

NATIONAL/INTERNATIONAL

Xi calls China-Russia ties 'precious' in current international context

BEIJING, APR 15: Chinese President Xi Jinping said Wednesday that the stability and certainty of China-Russia relations are particularly "precious" in the face of an international landscape intertwined with change and chaos, while also referencing the war in Iran.

During a meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in Beijing, Xi said the strong vitality and exemplary significance of the friendship treaty between the two countries stand out even more under such a backdrop.

He said foreign ministries from both countries would need to fully implement the consensus reached between him and Russian President Vladimir Putin, calling for



strengthening strategic communication and close diplomatic coordination. He also urged them to promote the comprehensive strategic partnership between Beijing and Moscow to "stand higher, walk more steadily and go further."

Xi touted the value of the two nations' ties at a time when uncertainty lingered about how long the Iran war would last.

In clips from an interview with the Fox Business Network, US President Donald Trump said Tuesday the war was "close to over." Trump has repeatedly declared a US

victory in Iran after the war started – even as the reality on the ground has been far more complicated.

Relations between China and Russia have deepened in recent years, particularly following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in early 2022.

Trump's unorthodox approach to the war in Ukraine has added a twist to the relationship but doesn't appear to have fundamentally changed it.

When Putin visited China in September, Xi welcomed his counterpart as an "old friend." Putin also addressed Xi as "dear friend."

Lavrov arrived in China on Tuesday for a two-day trip at the invitation of his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi. (AP)

BJP's 'Preparation' For Punjab Polls Has Begun: Kejriwal On ED Raids Against AAP MP Mittal

NEW DELHI, APR 15: As the Enforcement Directorate conducted raids against AAP leader Ashok Kumar Mittal, the party's national convenor Arvind Kejriwal on Wednesday said the BJP has started its "preparations" for the upcoming poll in Punjab by using central agencies.

The ED on Wednesday conducted raids at the business and residential premises of AAP Rajya Sabha MP Ashok Kumar Mittal in Punjab and Haryana as part of a Foreign Exchange Management Act (FEMA), officials said.

In a post on X in Hindi, Kejriwal said, "Modi ji has started preparations for the elections in Punjab. But, the people of Punjab will not tolerate this... they would give a befitting reply to the BJP." About 10 locations in Jalandhar and Gurugram are being



covered under the provisions of the Foreign Exchange Management Act (FEMA). This includes the premises of the Phagwara-based Lovely Professional University (LPU) and two linked educational institutions named Tetr College of Business and Masters Union College of Business located in Gurugram, ED officials said.

Mittal was recently appointed the deputy leader of the Aam Aadmi Party in the

Rajya Sabha, replacing MP Raghav Chadha. The 61-year-old AAP leader is also the Chancellor of Lovely Professional University, Phagwara.

Reacting to the development, AAP leaders accused the BJP of misusing central agencies ahead of elections.

There was no immediate response from the Bharatiya Janata Party. Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann also strongly condemned the raids, saying the BJP has be-

gun its "preparations" for the upcoming Assembly elections in the state, currently ruled by the AAP.

AAP leader Anurag Dhanda said the action indicates the BJP has begun its poll preparations in Punjab, and questioned whether the party can contest elections without relying on central agencies like the ED and the CBI.

Senior AAP leader Manish Sisodia alleged that central agencies are deployed ahead of elections in states, followed by political visits by BJP leaders.

He also criticised the Centre, accusing it of functioning in an authoritarian manner.

Officials, however, said the searches are part of an ongoing FEMA investigation and are being conducted at various premises linked to Mittal's business entities. (Agencies)

Boat carrying 250 people, including Rohingya and Bangladeshis, sinks in Andaman Sea

DHAKA, APR 15: At least 250 people, including Rohingya refugees and Bangladeshi nationals, were missing after a boat capsized in the Andaman Sea recently on the way to Malaysia, according to the United Nations' refugee and migration agencies.

When the boat sank and the status of any search Wednesday were unclear.

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Organisation for Migration in a joint statement said Tuesday that the trawler departed from Teknaf in the southern Bangladeshi district of Cox's Bazar carrying a large number of passengers to Malaysia.

Overcrowding, strong winds and rough seas caused



the vessel to lose control and sink, the agencies said.

UNHCR and IOM said the disappearance reflected the protracted displacement of Rohingya people and the absence of durable solutions.

They said ongoing violence in Myanmar's Rakhine state has made the Rohingyas'

safe return to Myanmar uncertain, and limited humanitarian assistance, restricted access to education and employment in refugee camps, continue to push vulnerable Rohingya refugees to choose risky sea journeys, often based on false promises of higher wages and better op-

portunities abroad.

UNHCR and IOM urged the international community to strengthen funding and solidarity to ensure lifesaving assistance for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, which has sheltered more than 1 million Rohingya from Myanmar. (AP)

Chhattisgarh Vedanta Power Plant Blast: Death Toll Rises To 16; Cong Demands Judicial Probe

SAKTI (CHHATTISGARH), APR 15: The death toll in a blast at the Vedanta power plant in Chhattisgarh's Sakti district has gone up to 16 with three more workers succumbing to injuries, police said on Wednesday.

The explosion occurred on Tuesday afternoon in a steel tube carrying high-pressure steam from the boiler to the turbine at the Vedanta Ltd power plant located in Singhitara village. The powerful blast left several workers with severe burn injuries. Chemistry

According to officials, four workers died on the spot, while nine others succumbed to injuries soon after the incident.

Three more workers have died in hospitals, raising the toll to 16, Sakti Superintendent of Police Prafull Thakur said.

While one of them succumbed at a hospital in Raigarh, two others died at a medical facility in the state capital Raipur, an industrial safety department official said.

Of the 18 other workers injured in the incident, four are currently admitted in



Raipur, while 14 are undergoing treatment at various hospitals in Raigarh district, he added.

Chief Minister Vishnu Deo Sai has announced a compensation of Rs 5 lakh to the families of each deceased worker and Rs 50,000 for those injured.

Vedanta Power has also announced Rs 35 lakh compensation for the family of each deceased worker, along with employment support. The company will also provide Rs 15 lakh to each injured person, ensure salary continuation until recovery, and offer counselling support, a statement from the plant management said.

The chief minister has ordered an inquiry into the inci-

dent by the Commissioner of the Bilaspur division, assuring strict action against those found responsible.

The district administration has also ordered a separate magisterial probe, while the company has initiated its own internal investigation.

The CM directed officials to ensure free and proper medical treatment for all injured and emphasised that no negligence in their care would be tolerated.

Sakti Collector Amrit Vikas Topno has appointed the Sub-Divisional Magistrate (SDM) of Dabhra to conduct the magisterial inquiry.

The SDM has been asked to submit a report within 30 days covering key aspects, in-

cluding the cause of the accident, whether it was due to technical or human error, and details of safety inspections carried out at the plant.

Meanwhile, the Opposition Congress has demanded registration of an FIR against the plant management and a judicial inquiry into the incident. State Congress communication wing head Sushil Anand Shukla on Wednesday alleged negligence on the plant management's part and accused the government of attempting to shield those responsible.

He also demanded compensation of Rs 1 crore for the families of the deceased and Rs 50 lakh for the injured.

The construction of a 1,200 MW coal-based thermal power project (two units of 600 MW each) in Singhitara, originally owned by Athena Chhattisgarh Power Ltd, started in 2009, but remained stalled between 2016 and 2022.

Vedanta acquired the plant in 2022, after which a 600 MW unit was completed and commissioned in August last year, while the second unit is still under construction. (PTI)

Ukraine's Zelenskyy pursues more arms deals with allies to help check Russia's invasion

KYIV, APR 15: Ukraine's top diplomatic priority is securing its allies' help to buy and build more air defence systems, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Wednesday between meetings with European leaders, as Russia kept up its deadly attacks on civilians and public infrastructure.

Russian strikes hit more than a half-dozen areas of Ukraine behind the front line from Tuesday to Wednesday, killing an 8-year-old boy in the central Cherkasy region and a woman who was in a kiosk near a bus stop that was hit in southern Zaporizhzhia, according to Zelenskyy and local officials.

"Every day we need air defence missiles – every day Russia continues its strikes," Zelenskyy said in a post on the Telegram messaging app.

With no plans announced for further US-mediated talks with Russia, Zelenskyy was visiting three European capitals in 48 hours, securing promises of further military and financial support from Germany and Norway ahead of his trip to Italy on Wednesday.

After more than four years of fighting Russia's full-scale invasion, Ukraine possesses battle-tested drone interceptor expertise and has developed groundbreaking air defense technology, but it lacks



the money to scale up production to levels that would press its advantage.

Zelenskyy said he is asking European countries to keep adding money to a fund that allows the purchase from the United States of American-made weapons for Ukraine, especially the Patriot air defence system that can stop the Russian cruise and ballistic missiles hitting civilian areas.

He is also championing joint weapons production agreements, including for drones and missiles, while pushing for the European Union to move quickly on providing a promised 90-billion-euro (USD 106 billion) loan.

Defence leaders from the 50-plus partner nations who regularly gather to coordinate weapons aid for Kyiv were to hold an online meeting Wednesday, chaired by German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius and British Defense Secretary John

Healey. NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte was due to attend.

Ahead of the meeting, Britain announced it will send 120,000 drones to Ukraine this year, its biggest delivery of the weapons so far. The package includes long-range strike drones, intelligence and reconnaissance drones, logistics drones and maritime capabilities. Officials didn't say how soon they will be sent.

Russia launched 324 drones and three ballistic missiles and at Ukraine overnight, the Ukrainian air force said, in its biggest barrage in almost two weeks. Air defences intercepted 309 of the drones. Russia also fired a powerful FAB-1500 glide bomb, weighing 1.5 metric tons, at the central part of Sloviansk before dawn Wednesday, the Sloviansk City Military Administration head Vadym Liakh said.

The blast destroyed a children's sports facility that was

a city landmark, he said.

In a nighttime strike on the southeastern city of Dnipro, Russian forces struck two universities overnight, damaging academic buildings, dormitories and nearby homes, Mayor Borys Filatov said.

The blast wave shattered more than 1,000 windows in surrounding buildings, he said, adding that there were no military targets in the area.

Meanwhile, Ukraine proceeded with its long-range drone attacks on Russia, with the Russian Defence Ministry reporting Wednesday that its air defenses intercepted 85 Ukrainian drones overnight over several Russian regions, the annexed Crimean peninsula and the waters of the Black and the Azov seas.

Ukrainian drones targeted an industrial facility in Sterlitamak, a Russian city about 1,300 kilometres (roughly 800 miles) east of the border with Ukraine, local authorities said.

Radiy Habirov, governor of the Bashkortostan region where Sterlitamak is located, said in an online statement Wednesday that several drones were shot down over Sterlitamak's "industrial zone," and debris fell on one of the facilities there, sparking a fire. He didn't provide further details. (AP)

TEL AVIV, Apr 15: Israel's military said on Wednesday that it had struck more than 200 Hezbollah targets in southern Lebanon as it presses ahead with its aerial and ground war there despite the US-Iran ceasefire.

Lebanon's National News Agency reported airstrikes and artillery shelling in multiple southern Lebanese locations on Wednesday, including near Bint Jbeil, where Israeli forces have encircled Hezbollah fighters. Breaking News Alerts

The fighting in the south has continued after Israeli and Lebanese officials concluded their first direct talks in decades. Lebanese officials want a ceasefire to halt fighting that has displaced more than 1 million people in their country, while Israel wants the Lebanese government to assume responsibility for disarming Hezbollah.

Hezbollah lawmaker Hassan Fadlallah has harshly criticised the Lebanese government's rare direct talks in Washington with Israel as "disgraceful" and urged Lebanon to hold a public referendum to determine the future of Hezbollah's arsenal. Fadlallah said that if the

Israel hits more Hezbollah targets in Lebanon



Lebanese government "truly wants to prove it reflects the aspirations of the Lebanese people, then it should accept a popular referendum" rather than negotiating with Israel on Hezbollah's disarmament. He accused Lebanon of giving Israel a political platform with the talks "at a time when it is killing Lebanese people and committing massacres."

"The enemy is the one benefiting," he said. He said he would expect a popular referendum on Hezbollah to show that "a majority of the Lebanese

people" support the militant group's campaign against Israel.

In the streets of northern Israel, in the border town of Kiryat Shmona near Lebanon, some Israelis feel wary that the ongoing talks with Lebanon may not bring about a decisive victory against the Iran-backed Hezbollah militant group.

"Hezbollah is much stronger than the Lebanese army, nothing will come out of it," said Eli Mizrahi, as residents believe that Israel should not retreat until a decisive victory is realized in

Lebanon.

Resident of Kiryat Shmona Bruria Danino said she will only "feel calm" when Hezbollah is eliminated, while the majority voiced their inconvenience from the constant sounds of sirens, warning them of incoming fire from Lebanon.

Fighting renewed between Hezbollah and Israel on Mar. 2, when the militant group fired rockets into northern Israel. At least 2,124 people have been killed in Israeli strikes in Lebanon, the country's Health Ministry said. (AP)

Two wanted militants killed in NW Pakistan

PESHAWAR, Apr 15: Two wanted militants were killed in an operation conducted by the Counter Terrorism Department in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in northwest Pakistan, police said Wednesday.

According to an official from the Counter Terrorism Department (CTD), the operation was carried out near the Northern Bypass in the provincial capital Peshawar on the basis of intelligence reports late on Tuesday night. The

CTD team laid an ambush in the area, which led to an exchange of fire with the militants. The two militants killed during the encounter were involved in the killing of a CTD constable, police said, adding that the slain constable's

mobile phone was also recovered from their possession. Officials further said that one of the militants was wanted in at least 11 terrorism cases, including incidents that resulted in the killing of five police personnel.