkiye, and Egypt, and the visit will provide an opportunity to further strengthen Pakistan's cooperation and coordination with these countries".

Geo News reported that the meeting was earlier scheduled to be held in Turkiye but due to Dar's engagement, he requested the leaders to come to Islam-

abad. News Archive Access "The meeting was scheduled to be held in Turkiye but due to my engagement, I requested my brothers to instead meet in Islamabad tomorrow (Sunday)," Dar was quoted as saying.

The deputy prime minister said that Pakistan is working with "honesty and sincerity" to resolve ongoing disputes.

Dar said that talks with Iran are continuing, but due to the sensitive nature of the negotiations, officials are refraining from making public

statements.

Pakistan on Thursday said that it was "actively and constructively engaged" with all stakeholders in the region and beyond to peacefully end the Iran war.

However, Foreign Office spokesperson Tahir Andrabi did not categorically confirm any chances of face to face talks in Islamabad over the coming weekend.

The spokesperson said that Pakistan has "remained actively and constructively engaged with relevant regional stakeholders and beyond our region, consistently advocating for immediate de-escalation, cessation of hostilities and an irreversible path towards a peaceful resolution".

Pakistan also confirmed relaying messages between the US and Iran, saying dialogue and diplomacy were the only way forward to end the West Asia conflict. (PTI)

Yemen's Houthis claim responsibility for missile attack on Israel, their first since war started

DUBAI, MAR 28: Israel's military said it intercepted a missile launched from Yemen toward Israel early Saturday, the first time it had faced fire from that country. The Iranian-backed Houthi rebels claimed responsibility for the attack, which calls into question whether the rebel group backed by Tehran will again target commercial shipping travelling through the Red Sea corridor.

Sirens went off around Beer Sheba and the area near Israel's main nuclear research centre for the third time overnight Friday into Saturday as Iran and Hezbollah continued to fire on Israel overnight.

The Houthis have held Yemen's capital, Sanaa, since 2014, and so far have stayed out of the war as the rebels have had an uneasy ceasefire for years with Saudi Arabia, which launched a war against the group on behalf of Yemen's exiled government in 2015.

Attacks on vessels during the Israel-Hamas war upended shipping in the Red Sea, through which about USD 1 trillion worth of goods passed each year before the war. The rebels also fired drones at Israel.

Israel struck Iran's nuclear facilities hours after threatening to "escalate and expand" its campaign against Tehran on Friday. Iran vowed to retaliate and struck a base in Saudi Arabia, wounding US service members and damaging planes.

Brig. Gen. Yahya Saree, a military spokesman for the Houthis, issued the claim in a statement Saturday on the rebels' Al-Masirah satellite television.

Saree said they fired a barrage of ballistic missiles targeting what he described as "sensitive Israeli military sites" in southern Israel. The attack came hours after Saree signalled in a vague statement on Friday that the rebels would join the war that shocked the region and rattled the global economy.

In 2024, the Trump administration launched strikes against the Houthis that ended weeks later. The US-led campaign against the Houthi rebels, overshadowed by the Israel-Hamas war in the Gaza Strip, turned into the most intense running sea battle the Navy had faced since World War II.

The Houthis attacked over 100 merchant vessels with missiles and drones, sinking two vessels and killing four sailors, from November 2023 until January 2025. That would cause further chaos in global shipping, which already is reeling from Iran's stranglehold over the Strait of Hormuz, the narrow mouth of the Persian Gulf through which a fifth of all oil and natural gas once passed.

The potential involvement of the Houthis in the war would also complicate the deployment of the USS Gerald R. Ford, the aircraft carrier that went to port in Crete on Monday for repairs. Sending the carrier back into the Red Sea could draw it into the same high tempo of attacks seen by the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower in 2024 and the USS Harry S. Truman in the 2025 American campaign against the Houthis.

Prior to the attack from Yemen, there appeared to be a breakthrough as Tehran agreed to allow humanitarian aid and agricultural shipments through the Strait of Hormuz, accepting a request from the UN. Ali Bahreini, the country's ambassador to the United Nations in Geneva, said Iran agreed to "facilitate and expedite" such movement.

The vital waterway usually handles a fifth of the world's oil shipments and nearly a third of the world's fertiliser trade. While markets and governments have largely focused on blocked supplies of oil and natural gas, the restriction of fertiliser ingredients and trade threatens farming and food security around the world.

"This measure reflects Iran's contin-



ued commitment to supporting humanitarian efforts and ensuring that essential aid reaches those in need without delay," Bahreini said on the social platform X. The UN earlier announced a task force to address the ripple effects that the war has had on aid delivery.

More than two dozen US troops have been wounded in Iranian attacks on a Saudi air base in the past week, according to two people who have been briefed on the matter. Iran fired six ballistic missiles and 29 drones at Saudi Arabia's Prince Sultan air base in a Friday attack that injured at least 15 troops, including five seriously, according to the people who were not authorised to comment publicly and spoke on the condition of anonymity.

The base had come under attack twice earlier this week, including an incident that injured 14 US troops, according to the people who had been briefed on the matter.

Located about 96 kilometres (60 miles) from the Saudi capital of Riyadh, the base is run by the Royal Saudi Air Force, but is also used by US troops.

Bahreini's announcement came just hours after Iranian state media said two

nuclear facilities had come under attack. Israel, which had threatened to "escalate and expand" its campaign against Tehran, claimed responsibility, and Iran quickly threatened to retaliate.

"Iran will exact a heavy price for Israeli crimes," Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi said via X.

Iran's Atomic Energy Organisation said the Shahid Khondab Heavy Water Complex in Arak and the Ardakan yellowcake production plant in Yazd Province were targeted, IRNA reported. The strikes did not cause any casualties, and there was no risk of contamination, it said.

The Arak plant has not been operational since Israel attacked it last June.

Yellowcake is a concentrated form of uranium after impurities are removed from the raw ore. Heavy water is used as a moderator in nuclear reactors.

The Israeli military later said raw materials are processed for enrichment at the Yezd plant, and the strike was a major blow to Iran's nuclear program.

Seyed Majid Moosavi, IRGC's Aerospace Force commander, said on X that employees of companies tied to the US and Israel should abandon their work-

places: "This time, the equation will no longer be an eye for an eye, just war."

Late Friday, Israeli authorities said Iran had launched missiles at the country that killed a 52-year-old man in Tel Aviv. Sirens alerted people to seek shelter in and around Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Beer Sheba and areas near the country's main nuclear research centre, which were targeted by Iranian strikes that injured dozens last weekend.

Speaking in Miami at an event sponsored by the Saudi sovereign wealth fund, Trump reiterated his desire for those two countries to normalise relations.

The president has been pressing the two biggest powers in the Middle East on that for years as part of his Abraham Accords efforts, and he said the time will be right when hostilities end with Iran.

"It's now time," he said. "We've now taken them out, and they are out bigly. We got to get into the Abraham Accords."

Significant headwinds remain, including Saudi Arabia's insistence that there needs to be a credible path to a Palestinian state before it normalises commercial and diplomatic ties with Israel.

Word of the attacks on Iran came after Trump claimed that talks on ending the war were going "very well" and that he had given Tehran more time to reopen the Strait of Hormuz. Iran maintains that it has not engaged in any negotiations.

With stock markets reeling and economic fallout from the war extending far beyond the Middle East, Trump is under growing pressure to end Iran's chokehold on the Strait.

A Gulf Arab bloc said Thursday that Iran has been exacting tolls from ships to ensure safe passage.

Trump envoy Steve Witkoff said Washington delivered a 15-point "action list" to Iran for a possible ceasefire,

using Pakistan as an intermediary. It proposes restricting Iran's nuclear program and reopening the Strait.

Iran rejected the offer and presented its own five-point proposal that included reparations and recognition of its sovereignty over the waterway.

Trump has said that if Iran doesn't reopen the Strait to all traffic by April 6, he will order the destruction of Iran's energy plants.

Uncertainty surrounding the conflict prompted a further drop in US stocks on Friday. The S&P 500 sank 1.7 per cent to close out its worst week since the Iran war started and its 5th losing week in a row. The Dow Jones Industrial Average dropped 1.7 per cent, and the Nasdaq composite sank 2.1 per cent. Meanwhile, crude oil prices continued to soar.

With US gas prices approaching USD 4 a gallon, members of Congress have been pushing to suspend the federal gasoline tax, set at 18.4 cents per gallon on gasoline and 24.4 cents per gallon on diesel fuel. Trump said he has "thought about" suspending it, but suggested states should look at suspending their taxes on fuel.

Witnesses in eastern Tehran reported a partial power outage following airstrikes. In Israel, loud explosions filled the air in Tel Aviv, and emergency crews responded to nearly a dozen impact sites.

An Associated Press journalist heard loud explosions in Tel Aviv, and Israel's Fire and Rescue Service said it was responding to 11 different impact sites across the metro area.

Defence Minister Israel Katz had earlier vowed that Iran "will pay heavy, increasing prices for this war crime."

Israel focused its attacks Friday on sites "in the heart of Tehran" where ballistic missiles and other weapons are produced, the military said. It said it also hit missile launchers and storage sites in Western Iran.