

NATIONAL/INTERNATIONAL

Govt Wants To Change India's Electoral Map, It's Nothing Short Of Anti-National Act: Rahul

NEW DELHI, APR 17: Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi on Friday said the constitution amendment bill has nothing to do with women's reservation but is an attempt by the government to change the country's electoral map by taking away representation from southern, northeastern and smaller states, which is "nothing short of an anti-national act".

Participating in a debate in the Lok Sabha on the three bills introduced for amendments in the women's quota law and setting up a delimitation commission, the Congress leader said, "This is not a women's bill as it has nothing to do with empowerment of women." "This bill is an attempt to change the country's electoral map, using and hiding behind India's women," he alleged.

Gandhi said the government should bring back the 2023 Women's Reservation Act for implementation, and the opposition will help the government pass it immediately.



ately.

He accused the government of avoiding giving power and representation to OBCs, saying that was its real agenda, and also alleged that it was trying to make sure that the caste census has nothing to do with representation for the next 15 years.

"They are scared of the erosion of their strength, and are trying to rejig the Indian political map," he said.

"The government is telling the southern, northeastern, and smaller states that for the BJP to remain in power, 'we are going to take away representation from you'," Gandhi said.

What the government is doing is nothing short of an "anti-national act", Gandhi said.

"We won't allow you to do it; the entire opposition will defeat this attempt. I want to assure the southern, northeastern, and smaller states that we will not allow the government to touch your representation in the Union of India," he said.

Gandhi said the BJP knew that the bill could not be passed, and bringing it was a "panic reaction" because Prime Minister Narendra Modi had two objectives — to change India's electoral map and show that he is pro-

women.

Responding to the uproar from the treasury benches over his apparent reference to the Modi in connection with the Balakot strike, demonetisation and Operation Sindoor, Gandhi said, "The BJP thinks that they are the people of India; they also think that they are the armed forces. You are not the people of India, you are not the armed forces, so you should not hide behind the people and the armed forces." The Constitution (131st Amendment) Bill to tweak the women's quota law was introduced in the Lok Sabha on Thursday after a division of votes.

Two ordinary bills — the Delimitation Bill and the Union Territories Laws (Amendment) Bill to implement the proposed amended women's quota law in Union territories of Delhi, Puducherry and Jammu and Kashmir — were also introduced in the House. (Agencies)

ED Raids Against Punjab Industries Minister Sanjeev Arora, Others

NEW DELHI/LUDHIANA, APR 17: The Enforcement Directorate on Friday conducted searches at premises of Punjab industries minister Sanjeev Arora, his son and some others as part of a foreign exchange violation probe linked to alleged insider trading in stock markets and round-tripping of betting funds from UAE to India, officials said.

A total of 13 residential and official premises in Ludhiana, Jalandhar, Gurugram and Chandigarh are being covered under the provisions of the Foreign Exchange Management Act (FEMA).

This includes the residences and offices of Arora, his real estate company Hampton Sky Realty Ltd (formerly Ritesh Properties and Industries Ltd) and that of Arora's son Kavya Arora (MD of the said realty company) in Ludhiana, the officials said.

The premises of Hemanth Sood, who runs a financial investment and stock broker company named Findoc Invest Private Ltd., in the same city and that of Jalandhar-based businessman and alleged bookie Chandra Shekhar Aggarwal were also covered.

The ED teams are being



provided security cover by the jawans of a central paramilitary force, they said.

Arora, 62, posted a message on X, saying he will cooperate with the probe.

"Good Morning! An action by the Enforcement Directorate took place at my premises. As a responsible citizen, I will fully cooperate with the agencies and I am confident that the truth will prevail," Arora, the minister for industry and commerce, said. The MLA from Ludhiana West was earlier raided by the ED in 2024 in a money laundering case linked to alleged misuse of industrial land for residential projects. He was then a Raja Sabha MP.

The latest action comes two days after the ED raided AAP Raja Sabha MP Ashok Kumar Mittal, his family and

educational institutions run by them in Punjab and Haryana as part of a FEMA case.

Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann condemned the raids against Mittal, saying the BJP has begun its "preparations" for the upcoming Assembly elections in the state.

"Democracy is being murdered. We strongly condemn it," he said, while alleging that, "Only non-BJP governments are being harassed".

ED officials said Sanjeev Arora's realty company is under their scanner for alleged irregularities such as illegal change of land use in Punjab, booking fraudulent and inflated sales to inflate share prices, insider trading scams in stock market and roundtripping of ill-gotten funds and illegal betting

money from UAE to India and so on.

Sood, whose company also has operations in Gurugram and Gujarat GIFT city, is alleged to have "partnered" with Sanjeev Arora for "round-tripping" of funds from UAE and also for alleged insider trading.

As per the agency, Sood is also alleged to have assisted some other betting and hawala operators in laundering "illicit" funds into India through the FPI (foreign portfolio investment) route.

Aggarwal, officials said, started as a cricket bookie and later expanded his operations to hawala deals. He is alleged to have launched a betting platform named "Khilladi book" which reportedly cheated thousands of people.

It is alleged by the ED that funds allegedly generated by him and parked in UAE have also been brought back into India through Findoc and invested in real estate through Sanjeev Arora.

Companies linked to Sanjeev Arora are also under scanner of the ED on charges of booking "fake" export bills and registering bogus purchases from non-existing GST entities, officials said. (PTI)

BJP using women's quota bill as front to pass Delimitation Bill that will break India: Mamata

COOCH BEHAR (WB), APR 17: Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on Friday alleged the BJP-led NDA government at the Centre was using the proposed amendment to the women's quota law in Parliament as a front for the Delimitation Bill that would "break the country into pieces".

The TMC will fight this Central government's move at every step, she asserted at her party's poll rally here.

The Constitution (131st Amendment) Bill to tweak the women's quota law, along with the Delimitation Bill and the Union Territories Laws (Amendment) Bill, to implement the proposed amended women's quota law, in the Union territories of Delhi, Puducherry and Jammu and Kashmir, were



introduced in the Lok Sabha on Thursday.

According to the Constitution amendment bill, Lok Sabha seats will be increased to a maximum of 850 from the current 543 to "operationalise" the women's reservation law before the 2029

parliamentary polls, following a delimitation exercise based on the 2011 Census.

Seats will also be increased in state and Union territory assemblies to accommodate 33 per cent reservation for women. Opposing the Centre's move, Banerjee alleged

that "the BJP brought the Delimitation Bill while keeping the women's reservation bill at the front".

"The BJP is trying to increase the number of seats in the Lok Sabha to nearly 850 through the Delimitation Bill. It will break the country into pieces," the TMC supremo said.

She also alleged that Prime Minister Narendra Modi was not speaking the truth about the development of north Bengal at a BJP rally last week.

"The prime minister said nothing was done for the development of north Bengal. But we spent Rs 1.72 lakh crore on the development of the region," Banerjee said and asked Modi to cross-check data before making such remarks.

Gujarat HC rejects Asaram trust's appeals against takeover of ashram land

AHMEDABAD, APR 17: The Gujarat High Court on Friday rejected appeals filed by self-styled godman Asaram's ashram in Ahmedabad against the takeover of land to develop sports infrastructure ahead of the 2030 Commonwealth Games, citing violations and encroachment.

More than 45,000 sq metres of land on which the ashram stands in Motera near the Narendra Modi Stadium is to be used for the proposed Sardar Patel Sports Complex.

Sant Shri Asharam Trust, which manages the ashram, had moved an appeal in the division bench after a single bench judge of the high court had dismissed its pleas challenging eviction notices is-

sued by the revenue authorities over allegations of encroachment and breach of conditions of allotment and regularisation.

The division bench of Chief Justice Sunita Agarwal and Justice DN Ray dismissed the pleas, observing that the trust not only violated the conditions of the allotment and regularisation orders of grant of government land but also encroached upon a substantial area of open land surrounding the allotted plots.

It also noted that the trust had illegally occupied land from the Sabarmati River belt over the years.

"In the totality of the facts and circumstances of the present case, none of the prayers made in the writ peti-

tion can be granted. There is no question of regularisation of the riverbed land encroached upon by the petitioner. Any such indulgence will be contrary to the decision of the apex court," the court stated in its order.

It also rejected the trust's request for a four-week stay on its order to challenge it in the higher court, after the government pleader informed the bench that the petitioner will be issued a fresh notice of eviction, giving it considerable time to carry out the same.

The trust had challenged the Gujarat Revenue Tribunal's order dismissing its petition for notices by the mamlatdar to hand over the possession of the land.

It argued that the orders

are premeditated, as the land is being taken under the guise of encroachment and breach of conditions to facilitate the government's proposal to build a sports enclave and use the land for the proposed Olympic Games.

Asaram (84) was sentenced to life imprisonment for raping a minor girl at his ashram in Rajasthan in 2013. In January 2023, a court in Gandhinagar also sentenced him to life imprisonment in another rape case.

The Gandhinagar court had convicted Asaram in a case registered in 2013 for raping a woman disciple, who hailed from Surat, on several occasions between 2001 and 2006 when she was living at his Motera ashram. (PTI)

ISLAMABAD, APR 17: Pakistan has started preparing to host the second round of high-stakes talks between the US and Iran during the next week for a landmark peace deal to end the war in West Asia that has crippled global energy supplies, officials said on Friday.

The US and Iran held rare direct talks in Pakistan over the weekend aimed at ending their conflict, but the talks ended early Sunday without any agreement.

Official sources in Pakistan on Friday said that a feverish diplomatic activity followed to bring the two sides back to the negotiating table. It was met with success as both continue to observe the temporary two-week ceasefire, allowing Pakistan to re-launch its mediatory push.

After working behind the scenes, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif embarked on a tri-nation tour on Wednesday, while Field Marshal Asim Munir landed in Tehran on the same day.

The Prime Minister, after discussion with the Saudi and Qatari leaders, reached Turkey on Thursday night as the Field Marshal spent more than 24 hours in Iran meeting its political and military leaders.

Though nothing has been officially said about the outcome of talks between the Pakistani civil and military leaders, security officials back home suddenly became active on Thursday evening,



authorities said.

According to officials in Islamabad, "preparations have started in Islamabad and neighbouring Rawalpindi as thousands of police and paramilitary personnel have started coming from other provinces."

Traditionally, the Islamabad administration seeks support from provinces to help in the work of law enforcement in case mega security arrangements are needed.

During the first round of talks, more than 10,000 security personnel were deployed.

There are also reports that transport companies have been approached by the Islamabad and Rawalpindi districts officials to inform them that traffic coming from other cities or leaving the twin cities may face drastic restrictions.

According to a message shared on social media, such restrictions, once imposed,

may continue until the end of next week. It urged citizens to avoid unnecessary travel during the next week or plan well in advance.

Similarly, educational institutions may be closed in the two cities along with markets in areas close to the airport to reduce traffic on roads, officials said.

US Vice President JD Vance, who led the American delegation, said the talks failed to reach a deal, citing Tehran not forgoing its nuclear programme as one of the key sticking points.

Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, who led the Iranian delegation in marathon peace talks, said that his team raised "forward-looking initiatives, but the opposite side ultimately failed to win the trust of the Iranian delegation in this round of negotiations."

The conflict began after the US and Israel launched attacks on Iran on February 28, paralysing global energy

markets and disrupting trade.

The ceasefire between the US and Iran would expire on April 22.

The chances of a peace deal got further support when President Donald Trump told reporters on Thursday that he may travel to Islamabad if a final agreement with Iran is signed there, while claiming that Tehran has accepted "almost everything" currently under negotiation.

"If a deal is signed in Islamabad, I may go... They want me," he told the reporters on the White House lawn before departing for Nevada and Arizona.

Trump expressed optimism about Pakistan-led diplomatic efforts to end hostilities and secure a settlement before the current ceasefire expires, indicating that he would extend it, although he suggested such a move might not be necessary if a deal is reached in time.

Senior British official resigns over Mandelson appointment, but Starmer insists he won't go

LONDON, APR 17: British Prime Minister Keir Starmer has no plans to resign over revelations that his scandal-tainted pick for UK ambassador to Washington was appointed despite failing security checks, officials said Friday.

Starmer says he was unaware that the Foreign Office had overruled the recommendation of security officials in early 2025 not to give Peter Mandelson the job. Many considered Mandelson a risky appointment because of his past friendship with convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein.

The top Foreign Office civil servant, Olly Robbins, took the fall for the decision and resigned late Thursday. Starmer is due to make a statement to Parliament on the issue on Monday.

That's unlikely to end the danger to the prime minister over his fateful decision to appoint Mandelson, a trade expert and elder

statesman of the governing Labour Party, as envoy to the Trump administration. It was a calculated risk that backfired spectacularly, and could bring down the prime minister.

Opposition politicians expressed disbelief that Starmer could have been unaware Mandelson had failed security vetting. Starmer's office said he only found out this week.

Darren Jones, the chief secretary to the prime minister, said Friday that "the recommendation was to not appoint Peter Mandelson to the role," and that the Foreign Office ignored it. He said that was "astounding," but within the rules.

He said no government minister had been told of the security assessment.

Opposition Conservative Party leader Kemi Badenoch said claims the prime minister didn't know were "completely preposterous."

"This story does not stack up. The prime



minister is taking us for fools," she told the BBC. "All roads lead to a resignation."

Ed Davey, the leader of the centrist Liberal Democrats, said Starmer "must go" if he misled Parliament and lied to the British public. Starmer has repeatedly insisted that "due

process" was followed in the appointment, which was announced in December 2024. Mandelson took up the Washington post in February 2025, after undergoing security vetting.

But documents released by the government in March, after being forced to by Parliament, showed Starmer ignored red flags raised by his staff. He was warned that Mandelson's friendship with Epstein, who died in prison in 2019, exposed the government to "reputational risk."

Starmer fired Mandelson in September 2025 after evidence emerged that he had lied about the extent of his links to Epstein.

Starmer's premiership faced its biggest crisis in February after the release of millions of pages of Epstein-related documents by the U.S. Department of Justice showed the closeness of Mandelson's relationship with the financier, even after Epstein's conviction

in 2008 for sexual offenses involving a minor.

Emails between the men suggested Mandelson had passed on sensitive — and potentially market-moving — government information to the disgraced financier in 2009, when he was a member of Prime Minister Gordon Brown's government.

British police subsequently launched a criminal probe and searched Mandelson's two houses in London and western England. Mandelson was arrested on Feb. 23 on suspicion of misconduct in public office.

He has been released without bail conditions as the police investigation continues. Mandelson has previously denied wrongdoing and hasn't been charged. He does not face allegations of sexual misconduct.

Starmer has apologized to the British public and to Epstein's victims for believing what he has termed "Mandelson's lies." (AP)