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WITH ₹24,454 CRORE INFLOW IN
DECEMBER FIRST WEEK

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ASSAD FLEES, SYRIA JUBILATES

AP ■ DAMASCUS
Syrians poured into streets echoing with celebratory gunfire on Sunday after a stunning rebel advance reached the capital, putting an end to the Assad family's 50 years of iron rule but raising questions about the future of the country and the wider region. Joyful crowds gathered in central squares in Damascus, waving the Syrian revolutionary flag in scenes that recalled the early days of the Arab Spring uprising, before a brutal crackdown and the rise of an insurgency plunged the country into a nearly 14-year civil war. Others gleefully ransacked the presidential palace and the Assad family residence after President Bashar Assad and other top officials vanished, their whereabouts unknown. Russia, a close ally, said



Syrians celebrate the fall of Bashar Assad's government in the town of Bar Elias, Lebanon, near the border with Syria AP/PTI

Assad left the country after negotiations with rebel groups and had given instructions to transfer power peacefully. Abu Mohammed al-Golani, a former al-Qaida commander who cut ties with the group years ago and says he embraces pluralism and religious tolerance, leads the biggest rebel faction and is poised to chart the country's future direction. The end of Assad's rule deals a major blow to Iran and its allies, already weakened by over a year of conflict with Israel. The rebels now face the daunting task of healing bitter divides in a country ravaged by war and still split among different armed factions. Turkey-backed opposition fighters are battling US-allied Kurdish forces in the north, and the Islamic State group is still active in some remote areas.

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Police shower protesting farmers with petals before lobbing teargas

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI/CHANDIGARH
Agitating farmers on Sunday afternoon suspended their "Dilli Chalo" foot march for the day after some of them suffered injuries in tear gas shelling by Haryana police, the protesting farmers will decide on the next course of action on Monday. After the farmers started the foot march on Sunday, they were halted by the multilayered barricading erected by the Haryana Police at the entry point to Haryana from Punjab. A heated argument took place between protesting farmer 'jatha' and security personnel. Haryana Police asked the farmers to show them the requisite



Police personnel shower flowers on farmers agitating at Shambhu border, in Patiala district PTI
list. As the confrontation escalated, tear gas shells were lobbed and water cannons were aimed towards the farmers to disperse them, injuring several protestors. Continued on page 2

Delhi gets colder, its air turns 'very poor'



Photo: Ranjan Dimri/Pioneer

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI
The national Capital recorded its second-lowest daytime temperature of the winter season so far on Sunday at 23.7 degrees Celsius, with some parts of the city receiving thundershowers in the evening. The minimum temperature was recorded at 8 degrees Celsius on Sunday morning, two degrees below the season's average. While the air quality took a downturn again into the 'very poor' category with an AQI reading of 302 after having improved to the 'moderate' level at the start of December. The maximum temperature was recorded at 23.7 degrees Celsius, a notch below normal, compared to 25.4 degrees Celsius on Saturday, according to the weather department. The lowest maximum temperature of the season so far was recorded on November 18, when it dropped to 23.5 degrees Celsius. IGI Airport, Vasant Kunj, Hauz Khas, Malviya Nagar, Kalkaji, Mehrauli, Tughlaqabad, Chhattarpur, IGNOU, Aya Nagar and Deramandi, as well as NCR areas (Noida, Gurugram and Manesar) and Farukhnagar (Haryana) received light rainfall in the evening. According to the India Meteorological Department


(IMD), Delhi is set to experience a sharp dip in temperatures, with the mercury expected to plummet to around 3°C from December 10. This significant drop marks the onset of a cold wave that will grip not only the national capital but also the entire northern belt, including Punjab, Haryana, and Western Uttar Pradesh, until December 14. IMD has also warned of dense fog across parts of northern India on December 9 and 10, potentially reducing visibility and impacting transportation. IMD advised that fog may affect some airports, highways and railway routes in the areas of metropolitan division. "Chances of tripping of power lines in the very dense fog routes," it said. However, the chilling conditions are predicted to intensify due to a combination of factors, including snowfall in the northern hills and the influence of a Western Disturbance, which could bring light showers to the plains. These rains, expected on December 8 and 9, may exacerbate the cold spell further. The IMD has forecast very light rain or drizzle for Monday and moderate fog conditions from Monday to Wednesday. The fog intensification will then reduce as shallow fog is forecast for Thursday.



Black Sunday for Indian Cricket

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI
It turned out to be a forgettable day on Sunday for Indian cricket as each of the three national teams -- senior men's, women's and Under-19 men's sides -- suffered humiliating defeats in their respective games. While the Rohit Sharma-led side suffered a 10-wicket defeat against Australia in the second Test of the five-match Border-Gavaskar Trophy in Adelaide, the Indian women lost by a huge margin of 122 runs against Australia in the second ODI to hand their rivals a 2-0 lead in the three-game series in Brisbane. The Border-Gavaskar Trophy is now levelled at 1-1 after

India won the series opener in Perth by 295 runs. The third Test will be played in Brisbane from December 14. It was a tale of two shoddy batting efforts with the two senior-most players Rohit and Kohli looking well past their best. Jasprit Bumrah gave it all but lacked a potent bowling partner at the other end. For Rohit Sharma, things are getting increasingly difficult as he now has lost the last four Tests that he has captained. In his last six Test matches, he has batted in 12 innings with just one half-century in Bengaluru. The only other innings where he crossed 20-run mark is the 11-ball-23 cameo in Kanpur against Bangladesh. Continued on page 2



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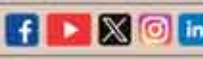
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TMC civic board issues documents to Afghans

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

In a shocking revelation six Afghan nationals who were recently detained in Delhi were issued credentials including birth and death certificates from the civic authorities of Malbazar Municipality run by the Trinamool Congress, sources said. The reports come at a time when the central intelligence agencies have alerted the Home Department about increased activities of the Harkat-ul-Jihad-al Islami Bangladesh (HuJI-B) and Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen (JMB) two radical Islamist terrorist organisations working from Bangladesh but having tenta-

cles in this side of the border too. The Central Bureau of Investigation which has been investigating the Afghan national case has reportedly asked the Malbazar municipality in Jalpaiguri district of North Bengal to furnish related documents based on which the six Afghan nationals were issued birth certificates so as to enable them acquire Aadhar and Voter Identity cards. The Malbazar municipalities have received two such letters from the CBI, the latest one being received as late as on December 5, sources in Jalpaiguri said. Reports also led the rounds that at least 15 illegal immigrants from

Afghanistan have acquired similar credentials from various municipal authorities. A senior district Trinamool Congress leader and a top functionary of the civic body said that he had no information regarding the issuance of such certificates to any foreign nationals and said inquiries had been ordered and actions would be taken if anyone would be found guilty of misconduct. "I was not coming to office for several days and hence had not much information about such developments ... however considering these as routine affair ... I have given instructions to the department concerned to find out the veracity of the reports of



fake certificates being provided to any foreign national ... if so strong action will be taken," the TMC leader said. Another senior functionary of the TMC responsible for handling the municipal body said that he too was not aware of

such incidents having taken place assuring strong action would be taken "if anyone is found guilty." He also said that "first of all it has to be ascertained whether any such birth or death certificate was issued by the municipality because there may be rackets providing fake certificates." Meanwhile, in a parallel development the Home Department has been alerted by the central agencies about increased activities of HuJI and JMB along the India-Bangladesh border. While HuJI was set up in 1992 as an extended organization of Bin Laden's International Islamic Front (IIF), JMB was established as a terror group working in

India, Bangladesh, Malaysia, UK and Australia. Believed to have been nurturing more than 10,000 terrorists the banned organisation was founded by Abdur Rahman in April 1998 in Dhaka's Palampur area and earned notoriety by exploding bombs in 2001 and again detonating 500 small bombs at 300 locations throughout Bangladesh. Both HuJI and JMB which have been working along the India-Bangladesh borders, with diminished capabilities during the Sk Hasina Government have suddenly come alive during the present regime. According to sources the two militant organizations --- one

of which was responsible for the October 2 Khagragarh blast in Birbhum district killing two terrorists --- had recently joined hands and were working in close coordination. "It has been noticed that these organizations which had lost much of their teeth during the Sheikh Hasina regime have suddenly woken up in the past several months and have activated their sleeper cells along the border districts of Malda, Murshidabad and Birbhum," sources said adding the activation of the sleeper cells come in the wake of release of some 250 dreaded terrorists from Bangladesh jails by the present interim Government of Md Yunus.

Policeman shoots colleague dead before killing self near Udhampur

MOHIT KANDHARI ■ JAMMU

In a rare incident of fratricide, a head constable of Jammu and Kashmir police allegedly shot dead his colleague in a fit of anger before shooting himself dead with his service weapon in a moving police van on Jammu Srinagar National Highway near Udhampur early Sunday morning. According to local police, the firing incident occurred near the Kali Mata temple in the Rehambal area of Udhampur around 6.30 am. when three policemen were traveling in a van bearing registration number JK05 E 4703 from North Kashmir's Sopore to the Subsidiary Training Centre, Talwara in Reasi district. Preliminary investigations revealed a head constable, hailing from Kashmir, opened fire at the driver over some argument before committing suicide with his service weapon. Another selection grade constable, who was also traveling in the vehicle, escaped unhurt and is being questioned to ascertain the real provocation before the fir-



ing took place. Confirming the same, Senior Superintendent of Police, Udhampur, Amod Ashok Nagpure said the accused used his AK 47 assault rifle in the firing. "The policemen traveling in the police van were posted in Sopore and belonged to Kashmir. Earlier the Udhampur police posted on X (earlier Twitter), "Today, at about 6.30 am, Police Station Rehambal received information that two policemen from Sopore traveling towards STC Talwara in a department vehicle have suffered bullet injuries due to firing." Initial investigation reveals that it is a case of fratricide and suicide. Senior police officers have reached the spot

India's success with UPI offers replicable model for other nations: Experts

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

India's success with UPI offers a replicable model for other nations, a paper written by noted experts asserted, arguing that how this indigenous fintech solution combined public digital infrastructure with open banking policies to reduce financial exclusion, foster innovation, and promote equitable economic growth. The paper, which runs into 67 pages, titled 'Open Banking and Digital Payments: Implications for Credit Access' was authored by Shashwat Alok, Pulak Ghosh, Nirupama Kulkarni and Manju Puri. Among key highlights of the paper are that UPI has enabled underserved groups, including subprime and new-to-credit borrowers, to access formal credit for the first time. In regions with high UPI adoption, loans to new-to-credit borrowers grew by 4 per cent, and to subprime borrowers by 8 per cent, the paper claimed. Unified Payment Interface is



India's leading digital payment platform. Payments through digital means in India are hitting fresh highs, as its citizens are increasingly adopting the emerging modes of transacting on the internet. Among others, a key emphasis of the Indian government has been on ensuring that the benefits of UPI are not limited to India only; other countries, too, benefit from it. Since its launch in 2016, the Unified Payments Interface (UPI) has transformed financial access in India, enabling 300 million individuals and 50 million merchants to perform seamless digital transactions. By October 2023, 75 per cent of all retail digital payments in India were through UPI.

Fight breaks out between trainee IPS officer and UPSC coach

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

A fight broke out between a 2023-batch trainee IPS officer and a UPSC coach at a wedding in southwest Delhi's Kapashera area. According to the police on Sunday, the incident took place on December 6 and resulted in both sides filing complaints at the local police station. Vikas Dhayal, a Rajendra Nagar resident and a civil services coach, said that the trainee officer struck him on his head with a glass. No immediate reaction was available from the officer. "We are checking the CCTV footage of the entire incident. Initially, we got to know that

there was some issue between two people and one of them hit another with a glass. We have received two different complaints. Both complaints are under investigation," a senior police officer said. Dhayal shared a video on X, purportedly showing the assault, including images of his blood-smeared face and clothes. He alleged that police refused to file an FIR first, and only relented when his post went viral. "The police didn't take any action on my complaint on a life-threatening attack by IPS trainee Rahul Balhara, visible on cctv clearly. But, now after the twitter post, the "upright" Delhi Police lodged a complaint against me, when I didn't lay a finger anyone," he said in a post on X.

Black Sunday for Indian Cricket

From page 1

If one looks at the pattern of 37-year-old Rohit's dismissals, it is very similar to Krishnamachari Srikkanth and Virender Sehwag's way of getting out at the end of their careers. These three were gifted with exceptional hand-eye coordination where they picked length at ease during their prime and reacted accordingly. Now with reflexes slowing down, the reaction to the length is a split second slower and the way Rana, Taskin Ahmed, Tim Southee and now Pat Cummins have squared him, it speaks volumes about where he is going wrong. He is still trying to cover the line of his deliveries but wrong judgement of length means is causing trouble. Number six wouldn't solve his issues and he needs to again bat in top three. For Virat Kohli, the hundred at Perth now seems like "buffet runs" which came easily after KL Rahul and Yashasvi Jaiswal added 201 runs and by the time, he came in, India were ahead by 300 runs and the contest was as good as dead. To his credit, he hung in there for a 100 but it was tired attack that he belted to signal end of a prolonged lean patch. His problems with the fourth stump line has persisted since James Anderson exposed it in 2014. The 26-year-old Kohli, back then, worked hard and managed around his technical deficiency of edging behind stumps. He would stand closer to off-stump to cover the line but at 36, the movements have slowed and the effects are showing. If India need to be competitive in the remainder of the series, the two veterans need to figure out how to get over the slump or it might just be too late. If India had to pull off a coup, it needed Rishabh Pant's (28) excellence but Starc, the undisputed 'OG' of 'pink ball'

Tests with 74 victims, bowled a delivery on length which the Indian batter jabbed at without pressing forward fully. If that was not enough, the Indian Under-19 side lost by 59 runs against Bangladesh in the final of the Under-19 Asia Cup in Dubai. Chasing a paltry 199, title favourites India were shot out for a mere 139 in 35.2 overs by the defending champions Bangladesh in the summit clash to lift the Under-19 Asia Cup trophy. The batters could not capitalise on the good job done by the bowlers as India suffered a massive 59-run defeat to Bangladesh in the low-scoring U19 Asia Cup title clash, here Sunday. After India produced a fine performance with the ball to keep Bangladesh to a mere 198 in 49.1 overs, it looked like the job was half done since the batters had played their roles to perfection since defeat in the tournament-opener to Pakistan. However, in the crunch final, India lost wickets in a flurry on two occasions which broke the back of their chase, with Bangladesh bowlers and fielders doing their part well in exerting further pressure. Chasing 199, India were bundled out for 139 in 35.2 overs as none of their specialist batters could play an impact knock, including the youngest IPL star Vaibhav Suryavanshi who managed a mere 9 (7 balls, 2 fours). India suffered early blows in form of Suryavanshi and Ayush Mhatre (1) to stumble to 24 for two inside five overs. With the summit clash placed precariously, Bangladesh edged ahead by keeping the rest of the Indian batters largely quiet, drying up the boundaries and even the singles. C Andre Siddarth's (20 off 35 balls) chance was ended by Rizan Hossain in the 12th over,

which was another crucial point in the game as the balance tilted heavily in favour of Bangladesh. But it was Iqbal Hossain Emon who made the most of the situation as he snaffled three vital wickets to severely dent India's hopes, accounting for KP Karthikeya (21), Nikhil Kumar (0) and Harvansh Pangalia (6) in quick succession. Mohamed Amaan resisted for long, scoring a 65-ball 26 but his effort and Hardik Raj's late 21-ball 24 also was not enough for India to turn the tables. The end came swiftly for India as Azizul Hakim took 3/8 from his 2.2 overs towards the end. Earlier in the first half, Rizan Hossain's 47, Mohammad Shihab James' 40 and Farid Hasan's 39 proved to be the difference in a contest wherein batters mostly struggled for fluency in the middle. India dominated the Bangladeshi batters for the entirety of the first half as they could only get near the 200-run mark while consuming most of their allotted overs. Yudhajit Guha (2/29) was the pick among the performers from India as Chetan Sharma (2/48) and Raj (2/41) also chipped in with a couple of wickets each. Kiran Chormale returned a measly 7-0-19-1 while Karthikeya (1/37) and Mhatre (1/9) also chipped in with a wicket each. Meanwhile, in the second Women's ODI against Australia, India were no match to the hosts and were bowled out for 249 in 44.5 overs. O opener Richa Ghosh was the top-scorer who took 72 balls for her 54, while the likes of Jemimah Rodrigues (43) and skipper Harmanpreet Kaur (38) failed to convert their starts. Minnu Mani waged a lone battle with 45-ball unbeaten 46 but it proved insufficient.

Police shower protesting farmers with petals...

From page 1

The teargas shells forced the farmers, some of whom had covered their faces and were wearing protective eyewear, to get back a few metres. Some were seen covering the shells with wet jute bags. Ambala police had earlier said the farmer outfits, which are agitating for a legal guarantee for Minimum Support Price and other demands, can march to Delhi only after getting permission from the national capital administration. The protesters, dubbed as 'marjeevras', (someone willing to die for a cause), were stopped only a few metres into the march and the standoff continued for over three hours. The farmers called off their march for the day following action of security forces. Farmer leader Baldev Singh Zira, who led the 'jatha' on Sunday, said it was a "drama" by Haryana Police. "Along with tea, and biscuits, they fired teargas shells," he said. "They have been exposed," he said. As the protesters reached the barricades, a few police personnel climbed the roof of a tin shed where security personnel have been stationed,

and threw flower petals on a group of farmers. A farmer said, "They are saying that our names were not on the list. We do not know which list they have. When we asked them whether they would allow us to move ahead after verifying our identities, they told us then we would have to show the permission." A Haryana security personnel was seen asking farmers to show permission to march to Delhi and questioned the identity of some of the protesters. Punjab farmer leader Sarwan Singh Pandher in the evening said six farmers were injured and one of them was rushed to the Post-Graduate Institute of Medical Education and Research (PGIMER) in Chandigarh. "We have called back the 'jatha' (group of 101 farmers)," he said. "Whatever happened today was seen by the whole country," said Pandher as he slammed the use of teargas against farmers. "The (Haryana) administration used tactics like offering biscuits, 'langar', showering flower petals. Immediately after showering flowers, they (Haryana security personnel)

and an investigation is underway," it said. Earlier, an incident of fratricide was reported in the Udhampur district in July 2022. At that time a jawan of the Indo Tibetan Police Force, deployed on Amarnath yatra duty, opened fire on his colleagues near Devika Ghat community centre. In the firing incident, three ITBP jawans received injuries while one of them was found dead inside the Devika Ghat community centre. On July 15, 2022, Two soldiers of the Indian army were killed while two others were injured in a similar firing incident inside Surankote-based territorial army camp in Poonch

border points between Punjab and Haryana since February 13 after their march to Delhi was stopped by security forces. Apart from legal guarantee for Minimum Support Price (MSP) the farmers are demanding a farm debt waiver, pension for farmers and farm labourers, no hike in electricity tariff, withdrawal of police cases (against farmers), and "justice" for the victims of the 2021 Lakhimpur Kheri violence. Reinstatement of the Land Acquisition Act, 2013 and compensation to the families of farmers who died during the previous agitation in 2020-21 are also part of their demands. Mobile Internet and the sending of bulk messages have been suspended in parts of Ambala district. District officials have already issued orders banning gatherings of five or more people, and government-run and private schools were shut for the day on the administration's order. To prevent disruptions, the Haryana Police had tightened security at Ambala's border with Punjab with multilayered barricades at the Shambhu border on National Highway 44 and also deployed water cannons.

Earlier Haryana Police has written to its Punjab counterpart asking it to ensure media personnel are stopped at a "safe distance" from the protest site for the sake of their safety. It had earlier asked the farmers not to proceed with the march and cited a prohibitory order clamped by the Ambala administration under Section 163 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS) that bans unlawful assembly of five or more people in the district. In Delhi, Security was tightened at Delhi's Singhu border on Sunday. "Delhi Police is on alert and security has been tightened at the Singhu border. A skeletal deployment has been made at the Singhu border but it may increase as per the situation at the Shambu border," a senior police officer said Traffic may also be hit due to the security arrangements at the border and in the central part of Delhi, he said. A strict vigil is also being maintained at the Noida border as another group of farmers from Uttar Pradesh has been protesting there, he added. The officer said police are ready to tackle any situation.

ASSAD FLEES, SYRIA JUBILATES

From page 1

Syrian state television aired a video statement early Sunday by a group of rebels saying that Assad had been overthrown and all prisoners had been set free. They called on people to preserve the institutions of "the free Syrian state." The rebels later announced a curfew in Damascus from 4 pm to 5 am. The rebels said they freed people held at the notorious Saydnaya prison, where rights guard says thousands were tortured and killed. A video circulating online purported to show rebels breaking open cell doors and freeing dozens of female prisoners, many of whom appeared shocked and confused. At least one small child could be seen among them. Rebel commander Anas Salkhadi, who appeared on State TV later in the day,

sought to reassure Syria's religious and ethnic minorities, saying: "Syria is for everyone, no exceptions. Syria is for Druze, Sunnis, Alawites, and all sects." "We will not deal with people the way the Assad family did," he added. Residents of Damascus gathered to pray mosques and to celebrate in the squares, chanting "God is great." People also chanted anti-Assad slogans and honked car horns. Teen boys picked up weapons that had apparently been discarded by security forces and fired them in the air. Revellers filled Umayyad Square in the city centre, where the Defence Ministry is located. Men fired celebratory gunshots into the air and some waved the three-starred Syrian flag that predates the Assad government and was adopted by the revolutionaries. Soldiers and police officers left

their posts and fled, and looters broke into the Defence Ministry. Videos from Damascus showed families wandering into the presidential palace, with some emerging carrying stacks of plates and other household items. "I did not sleep last night, and I refused to sleep until I heard the news of his fall," said Mohammed Amer Al-Oulabi, 44, who works in the electricity sector. "From Idlib to Damascus, it only took them (the opposition forces) a few days, thank God. May God bless them, the heroic lions who made us proud." Syria's al-Watan newspaper, which was historically pro-government, wrote: "We are facing a new page for Syria. We thank God for not shedding more blood. We believe and trust that Syria will be for all Syrians." The newspaper added that

media workers should not be blamed for publishing government statements in the past, saying: "We only carried out the instructions and published the news they sent us." A statement from the Alawite sect - to which Assad belongs and which has formed the core of his base - called on young Syrians to be "calm, rational and prudent and not to be dragged into what tears apart the unity of our country." The rebels mainly come from the Sunni Muslim majority in Syria, which also has sizable Druze, Christian and Kurdish communities. Syrian Prime Minister Mohammed Ghazi Jalali said in a video statement that the government was ready to "extend its hand" to the opposition and turn its functions over to a transitional government. A video shared on Syrian opposition media

showed a group of armed men escorting him out of his office and to the Four Seasons hotel on Sunday. Rami Abdurrahman of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights told The Associated Press that Assad took a flight Sunday from Damascus. A senior diplomat from the United Arab Emirates, which had sought to rehabilitate Assad's image and has welcomed high-profile exiles in recent years, declined to comment on his whereabouts when asked by reporters at a conference in Bahrain. Anwar Gargash said Assad's destination at this point is a "footnote in history," comparing it to the long exile of German Kaiser Wilhelm II after World War I. Assad has been accused of war crimes and crimes against humanity during the war, including a 2013 chemical

weapons attack on the outskirts of the capital. There was no immediate comment from Iran, which had been Assad's staunchest supporter. The Iranian Embassy in Damascus was ransacked after apparently having been abandoned. The rebel advances since November 27 were the largest in recent years, and saw the cities of Aleppo, Hama and Homs fall in a matter of days as the Syrian army melted away. Russia, Iran and Lebanon's Hezbollah militant group, which provided crucial support to Assad throughout the uprising, abandoned him in the final days as they reeled from other conflicts. The rebels are led by the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham group, or HTS, which has its origins in al-Qaida and is considered a terrorist organization by the United States and the United Nations.

Its leader, al-Golani, has sought to recast the group as a moderate and tolerant force. HTS set up a "salvation government" in 2017 to administer a large region in northwestern Syria under its control. "Golani has made history and sparked hope among millions of Syrians," said Doreen Khalifa, a senior adviser with the International Crisis Group and an expert on Syrian groups. "But he and the rebels now face a formidable challenge ahead. One can only hope they rise to the occasion." The UN's special envoy for Syria, Geir Pedersen, called Saturday for urgent talks in Geneva to ensure an "orderly political transition." The Gulf nation of Qatar, a key regional mediator, hosted an emergency meeting of foreign ministers and top officials from eight countries with

interests in Syria late Saturday. The participants included Iran, Saudi Arabia, Russia and Turkey. Majed bin Mohammed al-Ansari, Qatar's Foreign Ministry spokesman, told reporters that they agreed on the need "to engage all parties on the ground," including the HTS, and that the main concern is "stability and safe transition." The Israeli military said Sunday it has deployed forces in a demilitarized buffer zone along its northern frontier with Syria following the rebel offensive there. The military said the deployment was meant to provide security for residents of the Israeli-annexed Golan Heights. Israel captured the territory in the 1967 Mideast war and the international community, except for the United States, views it as occupied.

Special Cell arrests wanted criminal from Hyderabad after 2,500 km chase

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Delhi Police's Special Cell on Saturday arrested a wanted criminal, with a bounty of Rs 2 lakhs, from Hyderabad allegedly involved in the illegal trafficking of Indian youths and forcing them to work in fake call centres engaging in cyber fraud. According to the police, the arrest came after a 2,500-kilometre non-stop chase. The accused has been identified as Kamran Haider alias Zaidi, resident of Delhi's Jasola, who was wanted by the National Investigation Agency (NIA) in case related to illegal human trafficking across

international borders. A reward of Rs. 2,00,000 was declared on the accused Kamran by the NIA and claimed that he was trying to go abroad to Thailand and Laos. "After a long persevering chase of 2,500 km, Kamran Haider alias Zaidi was nabbed from Hyderabad," Deputy Commissioner of Police (Special Cell) Manoj C said. According to police, on May 27, a case under section 420 (Cheating and dishonestly inducing delivery of property), 370 (trafficking), 342 (Punishment for wrongful confinement) and 506 (criminal intimidation) of the

Indian Penal Code (IPC) was registered at New Friends Colony Police Station on the complaint of one Naresh Lakhavath, who said he was searching for a job when he came across Ali International Service, a consultancy firm supposedly based in New Delhi. "The firm offered him a job in Thailand and Laos and he was eventually sent to Thailand on the pretext of getting a job. But when he reached there, his passport was snatched and he was forced to work for a Chinese company which used to scam Indian people online," the DCP said. An investigation carried out



by the NIA identified Manjoor Alam alias Guddu, Sahil, Ashish alias Akhil, Pawan Yadav alias Afzal and Afroz, and Haider as key conspirators. "All five were involved in trafficking vulnerable Indian

youth to the Golden Triangle Region in Laos where they were forced to commit cyber scams targeting European and American citizens," the officer said, adding that they operated through Ali International Services, which functioned as a front. "The main accused was identified as Kamran Haider. Kamran Haider absconded and despite all efforts accused Kamran Haider could not be arrested. He was trying to go abroad to Thailand and Laos," the DCP said. Another officer said that he along with his syndicate members hatched the whole conspiracy. "It was Zaidi

who had facilitated the entire operation and was also involved in extorting money through crypto currency wallets from victims who tried to escape the clutches of the Chinese scammers, as per NIA investigation," he said, adding that this syndicate head by Zaidi was indulged from operation of unlicensed manpower supply agency, to illegal transfer/ transport of potential victims for criminal activities in South Eastern Asian countries. "The human trafficked persons were being used as a slave and forced to work inhumane conditions," the officer said.

Haider continuously changed his locations from one state to another after he absconded. Teams were stationed in Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh to nab him, police said. "Zaidi was located in Hyderabad, Telangana. Immediately two different teams of the special cell were sent to Hyderabad. He was apprehended on December 7 after a long persevering chase of 2,500 kilometres by the team without any rest. "He was apprehended near Nampally Railway Station, Hyderabad, Telangana while trying to escape to another hideout," said the DCP.

Nasir removed from post of Bar Council of Delhi's Vice Chairman

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Bar Council of India (BCI) has removed Sanjeev Nasir from the post of Bar Council of Delhi's vice chairman and has called for a Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) probe into the authenticity of his LL.B. (Hons.) degree. Nasir, who also leads the legal cell of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), is under scrutiny following allegations of possessing a fabricated law degree. Nasir, who is also the president of Aam Aadmi Party's legal cell, holds a law degree from Devi Ahilya Bai Vishwavidyalaya, Indore. In a meeting held on December 7, 2024, the BCI resolved to take decisive action regarding irregularities in the LL.B. (Hons.) degree purportedly issued to Nasir by Devi Ahilyabai Vishwavidyalaya, Indore. This decision stems from an inquiry conducted by a sub-committee formed on September 3, 2024, in response to directives from the Delhi High Court. In a release issued on Sunday, the BCI said, "The sub-committee constituted by the BCI, after a thorough enquiry, concluded that the authenticity of the LLB (Hons) degree of



Sanjeev Nasir is highly questionable." It said the BCI's general council had resolved to adopt the committee's report and the BCI secretary had been directed to approach the CBI, requesting it to probe the degree's authenticity. "Pending the outcome of the investigation, Sanjeev Nasir is removed from the position of vice chairman, Bar Council of Delhi," said the release signed by BCI secretary Srimanto Sen. The non-cooperation and obstructive behavior of university officials during the inquiry further cast serious doubts on the authenticity of the degree. Consequently, the sub-committee concluded that the legitimacy of Nasir's LL.B. (Hons.) degree is highly questionable. It said the measure was necessary to safeguard the integrity and dignity of the legal pro-

fession and ensure public confidence in it. "The BCI is conscientious to uphold the prestige and honour of the legal profession and remains resolute in its resolve to uphold its sanctity to ensure that only those meeting the highest standards of ethics and qualifications are permitted to practice law in India," the release said. This development follows a series of legal challenges concerning Nasir's qualifications. In August 2024, the Delhi High Court dismissed a petition seeking his removal, noting that the verification report from the concerned university stated his law degree is genuine. The plea, filed by Naresh Chand Gupta, former President of the Delhi Bar Association, sought a writ of quo warranto against Nasir. Gupta alleged that Nasir was enrolled with the Bar Council of Delhi (BCD) using a forged and fabricated LLB degree. Gupta requested that the BCD and the Bar Council of India (BCI) remove Nasir and another advocate, Dalip Kumar Rana, from the roll of advocates and file an FIR against them for their alleged involvement in a "racket."

Negligence of AAP Govt: BJP protests with slum dwellers

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi BJP workers along with the slum dwellers on Sunday held a protest together in about 968 small and big slums of Delhi regarding the local problems arising due to the negligence of the AAP government. Their problems were raised by BJP MPs, MLAs and Municipal Councilors raising the issues people face in slums. "An outrage is being seen in the slums against the Arvind Kejriwal government and the biggest reason for this is their breach of promise," the party in a statement said, adding that on 15 December, BJP workers will again do night stay and public awareness in all the slums of Delhi. Addressing the public outrage protest held in Govindpuri slum of Kalkaji assembly constituency, South Delhi BJP MP Ramveer Singh Bidhuri said that due to the corruption of Kejriwal's party government, the condition of slums has become bad. "No roads, no cleanliness and no drinking water. Today, the slum dwellers of Delhi are deprived of even basic facilities. As soon as the BJP government is formed, Delhi BJP will work to fulfill the dreams of slum dwellers," he said. Northwest Delhi BJP MP



Yongendra Chandolia also participated in the slum public outrage in JJ Colony of Bawana and along with the local people supported the allegation of breach of promise against Arvind Kejriwal.

Addressing the protest, he said, "Illegal recovery is being made in electricity bills. Toilets and drains are in a bad condition. Therefore, due to the pathetic conditions, our brothers and sisters living in slums

are forced to live a hellish life. For which the head of the corrupt system Arvind Kejriwal is responsible." West Delhi BJP MP Kamaljeet Sehrawat while addressing the public anger of Matiala

Assembly Goyala Dairy slum colony said that for the last 10 years Delhi government has considered slum dwellers as vote bank only for its politics and today its result is that slum dwellers are forced to live a hellish life. New Delhi BJP MP Bansuri Swaraj raised slogans against Arvind Kejriwal along with the local people in the protest organized in Kailash Park Cluster of Moti Nagar and said that today all the slum dwellers of Delhi are on the streets regarding the local problems arising due to the negligence of the AAP government. Chandni Chowk BJP MP Praveen Khandelwal protested strongly against the failure and breach of promise of the ruling party Bastei of Wazirpur. He said, "The neglect of the citizens of Seva Bastei will not be tolerated anymore. Now we will not tolerate it, we will change." Leader of Opposition Vijender Gupta while addressing the protesters in the protest held at Valmiki Mandir Begumpur Malviya Nagar said that malaria, diarrhoea, TB, skin diseases and respiratory diseases have become common in these settlements due to the negligence of the Arvind Kejriwal government.

99 per cent of city residents support its welfare schemes: AAP

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Ahead of the Delhi assembly elections, the AAP on Sunday claimed that 99 per cent of Delhi residents support its welfare schemes like free electricity, water subsidies, and complimentary bus rides for women among others. The ruling party has intensified its 'Revdi Par Charcha' campaign to mobilise grassroots volunteers ahead of the Delhi Assembly elections scheduled to be held in February next year. The AAP is eyeing a third consecutive term in Delhi. "The programme involves hosting 2,000 public meetings daily across the capital to gather feedback on the party's welfare schemes and ensure greater public engagement," the party said in a statement. During these discussions, the party claimed, Delhiites have expressed overwhelming sat-



isfaction with the AAP's welfare programmes, including free electricity, water, education, healthcare, bus travel for women, and pilgrimage trips

for senior citizens. "According to party workers, 99 per cent of residents support the continuation of these benefits, which they say have

significantly improved their quality of life and reduced household expenses," the statement said. It added that the party con-

venor Arvind Kejriwal has pledged to incorporate the feedback from these meetings into future policies, hoping to strengthen its welfare model, which has been the cornerstone of its governance over the last decade. Residents attending the 'Revdi Par Charcha' meetings have shared stories of how these schemes have helped them save between Rs 6,000 and Rs 8,000 monthly. For families earning Rs 8,000 to Rs 10,000, these savings have been transformative as they have effectively increased their disposable income, it said. "The AAP has recently announced a new scheme: a monthly allowance of Rs 1,000 for every woman aged 18 and above... A step toward women's empowerment, it aims to support the daily expenses and remove barriers to education for young girls," it added.

Man held for robbing ₹5.5 lakh from west Delhi house

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi Police have arrested a 27-year-old man who robbed Rs 5.5 lakh from a house in north-west Delhi, an official said on Sunday. The incident took place in Bharat Nagar area when the accused had stolen cash and valuables meant for a wedding, which got cancelled due to the theft. Arun, is a habitual offender and he was arrested from Wazirpur area, Deputy Commissioner of Police (Northwest) Abhishek Dhanias said. He had stolen cash and valuables meant for a wedding, which got cancelled due to the theft, the DCP said. The case came to light on November 26 when the complainant, who runs a nursery, reported the theft. He had saved Rs 5.5 lakh and purchased clothing for his sister's



wedding in Uttar Pradesh, the officer said. The theft took place around 4.30 am when the complainant left his bag unattended while taking a bath, Dhanias said. An FIR was registered at Bharat Nagar police station and an investigation was launched in the matter, the police said. Police team analysed CCTV footage and conducted raids across the city. Based on a tip-off, the team arrested Arun,

who confessed to the crime during interrogation, they said. Police recovered most of the stolen property, including cash and personal documents of the complainant, the DCP said. Investigations revealed that Arun is a habitual offender with 11 prior cases of robbery and theft against him. He admitted to committing the crime to fund his addiction of drugs and alcohol, the officer said.

Roof of house collapses in Shani Bazar, six members of family injured

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

A roof collapse at a two-storey house in the Shani Bazar area of outer north Delhi left six members of a family injured on Sunday morning, with the incident also sparking a fire. The accident occurred around 7 am when the family was reportedly preparing breakfast in the kitchen, leading to both burn and impact injuries. According to the police, they received an emergency call about the fire and building collapse at 7:53 am. The incident took place in the Narela area of Delhi, and two fire tenders were immediately rushed to the location. Delhi Fire Services chief Atul Garg confirmed that the roof of a Delhi Development Authority (DDA) Janta flat had collapsed, causing the Piped Natural Gas (PNG) pipeline to break, which ignited a fire. The fire spread throughout the house, causing extensive damage and injuries to the occupants.



The family members who were injured have been identified as 40-year-old Raju, his wife 35 year old Rajeshwari, their 18 year old son Rahul, and their three daughters 12 year old Mohini, five year old Varsha, and three years old Mahi. At the time of the incident, the family was in the kitchen, and the collapse trapped them under the debris. Neighbours quickly arrived at the scene and assisted the injured before emergency services reached the spot. Initially, there were concerns that a gas cylinder explosion had caused the collapse.

Eyewitnesses feared that a cylinder might have exploded, triggering the building's collapse and subsequent fire. However, after a thorough inspection, authorities confirmed that there had been no cylinder blast. Instead, the collapse was caused by the roof's failure, and the rupture of the PNG gas pipeline led to the fire. The six injured family members were rushed to Raja Harishchandra Hospital for medical treatment. According to doctors, they sustained a combination of injuries from the falling debris and burns caused by the proximity of the fire. Raju, the father, suffered 52 per cent burn injuries, while his wife Rajeshwari and son Rahul sustained 45 per cent burn injuries each. The three daughters, Mohini, Varsha, and Mahi, suffered burns to 50 per cent, 6 per cent, and 8 per cent of their bodies, respectively. The police are continuing to investigate the cause of the collapse and the fire.

Massive rally organised to raise awareness on deteriorating state of Yamuna

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The streets of Badarpur echoed with the powerful slogan 'Save Yamuna, Save Delhi' on Sunday as a massive rally was organized to raise awareness about the deteriorating state of the Yamuna River. The event, held under the leadership of Yamuna monk Ravi Shankar Tiwari, featured the Bhikshatana Mahayagya, a significant spiritual ritual. The procession began from Badarpur NTPC Gate-3, marking the start of a large-scale public movement to protect and restore the Yamuna River. The rally, organized by Surendra Singh Bidhuri, founder of the Swabhimani Desh Ka Sangathan, drew an enthusiastic crowd of supporters who gathered to show their commitment to saving the Yamuna. Participants pledged their support with body, mind, and financial contributions to the cause. During the procession, partic-



ipants, including women and children, welcomed the Yamuna Bhikshus (monks) with flowers and garlands at various locations, including the Molarband Market. Women performed aarti and applied tilak to honor the procession while the NCC cadets marched in their uniforms. The central message of the event was to raise awareness about the environmental importance of the Yamuna River for the people of Delhi. Bidhuri emphasized that

Yamuna is the lifeline of Delhi, and its purification is crucial for the survival of the city itself. He urged Delhi residents to come together and make sacrifices to save the river. Tiwari referred to Yamuna as being on a ventilator, symbolizing the river's dire condition. He assured the crowd that the campaign would focus on natural healing methods to restore the river. "We have set out to treat Yamuna in a natural way, and our method is naturopathy," he said.

Vijay Goel leads march to Ghazipur to protest against issue of garbage, landfill mountains

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Senior BJP leader and former Union Minister Vijay Goel on Sunday led a march from the Fish Market to Ghazipur to protest against the Kejriwal Government regarding the issue of garbage and landfill mountains in Delhi. Speaking on the matter, Goel stated, "Be it water and sewage, pollution, broken roads, garbage and landfill mountains, deteriorating hospitals, schools, parking issues, law and order, corruption, or the polluted Yamuna - the Kejriwal government has done nothing

for the past 10 years and keeps asking for more time every year, but no action has been taken to resolve these problems." Goel said that instead of reducing, the landfill mountains are only growing larger. "Meanwhile, the Delhi government continues to shirk its responsibility, blaming the Centre or neighbouring states, without formulating a single concrete plan to address the issue," he claimed, adding that the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) disposes of over 3,400 tonnes of fresh waste daily at the Ghazipur and Bhalswa landfills.



Ranjana Dimri

BJP-Congress war of words over Soros escalates

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The BJP on Sunday alleged that former Congress president Sonia Gandhi has links to an organisation financed by the George Soros Foundation and which has backed the idea of Kashmir as an independent nation. This association shows the influence of foreign entities in India's internal affairs, the ruling party said in a series of posts on X.

Meanwhile, notwithstanding the US' dismissal of BJP's allegations that it is backing attempts to destabilise India, party MP Nishikant Dubey said he would pose 10 questions to Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi in the Lok Sabha on the issue. He said media portal Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) and Hungarian-American businessman have colluded with the Opposition to ruin India's economy and defame the Modi Government.

The BJP claimed that Sonia Gandhi, as the co-president



of the Forum of the Democratic Leaders in Asia Pacific (FDL-AP) Foundation, is linked to an organisation financed by the George Soros Foundation. "Notably, the FDL-AP Foundation has expressed their views that treat Kashmir as a separate entity," the party said.

"This association between Sonia Gandhi and an organisation that has backed the idea of Kashmir as an independent nation expresses the influence of foreign entities on India's internal affairs and the political impact of such connections," it said. The BJP further claimed that Sonia Gandhi's

chairmanship of the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation led to a partnership with the George Soros Foundation, "displaying the influence of foreign funding on Indian organisations". "Rahul Gandhi's press conference on Adani was live telecast by George Soros-funded OCCRP, which

Gandhi used as a source to criticise Adani. It shows nothing but their strong and dangerous relationship and highlights their attempts to derail the Indian economy. "Congress MP Shashi Tharoor has publicly acknowledged George Soros as an 'old friend'. It's something truly noteworthy," it said.

The BJP's allegations come after it claimed on Thursday that the US "deep state" colluded with OCCRP and Rahul Gandhi to damage India's image. The US on Saturday rejected BJP's allegations that organisations funded by its State Department and elements in the American "deep state" were behind attempts to destabilise India through targeted attacks on Prime Minister Narendra Modi and business tycoon Gautam Adani. A spokesperson at the US embassy described the allegations as "disappointing" and asserted that the US government has been a champion of media freedom around the world. Reacting to

the US embassy's statement, BJP MP Dubey said, "Yesterday I read the statement of the US embassy officials again and again. They admitted that the US government funds OCCRP and Soros' foundation also funds it." The job of OCCRP and Soros is to ruin India's economy and defame the Modi government in connivance with opposition leaders, he said in his post on X in Hindi. "After yesterday's statement, I will have to ask Rahul Gandhi my 10 questions in the Lok Sabha. The opposition is trying to suppress my voice in Parliament. Lok Sabha Rule 357 gives me the right to ask questions. Waiting for tomorrow," the MP said.

The BJP has cited Gandhi's use of OCCRP reports to attack the Adani Group and accuse it of having closeness with the government. "It's disappointing that the ruling party in India would make these kinds of accusations," the US embassy spokesperson said on Saturday.

Tharoor responds to BJP after US rejects allegations

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Congress leader Shashi Tharoor on Sunday slammed the BJP after the US rejected the ruling party's allegations that the former Congress president had links to the so-called "buffer zones" to which our troops and livestock herders are "denied access" that they previously had. "These statements taken together suggest that the MEA is accepting a settlement that does not return the LAC to the April 2020 status quo as desired by the Army and the nation. Elements in the American 'deep state' were behind attempts to destabilise India and said this 'attack-dog' behaviour is an embarrassment to India. Reacting to Tharoor, Union Minister Kiren Rijiju accused Tharoor is in the payroll of Soros. In a post in X, Tharoor said, "It's clear the BJP neither understands democracy nor diplomacy. They are so



blinded by petty politics that they forget the value of a free press and vibrant independent civil society organisations in a democracy, and they are oblivious to a ruling party's responsibilities in maintaining good relations with key foreign countries." "This attack-dog behaviour is an embarrassment to India," the former Minister of State posted.

PM Modi hails elevation of Indian priest George Jacob Koovakad as Cardinal

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Indian priest George Jacob Koovakad being elevated as a Cardinal of the Holy Roman Catholic Church by Pope Francis is a matter of great joy and pride for India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said on Sunday. He said George Cardinal Koovakad has devoted his life to the service of humanity as an ardent follower of Jesus Christ.

"A matter of great joy and pride for India! Delighted at His Eminence George Jacob Koovakad being created a Cardinal of the Holy Roman Catholic Church by His Holiness Pope Francis," Modi said in a social media post.

"His Eminence George Cardinal Koovakad has devoted his life in service of humanity as an ardent follower of Lord Jesus Christ. My best wishes for his future endeavours," the prime

minister said. In a grand consistory held in the Vatican on Saturday, 51-year-old Koovakad was elevated to the rank of cardinal by Pope Francis.

The ceremony, held at the famous St Peter's Basilica and attended by clergy and dignitaries from around the world, witnessed the induction of 21 new cardinals from various countries. The ceremony began at 8.30 pm (IST) marking a procession with 21 cardinal-designated to the altar of St Peter's Basilica. Later, the Pope addressed the gathering and handed over the ceremonial cap and ring to the cardinal-designate, followed by a certificate accompanied by prayers.

Koovakad's appointment brings the total number of Indian cardinals to six, further strengthening the country's representation at the Vatican.



Railway and Information Broadcasting Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw on Sunday inspected the to be commissioned 2.2 kilometres double line New Railway Bridge over Ganga in Prayagraj where the Mahakumbh is scheduled early next year. The old bridge was single line and of more than 100 years which will be decommissioned shortly. The work for the New Ganga Bridge started in October 2020 and will be commissioned soon by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Railways also announced that it will run 13000 trains for the Mahakumbh between early January 2025 till February 2025. Pioneer Photo

Congress slams BJP over its statement in Parliament on India-China tie

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Criticising the government Cover its statement in Parliament on India-China ties, the Congress on Sunday claimed that the Modi government has agreed to a "new normal" over the "old normal" prevailing before April 2020 which was unilaterally disturbed by China. It also demanded that Parliament be allowed to debate the full gamut of the relationship between the two countries.

Congress chief spokesman Jairam Ramesh said a discussion in Parliament on the India-China relationship should focus on both strategic and economic policy, especially since our dependence on China has increased economically, even as it unilaterally changed the status quo on our borders over four years

back. In a statement, Ramesh said the Congress has studied the recent suo motu statement made by External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar in both Houses of Parliament titled "Recent Developments in India's Relations with China". It is unfortunate, but typical of the Modi government, that MPs were not permitted to seek any clarifications, he said.

While "fully appreciating" the sensitive nature of many aspects of India-China border relations, he said the Congress has four pointed questions on the statement issued by the Modi government.

Ramesh noted that the statement claims that "the House is well aware of the circumstances leading up to the violent clashes in Galwan Valley in June 2020", and pointed out that it is an

unfortunate reminder that the very first official communication to the nation on this crisis came on June 19, 2020, when the PM provided a clean chit publicly to China and falsely stated "Na koi hamari seema mein ghus aaya hai, na hi koi ghusa hua hai".

"Not only was this an insult to our fallen soldiers but it also weakened India's position in subsequent negotiations. Whatever prompted the PM to make this assertion?" Ramesh said.

"On October 22, 2024, Chief of Army Staff General Upendra Dwivedi restated India's longstanding position: 'As far as we are concerned, we want to go back to the status quo of April 2020... Thereafter we will be looking at disengagement, de-escalation and normal management of the LAC'.

Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri to raise concerns over attacks on Hindus in Bangladesh

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri is expected to raise with Dhaka India's concerns over attacks on Hindus and other minorities as he embarks on a day-long visit to Bangladesh on Monday, in the first high-level trip from New Delhi after a massive uprising ended deposed prime minister Sheikh Hasina's 15-year rule in August.

Misri is scheduled to hold wide-ranging talks with his Bangladeshi counterpart Md. Jashim Uddin and meet the country's de-facto foreign minister Mohammad Touhid Hossain. It is learnt that the Indian foreign secretary is also likely to call on Bangladesh's interim leader and Nobel Peace laureate Muhammad Yunus during his nearly 12-hour visit to Dhaka.

On its part, Bangladesh is likely to convey its concerns over India continuing to provide shelter to Hasina. Last month, Yunus said his government will seek Hasina's extradition from India, people familiar with Misri's visit said.

The close ties between India and Bangladesh came under severe strain after Hasina

was forced to leave the country in the face of a massive anti-government protest in August. Yunus came to power days after Hasina took shelter in India. The relations deteriorated further in recent weeks over attacks on Hindus and the arrest of Hindu monk Chinmoy Krishna Das. There have been spate of incidents of violence against Hindus and other minorities as well as attacks on temples in the neighbouring country in the last few weeks that triggered strong concerns in New Delhi.

"Our position on the matter is very clear -- the interim government must live up to its responsibility of protecting all minorities," External Affairs Ministry spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said on November 29. "We are concerned at the surge of extremist rhetoric, increasing incidents of violence and provocation. These developments cannot be dismissed only as media exaggeration. We once again call upon Bangladesh to take all steps for the protection of minorities," he said.

India also hoped that the case relating to Bangladeshi monk Chinmoy Krishna Das, arrested on a charge of

sedition, will be dealt with in a just, fair and transparent manner. In the meetings, the Bangladeshi side is also likely to raise an incident of storming of its mission in Agartala on Monday by a group of protesters.

Subsequently, Bangladesh foreign ministry on Tuesday summoned the Indian envoy to Dhaka Pranay Verma and lodged a protest over the incident. West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura witnessed protests in the last few days over the persecution of Hindus in Bangladesh and the arrest of Das.

Das was arrested at Dhaka's Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport last month in connection with a sedition case. India on Friday announced that Misri is travelling to Dhaka to attend a meeting under the framework of Foreign Office Consultations.

"The foreign secretary is scheduled to visit Bangladesh for Foreign Office Consultations on December 9. This is part of our structured interactions with the Bangladesh side," Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) Spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said in brief remarks.

VP Jagdeep Dhankhar urges collective efforts for Viksit Bharat by 2047, warns against anti-national forces

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI/CHANDIGARH

Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar on Sunday said that "Viksit Bharat" is no longer a dream, but a target that has to be achieved with the collective efforts of the citizens, keeping the message of the Bhagavad Gita in mind.

He also warned people about forces that want to hurt India. "We have chosen the path of Viksit Bharat in 2047. Viksit Bharat is no longer a dream, but a target before us. To achieve it, we will have to keep the message of the Gita in mind... Like Arjuna was focused on his target, we will have to have the same vision, the same determination, the same concentration," Dhankhar said.

Addressing an event in Haryana's Kurukshetra during the ongoing International Gita festival, the vice president said he has no doubt in his mind that the target of a developed India will be achieved with the collective efforts of the people of the country by 2047 or even before that.

He talked about the rapid progress India has made in the last few years and expressed hope that the



country, which is currently the world's fifth-largest economy, would soon leave Germany and Japan behind. The vice president cautioned people, saying there are some forces in the country and abroad, which on the basis of money power and by using mechanisms, want to hurt India, its economy and make its institutions dysfunctional. "Their sinister design, pernicious object is to taint, tarnish and diminish our constitutional institutions, to

run down our growth trajectory. Such forces cannot be ignored now. "Our culture says that there are occasions when such forces have to be crushed, they have to be crushed... And we understand all this from the Gita," he said. "I want to give a message from this land that the nation is supreme for us. There is nothing to be measured in this love for the nation, it will be pure, it will be 100 per cent.

We will always keep the nation first," he said. "We have to remember, we are Indians, Indianness is our identity and we are citizens of such a great country that there is no other country like this in the world, so will we allow our Mother India to be hurt?" Dhankhar asked the gathering.

Referring to the Centre's free ration scheme, Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PMGKAY) that covers 80 crore poor people,

the vice president, without naming anyone, said it is "perverse" thinking that this means the government has accepted that 80 crore people in the country are poor. "Some people are a recipe for chaos, they can only be critics, they cannot think in a positive way. My message to them is that they should understand the essence of the Gita, the message of the Gita," he said. The PMGKAY was launched in April 2020 to help the poor amid the COVID-19 pandemic for three months but extended later.

Under the scheme, poor families get five kg of foodgrains each month for free.

The vice president talked about the technological advancement the country has made in various fields and said India's digital penetration is a matter of envy for the rest of the world. "World leaders tell me that we want to learn from India in digital penetration, technological application," he said.

Haryana Governor Bandaru Dattatreya, Chief Minister Nayab Singh Saini and Gita Manishi Swami Gyananand, were present on the occasion, among others.

Centre urges states to submit action plans for effective implementation of menstrual hygiene policy for school girls

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Centre has urged states to submit action plans for effective implementation of the menstrual hygiene policy for school girls to ensure their access to low-cost hygiene products and gender-responsive sanitation facilities in public and government-aided schools.

The Union Health Ministry's letter to all states comes after the Supreme Court on November 12 stated that the effective roll-out of the policy would require comprehensive



action plans tailored to the specific needs and contexts

of each state and UT. The Centre had last month

informed the Supreme Court about the Menstrual

Hygiene Policy for School Going Girls,' which was approved by the Union Health Ministry on November 2. The policy aims to mainstream menstrual hygiene within the school system of the government to bolster change in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviour among schoolgirls, overcoming the barriers of low awareness that often restrict their freedom, mobility and participation in daily activities. It advocates for streamlining

mechanisms to provide for continuous and timely availability of menstrual hygiene products in schools. For government and government-aided schools, the policy says that states/UTs should assess and estimate the actual requirement of menstrual hygiene products to enable efficient use of resources. To enable coverage, assessment through appropriate levels of survey mechanisms can be undertaken by states or UTs followed by gap filling, so that girls in government and

government aided schools have regular access to menstrual hygiene products. Additionally, the policy seeks to dissipate harmful social norms, promote safe menstrual hygiene practices, and enable environment friendly management of menstrual waste. The health ministry has asked states to develop and submit a detailed state and UT action plan that incorporates all aspects of the policy, ensuring coverage of government and government-aided schools.

They have been asked to ensure inter-departmental coordination with relevant stakeholders to address challenges in infrastructure, supply chain, and awareness besides prioritising sensitisation and awareness activities to promote safe menstrual hygiene practices and foster behavioural change among adolescents, parents and educators. They have also been urged to include specific timelines, monitoring mechanisms and key performance indicators in the action plans.

Pawar calls for ballot paper based polls in rebel village

TN RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

During his visit to Markadwadi village in western Maharashtra's Solapur district which created history last week by attempting unsuccessfully to hold a "mock ballot paper poll", NCP (SP) President Sharad Pawar on Sunday gave a fervent call for dumping the Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) and reverting to the ballot paper-based electoral system.

Interacting with the villagers of Markadwadi in Solapur district, Pawar exhorted the Gram Sabha of not just that particular village but the Gram Sabhas of all villages in Malshiras taluka to pass resolutions opposing the conduct of elections through EVMs and making a strong case for reverting to the system of ballot papers. This, he said, was essential because the people had lost faith in the EVMs.

"Based on such resolutions, we will take up the matter with the Election authorities in Maharashtra, the chief minister, the Election Commission of India (ECI) and the Prime Minister of the country. We will also raise the issue in the ongoing winter session of Parliament," Pawar said. Alluding to an unsuccessful attempt made by the villagers



to hold a "mock ballot paper poll" on December 3 in the wake of shocking results in the recent State Assembly polls, Pawar said: "There is something wrong with the EVMs. There are strong doubts in the minds of the people about the authenticity of the polls held through EVMs. Since you people have created awareness among us, the only thing that can be done is to bring about a change in the electoral

system that is adopted in the country now and revert to the use of ballot papers to hold the elections." Taking a strong exception to the manner in which the police prevented the villagers from holding the "mock ballot paper poll" on December 3, Pawar said: "I was surprised to learn about things that happened in your village. Whatever you people did was not official. The people of your village sat

down and decided to go in for re-voting and you decided to vote once again in a different way. But, why did the police prevent you from holding such an unofficial poll? What does the law say?" "From what happened in the recent Assembly elections, there are serious doubts about the electoral process involving EVMs in the minds of the voters. The doubts have to be removed.

In advanced countries like the USA and UK, votes are cast through ballot papers. Not all countries in Europe conduct elections through EVMs like we do," the NCP (SP) chief said.

Referring to chief minister Devendra Fadnavis' objection to his visiting Markadwadi village to interact with the local people on EVMs, Pawar said: "The chief minister advised me against visiting your village. What wrong have I done? Is it wrong to visit your village? Is it wrong to take care to know about the doubts that you people have (about EVMs) and try to bring about necessary change? After all, what is democracy for? What are people's rights?"

Maintaining that "politics should not be brought into this", Pawar said: "I would like to tell the chief minister, we do not want to bring politics into this. We will provide all the information to the government, the Centre and ECI. If possible, the chief minister can himself visit the village and listen to what people say and work towards making necessary course corrections". Pawar said that on behalf of the people of Markadwadi village, he and his party

would raise the EVMs issue in Parliament and seek reforms in the current electoral process.

Meanwhile, Maharashtra BJP president Chandrashekhar Bawankule came down strongly against Pawar for visiting Markadwadi village and for allegedly spreading lies and deceiving the people of Maharashtra.

"Sharad Pawar should accept defeat. He suffered a great loss in these elections. The kind of lies they said in the Lok Sabha elections were all rejected by the people. Pawar Sahab has gone to Markadwadi. It doesn't behove a person of his age to mouth lies," Bawankule said.

"The people of Maharashtra respect Pawar Sahab. Several elections have been held in Markadwadi. Several elections have been held through EVMs in Maharashtra. But at no point in time in the past the Opposition had rejected the poll outcome as it is doing now. The Opposition leaders did not say anything about the EVMs when it won 31 seats in Lok Sabha polls," Bawankule said, adding that the NCP (SP) chief was doing all this to create an excuse as the MVA was all set to lose the upcoming local body elections in the state.

HSIIDC to build new township in Gurugram district

PARVESH SHARMA ■ GURUGRAM

Haryana State Industrial and Infrastructure Development Corporation (HSIIDC) has prepared a plan to build an industrial township on 3,000 acres near Pachgaon Chowk. With this township, HSIIDC will build the fourth township in the district. Earlier, townships have been built in Udyog Vihar, IMT Manesar and Sohna.

It may be noted that more than 10,000 small and big industries are operating in all the townships of HSIIDC. "HSIIDC will start the process to develop a new township on three thousand acres near Pachgaon Chowk from next year. The corporation has 3 thousand acres of land in two parts near Pachgaon Chowk. There are about 1,300 acres of land in one part and 1,700 acres in the other part," said an HSIIDC official.

A plan has been prepared and after assessing how much it will cost to develop basic facilities in the township, the headquarters plan will be sent to the government for

approval.

The corporation has three thousand acres of land in Pachgaon near Kundli-Manesar-Palwal (KMP). After the development of IMT township here, industries will have a lot of convenience in getting and sending goods.

Direct connectivity of IMT township with KMP will be arranged. Metro will be extended from Rajiv Chowk to Global City and from there directly to Pachgaon Chowk via Manesar. People coming from Delhi will be able to reach Pachgaon by travelling directly by metro.

Apart from this, the government has also planned to establish five new cities on both sides of KMP. There will also be planning for other cities to be built along KMP. Apart from Sonapat, Gurgaon, one of the five new cities will also be built along KMP in the area around Bahadurgarh.

This city is number two on the list of Panchgaon of the state government. This city will be built on about 50 thousand hectares of land of villages around Bahadurgarh.

India will soon create comprehensive anti-drone unit to secure borders: Shah

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ JAIPUR

Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Sunday said India will soon create a comprehensive anti-drone unit to secure its borders as the "menace" of unmanned aerial vehicles is going to get serious in the coming days.

Addressing BSF troops at the 60th Raising Day event of the force here at its training camp in Jodhpur, about 300 km from the India-Pakistan border, Shah said the initial response to a "laser equipped anti-drone gun-mounted" mechanism has been encouraging.

This has led to an increase in drone neutralisation and

detection cases, up from 3 per cent to 55 per cent, along the India-Pakistan border in Punjab, he said. "The drone menace is going to get more serious in the coming days... We are tackling this issue with a 'whole of government' approach with the defence and research organisations and the DRDO joining hands.

"We are going to create a comprehensive anti-drone unit for the country in the coming time," said Home Minister. According to official data, more than 260 drones have been downed or recovered from India's border with Pakistan this year as compared to about 110 in 2023. The maximum

number of such interdictions of drones carrying arms and drugs have taken place in Punjab and very few in Rajasthan and Jammu.

The Home Minister reviewed the ceremonial parade, took salute and awarded medals to gallantry award winners and some other decorations. The Border Security Force (BSF), which has a strength of about 2.65 lakh personnel, was raised on December 1, 1965. It is primarily tasked with guarding more than 6,300 kms of Indian fronts with Pakistan and Bangladesh apart from rendering a variety of duties in the internal security



domain of the country. Shah said the ongoing Comprehensive Integrated Border Management System (CIBMS) for securing India's borders with Pakistan (2,289 km) and Bangladesh (4,096 km) is a

work in progress. "We have had an encouraging response from the CIBMS deployed along the riverine border in Assam's Dhubri (India-Bangladesh international border) and some improvements are

required," he said.

The Minister also said that the Modi government's Vibrant Village Programme (VVP) for developing and bringing into the mainstream the population of northern borders will be implemented for all the frontier villages of the country. This is the Modi government's "biggest achievement" vis-a-vis enhancing border security and working for the population living in these remote areas with a fund allocation of Rs 4,800 crore. It is being run on an "experimental basis" in around 3,000 villages, he said.

Shah said the Union

government has sanctioned a "big" budget for strengthening India's borders -- fencing, frontier infrastructure, roads and other logistics.

"Securing global recognition and the number one place for India by 2047 is not possible without our security personnel... The jawans who guard our borders with dedication," he said. Shah said about 573 new border posts have been created by the Modi government apart from 1,812 km of roads.

BSF Director General (DG) Daljit Singh Chawdhary said 13,226 newly trained personnel have been posted in various battalions and

this will add to the "operational strength" of the force. An additional 4,000 freshly recruited personnel are under training while about 12,000 will join the force next month to learn security and combat skills before being posted at the borders, he said.

Chawdhary also spoke about the "increasing number" of drones carrying arms and drugs being sent by the enemy from across the Pakistan border. More than 250 drones have been intercepted this year on the western border, he said. "We have deployed a DRDO made anti-drone system to check this menace," he added.

Police procedure exhibition visited by Modi may be mounted at Maha Kumbh

PNS ■ CHANDIGARH

An exhibition attended by Prime Minister Narendra Modi during his visit here to witness the implementation of three new criminal laws in policing, may be taken to next year's Maha Kumbh Mela in Prayagraj, where an estimated 40 crore devotees are expected to come, officials said.

The temporary enclosure, resembling a hangar and covering an area of over 100,000 square feet, features eight setups where the processes involved in crime investigations are enacted by actors through skits. The skits offer visitors an understanding of the changes following the implementation of the three new criminal laws.

The massive structure also includes several displays explaining the new laws, procedures, and applications used by the police. The concept of using skits and



displays to simplify police procedures for the public was developed under the supervision of Union Home Minister Amit Shah. He personally reviewed at least three presentations on the concept and execution of the setup before the project was finalised, officials said.

Senior Superintendent of Police, Chandigarh, Kanwardeep Kaur, was tasked with giving a walkthrough of

the exhibition, during which she explained how police are implementing the changes in the Union Territory.

After witnessing the presentation on December 3, Modi instructed authorities not to dismantle it immediately and to keep the exhibition open for the public. The new laws - the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, and the Bharatiya

Sakshya Adhinyam - came into effect on July 1, replacing the British-era Indian Penal Code, Code of Criminal Procedure, and Indian Evidence Act.

Chandigarh has become the first administrative unit in the country to achieve 100 per cent implementation of the three laws. According to officials, around 250 to 300 people visit the exhibition every day at PEC College since it opened to the public. Chandigarh DGP SS Yadav said there are plans to take similar thematic displays to events like the Kumbh Mela and other large-scale gatherings with significant footfall. "We will also use this thematic display for the training of our personnel. We are coordinating with the authorities in Uttar Pradesh, and if they request, we will assist. The idea is under consideration. The aim is to spread awareness as widely as possible," he said.

"Kumbh Mela is a sacred event for the entire subcontinent, so with so many people attending, it is our duty as law enforcement to raise awareness about these three laws, which reflect our Bharatiyata (Indian identity), Bharatiya Sanskriti (Indian culture), and our commitment to a developed country," he added.

Efforts will be made not only at the Kumbh Mela but also at other large events to set up awareness camps about the three laws, he said. "We are in touch with the relevant police forces," he added. The Mahakumbh is held every 12 years. The next mega event will take place from January 13 to February 26, 2025.

The area on the banks of the Sangam in Prayagraj, where the religious event will be organised, has been named Mahakumbh Nagar and officially notified as a new district by the state government.

3 students killed, 25 injured after school picnic bus overturns in Rajasthan's Rajsamand

PNS ■ JAIPUR

Three school students were killed and 25 others were injured when a bus overturned in Rajasthan's Rajsamand district on Sunday, police said. The accident occurred when the students of Mahatma Gandhi School, Amet were en route to Parshuram Mahadev temple in Desuri, Pali for a picnic by bus, District Superintendent of Police Manish Tripathi said.

There were 62 children and six teachers in the bus, he said. The bus went out of control and overturned near Desuri Naal, killing three students and 25 other children injured in the accident, while 37 students were sent home after first aid, the DSP said.

Charbhujia Station House Officer Govardhan Singh said that three students who died on the spot in the accident have been identified as Preeti, Aarti, and Anita. The injured have been admitted to the hospital and the bodies have been handed over to the family members after post-mortem, Tripathi said. A case has been registered against the bus driver and investigation is underway, the officer said.

Meanwhile, Chief Minister Bhajanlal Sharma and Governor Haribhau Bagade expressed condolences. The chief minister in a social media post said, "As soon as information about the accident was received, necessary instructions were given to the district administration officials to ensure proper and immediate medical treatment of the injured children."

"I pray to Lord Shri Ram to give a place to the departed souls in his feet and provide speedy recovery to the injured children. Om Shanti," he said in his post.

Bengal Transport Department issues guidelines for bus operators

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ KOLKATA

In a bid to address the issue of road accidents due to reckless driving, the West Bengal Transport Department has issued guidelines for bus operators and asked them to display "antecedents and credentials" of drivers and conductors, including police complaints against them, inside vehicles and verify their driving track records before engaging them, an official said on Sunday.

The standard operating procedures (SOPs) issued by Transport Secretary Soumitra Mohan said a feedback mechanism, including a complaint register, should be kept ready in buses. These registers must be regularly reviewed and disposed and corrective measures must be taken, it said.

In view of several road accidents and fatalities due to "reckless driving, mechanical failure, lack of proper skill and awareness", it is felt imperative to frame and issue a detailed guideline to the transport operators and the crew operating public transport vehicles for checking such incidents in future," said the notice, issued on December 6.

Among the SOPs, the operators were asked to display the "antecedents and credentials of drivers and conductors, including police complaints, and driving track record should be duly verified before engaging them for operating a transport vehicle".

The laminated photocopies of driving licences of bus staffers should also be displayed prominently. "Any adverse (improper or negative) track record of the crew member, including a driver or a conductor should be kept in mind before appointing or allowing them to operate the vehicle," the notice said.

The move comes in the wake of reports that the buses and drivers involved in road accidents had hundreds of



cases related to traffic violations and rash driving and fines against them, and most of these were not acted on and the fines not realised, a transport official said.

In the past, there had been cases of pilferage of fuel from parked buses on city roads in which drivers were found to be involved and were arrested by police.

The arrests showed operators have "no say in appointing drivers" in different routes, and the arrested drivers had criminal cases against them in the past, the official said. The SOPs also advocated regular refresher courses, spanning 7-15 days, to make drivers and conductors aware of safety rules and good behaviour.

The transport department specifically asked the operators to scrap the existing commission system as this arrangement is seen one of the reasons behind road accidents and rash driving. The driver or conductor of a bus reaching the terminus before the earlier one on the same route gets a commission and the bus running late is fined.

"The route and timetable of each stage carriage should be displayed in the vehicle and must be strictly followed," the notice stipulated as among the guidelines. No bus shall pick up or drop passengers beyond 30 metres of designated bus stops/terminus/depots, it said.

A senior transport official said private bus operators and state transport undertakings have been asked to comply with the guidelines which are essential for bringing order into the chaotic city transport system.

BJP's Rahul Narwekar set to return as Maharashtra Assembly Speaker

T N RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

The election of ruling BJP MLA Rahul Narwekar as the Speaker of the Maharashtra Assembly became a mere formality on Sunday, after the Opposition Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) chose not to put up any candidate against him.

Narwekar -- accompanied by Maharashtra chief minister Devendra Fadnavis and his deputies Eknath Shinde and Ajit Pawar -- on Sunday filed his nomination for the Speaker's election scheduled for Monday.

Given that no one from the Opposition filed nomination for the elections to the Speaker's post, Narwekar will be declared elected unopposed as the Speaker of the Maharashtra Assembly on Monday.

Narwekar, who was the speaker in the 14th assembly for two and a half years, is



known for his controversial rulings on the disqualification pleas of Shiv Sena and NCP.

It may be recalled that on February 15, 2024, Narwekar had declared the Ajit Pawar-led faction as the "real NCP", while dismissing pleas seeking disqualification of the MLAs belonging to both the factions.

Narwekar's ruling had come close on the heels of the Election Commission's February 6, 2024 order recognising the Ajit Pawar-led faction as the "real NCP",

giving it control over the party's name and "clock" symbol, the Speaker ruled that between the two feuding factions, the Ajit Pawar faction enjoyed "overwhelming majority".

Narwekar's ruling on NCP was akin to the one he gave on January 10, 2024 in the case of the Shiv Sena, when he had ruled that the Shiv Sena-led by Maharashtra chief minister Eknath Shinde was the "real Shiv Sena" and not the one headed by former chief minister and Shiv Sena (UBT) head Uddhav Thackeray.

Though none of the Opposition parties have the requisite numbers to claim LoP's post, it is quite unlikely that Narwekar will consider the Opposition MVA's request for nominating a Leader of the Opposition (LoP) in the Maharashtra Assembly.

Drop in student numbers impacts Kota's coaching, hostel industry

PTI ■ KOTA/RAJASTHAN

Business has slowed down for coaching centres and hostels in Kota following negative publicity over student suicides, new guidelines regulating coaching centres and the expansion of coaching brands to other cities, according to industry stakeholders.

The number of students in Kota has fallen to 85,000 to 1 lakh this year from the usual 2 to 2.5 lakh, reducing the annual revenue to Rs 3,500 crore from Rs 6,500 to 7,000 crore, they said.

Despite the setback, stakeholders remain optimistic about the credibility of the Kota coaching model and its environment, that is absent in other cities.

Kota's educational system and environment are unmatched and will attract students back next session, which will compensate for

the decline, Govindram Mittal, Zonal Chairperson, United Council of Rajasthan Industries said.

He said that industrialists are also looking at alternative opportunities, with plans to establish Information Technology (IT) hubs in the city, modelled after Bengaluru.

Earlier this year, the Karnataka government approved a Bill seeking to reserve 50 per cent of management positions and 75 per cent of non-management positions in private sector for locals, drawing criticism from across the industry.

Industrialists here have approached companies based in Bengaluru to shift base to Kota and after a nod from these companies, land for IT sectors have been earmarked under the direction of Lok Sabha speaker and Kota-Bundi MP Om Birla, Mittal said.



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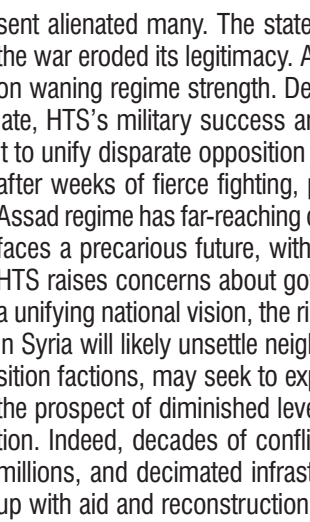
PAPER WITH PASSION

End of an era

The fall of Damascus to rebel forces and Bashar al-Assad's flight marks a watershed moment in Syrian history

The Assad family's grip on Syria, a legacy spanning more than five decades, has come to an end. The dramatic overthrow of Bashar al-Assad, following the rebel forces' breach of Damascus, marks the end of an era that began with his father, Hafez al-Assad. This monumental shift reshapes Syria's trajectory and poses critical questions for West Asia. The Assad dynasty began in 1970 when Hafez al-Assad seized power in a coup, transforming a politically unstable Syria into a tightly controlled state. Hafez's rule was characterised by ruthless centralisation, sectarian manipulation, and an iron grip on the military. His divide-and-rule tactics entrenched the Alawite minority—a historically marginalised community—to positions of power, ensuring the regime's survival at the expense of institutional robustness. Hafez's successor, his son Bashar, inherited a state rife with contradictions. Initially hailed as a potential reformer, Bashar's presidency quickly descended into authoritarianism, economic cronyism, and brutal suppression of dissent. His consolidation of power alienated Syria's rural majority and exacerbated sectarian tensions, sowing the seeds of unrest that erupted in 2011 during the Arab Spring.

Widespread poverty, corruption, and inequality under Bashar al-Assad's rule alienated vast swathes of the population. Economic mismanagement, compounded by a severe drought in the late 2000s, devastated rural livelihoods and drove migration to overcrowded urban centres, fueling discontent. The 2011 uprising ignited a protracted civil war that fractured Syria. While Bashar managed to cling to power for over a decade, the regime's reliance on military force to suppress dissent alienated many. The state's inability to provide security or basic services during the war eroded its legitimacy. A coalition led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) capitalised on waning regime strength. Despite its controversial history as a former al-Qaeda affiliate, HTS's military success and rebranding under Abu Mohammed al-Jolani enabled it to unify disparate opposition factions, culminating in the capture of Damascus. It fell after weeks of fierce fighting, prompting Bashar and his family to flee. The fall of the Assad regime has far-reaching consequences for Syria and the broader West Asia. Syria faces a precarious future, with no clear political alternative to the Assads. The rise of HTS raises concerns about governance and inclusivity in a post-Assad Syria. Without a unifying national vision, the risk of further fragmentation looms large. The power shift in Syria will likely unsettle neighbouring countries. Turkey, which has supported opposition factions, may seek to expand its influence. Iran, a long-time ally of Assad, faces the prospect of diminished leverage, while Israel watches the developments with caution. Indeed, decades of conflict have left Syria with a shattered economy, displaced millions, and decimated infrastructure. The international community will need to step up with aid and reconstruction efforts to prevent further suffering of Syrian people.



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PICTALK



Tourists gear up to take a hot air balloon ride in Manali

Domestic compulsions get the better of Trudeau



SONAL SHUKLA

While the Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's focus on India may serve short-term political goals, it risks long-term damage to bilateral relations

Recently, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) made sensational claims accusing Indian diplomats of engaging in acts of violence, intimidation, and murder targeting Khalistani extremists, allegedly with the help of the Lawrence Bishnoi gang. This accusation came just two days before Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau was scheduled to testify before the Foreign Interference Commission, which was investigating allegations of Chinese interference in elections. These allegations suggested that such interference had benefited Trudeau's Liberal Party, contributing to its electoral success and the loss of seats for Conservative candidates. Notably, a day before the RCMP's claims, members of Trudeau's government leaked sensitive information to *The Washington Post* (WP) to amplify Ottawa's narrative internationally. On October 16, Trudeau appeared before the commission but devoted significant attention to India instead of addressing the allegations of Chinese interference. He admitted to having no "hard evidence" but only "intelligence inputs" regarding the claims against India, raising questions about his motives.

Political Diversion
Prime Minister Trudeau faces mounting dissatisfaction among Canadians over various domestic crises, including high living costs, an unaffordable real estate market, immigration issues, and rising unemployment. Economic challenges such as slow growth, a widening fiscal deficit, and stagnating per capita GDP have further eroded Trudeau's support. Additionally, accusations of personal extravagance and the unpopular carbon tax have compounded public frustration. Speculation abounds that Trudeau may also be contending with internal dissent within his party.

Khalistani Separatism
For decades, India has criticised Canada for allegedly providing a safe haven to Khalistani separatists, driven largely by domestic vote bank politics. The most egregious example of Canada's



leniency toward Khalistani extremists was the 1985 Air India Flight 182 bombing. Despite prior intelligence, Ottawa has been accused of failing to prevent the attack or bring its perpetrators to justice. Sikhs represent approximately 2.1% of Canada's population but hold disproportionate influence with 4.4% of parliamentary representation. While the majority of Sikh Canadians do not support Khalistan, a vocal minority of Khalistani extremists wields significant political influence through intimidation and mobilization. Their support ensures votes, financial contributions, and political protection, making Canadian politicians reluctant to alienate them. Maxime Bernier, leader of the People's Party of Canada, has openly criticized this dynamic. He condemned Trudeau and Conservative leader Pierre Poilievre for not naming "Khalistani Sikhs" while condemning attacks on Hindu temples, accusing them of pandering to extremist elements. Bernier argued that Canada must collaborate with India to address Khalistani extremism instead of jeopardising bilateral relations. Toronto MP Kevin Vuong also raised concerns over the growing threat to Hindu Canadians following recent attacks on temples.

PRIME MINISTER TRUDEAU FACES MOUNTING DISSATISFACTION AMONG CANADIANS OVER VARIOUS DOMESTIC CRISES, INCLUDING HIGH LIVING COSTS, AN UNAFFORDABLE REAL ESTATE MARKET, IMMIGRATION ISSUES, AND RISING UNEMPLOYMENT.

Ottawa has accused India of being uncooperative in the investigation into the killing of Hardeep Singh Nijjar, a prominent Khalistani figure. However, some analysts suggest the issue lies in Canada's limited geopolitical leverage compared to the United States. For instance, WP reports allege that the CIA assisted in gathering evidence implicating Indian operatives in potential plots against Khalistani leaders. In contrast, Canada has only intelligence inputs from its Five Eyes partners and intercepted conversations of Indian diplomats. Ironically, while Canada prioritises the safety of Khalistani extremists, acts of violence, hate speech, and threats targeting Indian diplomats, temples, and community leaders have received little attention from Trudeau's government. **Trudeau's Dilemma**
Recent revelations have further complicated Trudeau's position. Last month, RCMP Commissioner Mike Duheme claimed to have "irrefutable evidence" implicating senior Indian officials in Nijjar's murder. However, Trudeau later denied possessing any such evidence, calling leaks to *The Globe and Mail* baseless and criminal. This inconsistency has fueled speculation about Trudeau's motives and whether external pressures—such as U.S. intelligence directives or

political considerations—might be influencing his stance. **Future of India-Canada Relations**
Despite robust people-to-people ties and ongoing trade, India's relationship with Canada has been fraught with tensions over Khalistani extremism. The issue transcends Trudeau or the Liberal Party and reflects deeper systemic problems in Canadian politics. Conservative leader Pierre Poilievre, while maintaining a neutral stance, has also avoided directly addressing Khalistani extremism, raising doubts about whether a change in government would significantly alter Canada's approach. India has historically responded to incidents involving Khalistani extremism in Canada with diplomatic protests and calls for accountability. However, experts argue that India should adopt a more proactive and sustained approach, raising the issue at international forums like the United Nations and during bilateral dialogues with Western nations. Emphasising the principles of hate speech and incitement laws, which exist in Canadian legislation, could strengthen India's case against Khalistani violence. *(The writer is a Public Policy Analyst and Lawyer National Law University, Jodhpur; views are personal)*

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

GOVT IGNORES PROTESTING FARMERS

Madam — The news, the government is not in a mood to talk to protesting farmers (December 8), is received with a lot of concern by many. The country witnessing the largest and the most prolonged protest in this decade is by the farmers. The woes of the farmers are genuine and can be better understood by the fact that millions of farmers had committed suicide due to the hostile policies of the government that plunges them in unbearable debt. Withdrawing subsidies, lack of control over the growing cost of the inputs and above all, lack of certainty over the returns in terms of the produce or the profit are the main reasons. The price of every product produced is fixed by the manufacturer. But agricultural products are the only exception. The farmer faces all the odds and bears all the pains with lofty hopes but miserably fails in the market due to the lack of a mechanism to get him reasonable returns. The field is left to the domination of the middlemen. Neither the producer nor the consumer gets the benefit. The government should take control of the entire mechanism and regulate it with norms that will not deprive anyone. It is unfortunate that the same person who was the Chief Minister of MP, where 6 protesting farmers were shot dead, is the Union Minister handling this ministry that again shoots at the farmers with teargas shells.

A G Rajmohan | Anantapur

INS TUSHIL JOINS FLEET

Madam — The Indian Navy will induct its latest multimedia stealth guided missile frigate, INS Tushil during a ceremony in Russia on December 9. It is really another milestone in the history of the Indian Navy. A frigate is a type of warship designed for various naval operations, including escorting large vessels and engaging in combat with enemy ships, submarines, and aircraft. It is the seventh ship in this series and

Air pollution menace



Air pollution is a significant national issue in India, affecting millions of people across the country. Several key points need to be considered to address this grave issue worsening over time. The loss of life expectancy and the impact of air pollution on quality of life are also affecting the economic growth of the country. It degrades the environ-

ment severely and exacerbates climate change by increasing greenhouse gas emissions. The government is quite aware of the major sources of air pollution, and there are laws to control them, but they are not being implemented strictly, for example, vehicular and industrial emissions, construction dust, and stubble burning due to various reasons, including political. Delhi often receives the most attention for its severe air pollution in terms of the local and central governments blaming each other and passing the buck. Political consensus is required to control sources of air pollution and implement and frame new laws to mitigate its impacts. So, it is appropriate and necessary to discuss air pollution in the Parliament.

O Prasada Rao | Hyderabad

the first of two additional frigates being built under a 2016 agreement between India and Russia. INS Tushil is the result of the continuous toil of hundreds of shipyard workers along with multiple Russian and Indian OEMs. Tushil is equipped with advanced stealth features, making it less detectable by enemy radar. It is really a powerful warship with all kinds of weapons and sensors, fitted with the BrahMos cruise missile as its principal weapon. Upon its commissioning, INS Tushil will be part of the Western Naval Command. It is expected to bolster the Navy's operational capabilities between India and Russia and will rank amongst the most technologically advanced frigates in the world. It will not only be a symbol of the Indian Navy's growing capabilities but also the resilient collaborative strength of the India-Russia partnership.

P Victor Selvaraj | Tirunelveli

RBI CUTS 50 BASIS POINTS IN CRR

Madam — The RBI's monetary policy has delivered exactly what the economy

and markets need currently, and its decision to cut the 50 basis points in CRR would infuse Rs1.16 trillion in liquidity into the banking system. This lifeline from the RBI will significantly help lenders, as lack of liability growth is hampering their lending growth. Besides that, real estate, consumer durables and the infrastructure sector also stand to gain. Despite requests for repo rate cuts from many quarters, RBI resisted with it and maintained a balance between economic growth and inflation. With the fact that retail inflation has spiked continuously for two months with food prices leading the pinch, RBI has done well to maintain a check. Last but not least, GoI will have to take a few steps like cutting the duty hike on edible oil and boosting consumption to support RBI's hope of our GDP growth of 6.6 per cent in the current financial year.

Bal Govind | Noida

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

World Climate Day: A call for inclusive and urgent action



EILIA JAFAR

Addressing climate change requires shared responsibility. Wealthy nations must fulfill financial and technical support commitments

Climate change disproportionately affects the world's poorest and most vulnerable communities. For them, it's not just an environmental issue but a daily struggle for survival. Living in precarious conditions, these populations bear the brunt of climate-induced disasters such as floods, droughts, and extreme weather, which devastate their homes, livelihoods, and food security. As global warming intensifies, it deepens social divides, further endangering marginalised groups and underscoring the urgent need for inclusive and compassionate action. The ILO's World Social Protection Report 2024-26, titled Universal Social Protection for Climate Action and a Just Transition, highlights the intersection of structural inequalities and climate vulnerability. It reveals that over 90 per cent of people in the 20 countries most affected by the climate crisis lack access to social protection, such as child or unemployment benefits. Similarly, in the 50 most climate-vulnerable nations, 75 per cent of the population-2.1 billion



people-remains unprotected. These gaps leave millions exposed to the worsening impacts of climate change. In India, climate change has become an immediate reality. The Yale Programme on Climate Change Communication found that 85 per cent of respondents had experienced global warming effects firsthand, an 11 per cent increase since 2021-22.

Unequal Toll

Vulnerable regions face higher mortality rates during climate-related disasters. Between 2010 and 2020, deaths from floods, droughts, and storms in high-vulnerability areas were 15 times higher than in low-vulnerability ones. In South Asia, climate-induced migration poses a growing threat. Research estimates that up to 45 million people in India could be displaced by 2050 due to rising sea levels and

shifting rainfall patterns. These patterns highlight the unequal risks faced by marginalised communities.

Socio-Economic Trade-Offs
Transitioning to renewable energy presents both opportunities and challenges. In India, while 85 per cent of people believe renewable energy will reduce air pollution, concerns about job losses and rising electricity costs persist. Balancing environmental goals with socio-economic realities is essential for equitable progress.

Addressing Inequities

Effective climate solutions must consider inequality. For example, carbon pricing can disproportionately burden low-income households if not implemented thoughtfully. Similarly, conservation efforts restricting access to forests can harm Indigenous livelihoods. Community engagement is crucial to creating inclusive policies. In India's Bundelkhand region, local water management projects have reduced migration by improving resource access, demonstrating the potential of community-led solutions. **Equitable Climate Action**
India's commitment to carbon

neutrality by 2070 and interim goals for 2030 signal progress. Achieving these targets will require collaboration across governments, businesses, and communities, alongside investments in renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, and green infrastructure. Educational initiatives promoting climate literacy are vital. Empowering communities with knowledge enables them to advocate for their needs and engage in decision-making. **The Cost of Inaction**
Failing to act will have catastrophic consequences. Global temperatures could rise by over 3°C, intensifying extreme weather and threatening ecosystems. In South Asia, climate disasters already displace millions, while extreme heatwaves in India with temperatures surpassing 50°C-disrupt lives and livelihoods. Human-induced warming now accelerates at 0.26°C per decade, emphasising the urgency for immediate and sustained action. *(The writer is a leader in disaster management, specializing in governance, climate change adaptation, and gender inclusion. Views are personal)*



FIRST COLUMN

DUMBPHONE IS A SMART CHOICE

Their growing popularity reflects a cultural shift, one that values mindful technology use over constant connectivity



SHAINY SHARMA

In a world where smartphones dominate our lives, many adults are turning to dumbphones to reclaim their time and mental well-being. Today, the young generation is realising that giving a child a smartphone means not just giving them access to the world but vice-versa too. Smartphones are more than just a tool for connection. It is a portal that opens them up to endless possibilities, distractions, and influences beyond one's control. Dumbphones which are also known as feature phones, are basic mobile phones that are designed primarily for calling and texting, with limited or no access to advanced internet features, applications or modern smartphone capabilities.

Unlike smartphones, which run on complex operating systems like iOS or Android, such phones usually have a simple operating system that is focused on basic functions like voice calls, text messaging, and sometimes simple games. Such phones often lack features such as social media apps, internet browsing, and advanced gaming.

They have a small monochrome or basic colour screen with no touch interface and a physical keypad. Moreover, due to their simple hardware and minimal functionality, such phones last for several days on a single charge, which is a significant advantage over smartphones. Today, the popularity of dumbphones stems from the increasing realisation of how smartphones have transformed daily life.

For many, smartphones are indispensable tools for communication, navigation, and productivity. However, their omnipresence also



comes with downsides such as excessive screen time, reduced attention spans, social media addiction, and mental health issues such as anxiety and depression.

There is no denying that technology is a powerful tool, but one mustn't forget that it is also one that can easily overshadow real-life experiences. In giving a child a phone, one must be prepared to teach them how to balance its use and ensure that the digital world doesn't replace the beauty of curiosity, creativity, and genuine human connection. The rise of dumbphones reflects a broader cultural shift toward digital mindfulness and the re-evaluation of technology's role in our lives.

As more individuals and families prioritise mental health and meaningful interactions, technological companies may feel pressured to design devices and platforms that promote healthier usage patterns. Moreover, this trend serves as a reminder of the need for balance in a hyper-connected world. While technology has undoubtedly enhanced productivity and convenience, its overuse can detract from the quality of life. Dumbphones symbolise a conscious effort to reclaim control and foster a deeper connection with the world around us.

The growing adoption of dumbphones highlights a societal push-back against the distractions and pressures of modern technology. By choosing dumbphones, individuals are making a bold statement that life's richness is found not in the screens we stare at, but in the people and experiences that surround us.

(The writer is an educator; views are personal)

Advancing the Centre's liberalisation agenda



UTTAM GUPTA

Agri-marketing reforms can be achieved by enabling bulk buyers to purchase directly at farm gates and creating multiple private-sector e-trading platforms

In June 2024, the Union Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' welfare set up a 12-member committee, under the chairmanship of additional secretary, Faiz Ahmed Kidwai with the mandate to formulate a national policy framework for marketing of farm items and suggest measures to ensure the remunerative prices to farmers. The committee has recommended (i) allowing direct farm-gate purchases of agriculture commodities by bulk buyers, including organised retailers, without having to go through the state-notified mandis or pay the various levies that the operators of these market yards charge; (ii) declaring warehouses, silos and cold storages, including those run by private agencies, as "deemed market yards" (DMYs); (iii) establish and operate multiple e-trading platforms, including e-NAMs (electronic-national agriculture market) in the private sector.

Will the suggested measures help in achieving the stated objective? At present, agriculture marketing is carried out under the respective state laws viz. APMC (Agricultural Produce Market Committee) Act which has widely varying provisions. This hampers the free movement of the agri-produce between different states. Even within a state, there isn't a free flow of the agri-produce as for the administration of marketing it is divided into several market areas and farmers in a given area can sell their agri-produce only at the designated APMC Mandi.

Between APMC Mandis, also market regulations vary widely. At the mandi, a cartel of licensed traders and commission agents (known as artisans in local parlance, their job is facilitating transactions between the farmer and the buyer) rules the roost.

The duo exploit the farmer to the hilt by giving a low price, rejections, weighing less, delaying payment, etc. Levies such as market fees, anthias commission, rural development cess (RDC) etc further erode her netback. The APMC mandis can handle only a fraction of the quantity farmers bring to sell. So, most of them are forced to come to private local markets, where sales are legally barred.

At these markets, they end up selling their produce to traders at throwaway prices. The latter have the blessings of corrupt bureaucrats and politicians and hence, won't face any action for violating the law. True, state agencies such as The Food Corporation of India (FCI), purchase in mandis specified crops for running welfare Schemes. They make purchases at the minimum support price (MSP) notified by the Centre. But, their purchases are limited. Even so only 6 per cent of farmers - mostly rich with larger land holdings - get access to government procurement.

Although many states have made enabling provisions for setting up private wholesale markets, private markets have come up only in a few states. This is because some states have not framed rules and in others, the rules are far from conducive to attract private entrepreneurs. A few states like Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Rajasthan and Karnataka have made provisions for farm-gate purchases but these transactions are restricted to select commodities for defined periods, and that too, after paying the taxes to the respective APMCs. Even the e-NAM (an online trading platform for agri-produce launched by the Centre in April 2016, was



ALTHOUGH MANY STATES HAVE MADE ENABLING PROVISIONS FOR SETTING UP PRIVATE WHOLESALE MARKETS, PRIVATE MARKETS HAVE COME UP ONLY IN A FEW STATES. THIS IS BECAUSE SOME STATES HAVE NOT FRAMED RULES AND IN OTHERS, THE RULES ARE FAR FROM CONDUCTIVE TO ATTRACT PRIVATE ENTREPRENEURS

intended to provide a unified market - at the national and state level - to give multiple options to farmers for selling their produce and fetch a better price helped much.

This is because the states haven't made necessary amendments in their laws to provide for electronic trading in agri-produce. Moreover, many APMCs have not set up an e-auction platform. The proof of the pudding is in the eating. Out of a little over 7000 regulated wholesale APMC mandis, just about 20 per cent of 1400 have been integrated into the e-NAM platform. Besides, the farmers registered on the e-NAM portal are 17.5 million which is around 12.5 per cent of the total 140 million.

As for business transacted on the portal, this hovers around 12 per cent of the total value of annual trade in agri-commodities (excluding dairy and meat products). At a fundamental level, the problem has to do with the continued stranglehold of the states on APMCs. In fact, for almost everything that stakeholders need to do for doing business on e-NAM be it pan-State/India license for traders, letting farmers sell on the portal (instead of only at designated Mandi) and so on, they need to get permission from the state authorities.

To cap it all, extant laws don't permit private entities to engage in agri-marketing. Now, the Committee's recommendations to allow direct farm-gate purchases of agri-commodities by bulk buyers, including organised retailers without having to go through the state-notified mandis or pay the various levies that the opera-

tors of these market yards charge-giving warehouses, silos and cold storages, including those run by private agencies, DMYs status and setting up multiple e-trading platforms including e-NAMs in the private sector essentially seek to give more options to farmers for selling their produce. But, the million-dollar question is How do you make these ideas work? For bulk buyers to directly purchase from farmers - bypassing APMCs - the concerned State will have to make provision in its APMC Act. Likewise, to enable farmers to sell straight from warehouses, silos and cold storages etc, the State has to amend the law. Similarly, for buying and selling to happen on the e-platform, the State will have to make necessary amendments to the Act.

This is acknowledged by none other than the Committee itself when it says "To align with the proposed national policy, the states and union territories would have to notify state policy on agri-marketing as the subject falls in the domain of states". But, the states are unlikely to give the desired relaxations in their laws. In the past, they have done little to liberalise agri-marketing despite much prodding by the Centre; Remember a Model Agricultural Produce and Livestock Marketing (Promotion and Facilitation) Law passed by the latter in 2017 which gave more options to farmers for selling besides a 'single pan-State license' for traders buying from anywhere in the State. But, this was ignored by the states.

Faced with the unwillingness of States to unshackle the farmers

from the clutches of APMCs and the dire need to open up agri-marketing, the Union government used its powers under the Constitution to offer them a parallel front. In September 2020, it enacted the Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020 to regulate inter-state trade and intra-state trade, providing for freedom of choice to the farmer or trader to conduct trade and commerce while allowing traders to purchase specified farm commodities directly from farmers anywhere in the country, even outside the State APMCs.

To realise the full potential of this law and give legal protection to farmers while engaging with buyers, it enacted two other laws viz. Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, 2020 and the Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act, 2020. Unfortunately, bowing to year-long protests by a handful of farmers and the Supreme Court order in January 2021 staying their implementation, Modi announced their repeal on November 19, 2021. The SC never said these laws were unconstitutional.

A revolutionary move by the Centre to give a remunerative price to the majority of poor farmers and increase their income was sabotaged by middlemen/traders who had much to gain from the continuation of the status quo. The situation can be retrieved only if the SC pronounces its verdict on merit.

(The writer is a policy analyst; views are personal)

Embedded insurance: Bridging India's coverage gap and transforming insurtech

By enhancing accessibility, streamlining processes and catering to underserved markets, embedded insurance is poised to revolutionise insurtech sector

As one of the largest and fastest-growing economies in the world, India has a lot of potential in both general and commercial insurance sectors. Even though the coverage of life and health insurance in India has been consistently increasing, there is a significant gap in terms of commercial insurance, as around 95 per cent of SMEs in the country are uninsured. However, this gap can be bridged by the emergence of embedded insurance, which has disrupted the Insurtech sector.

Unlike traditional models, where customers actively seek out policies, embedded insurance offers coverage at the point of sale—whether purchasing a smartphone, booking a flight, or subscribing to



ADITYA DADIA

a service. Embedded insurance is quite popular among retail and individual customers. At the same time, its role will be extremely critical in the commercial insurance segment. **What is Embedded Insurance:** Embedded insurance refers to integrating insurance products with the journey of non-insurance products and services. It is different

from conventional insurance processes where customers look for policies. Here, insurance is offered as an integral part of a transaction and is often tailored to the buyer's needs.

The model is based on leveraging the latest technologies, such as APIs, that help in providing instant coverage at the point of sale. One such example is travel insurance offered by airline companies, railways, and bus operators offered to travellers when booking tickets. The concept is a bit different in the context of commercial insurance. Here, embedded solutions are gaining traction through partnerships with supply chain platforms and B2B marketplaces.

Some examples include cargo insurance, business liability

coverage and other protections that help companies protect their assets.

Driving the Growth of Insurtech: The convenience and accessibility offered by embedded insurance are quite significant. Since it is integrated with different services, various aspects, including customer KYC, are often not required. Policies are generated and applicable at the point of sale.

This enhances the scope of insurance and ensures that overall customer experience is improved drastically. The overall level of customer experience and trust in the core service and the insurance offered improves due to this integration. It also enables insurers to reach underpenetrated markets like Tier-2 and Tier-3



cities in India, where digital platforms accelerate adoption. With digitalisation and an increase in the number of internet users (and smartphones), this trend will continue in the future as well. Impact on the Indian Insurtech Sector Embedded insurance can provide a much-needed boost to the Insurtech sector by devising the development of personalized, on-demand

products tailored to customer needs.

Since the demand for different types of digital services such as e-commerce, fintech apps, and ride-sharing platforms, is increasing, insurance companies have an excellent chance to enhance user convenience and relevance by integrating their services. This trend has led to increased partnerships between legacy insurance players and start-ups.

Even the existing service providers (besides insurance companies) have tried embedded insurance to ensure scalability and operational efficiency. As there is significant scope for bridging the underinsured in India, this can be an excellent tool through which insurance companies can reach untapped markets and deliv-

er high returns. Embedded insurance can be critical in bridging the insurance gap and fostering financial inclusion.

Challenges and Opportunities: However, despite the increase in overall popularity and usage, embedded insurance faces numerous challenges in India. First, there are regulatory issues, as integrating insurance with non-insurance products demands compliance with stringent industry norms and approvals. There can be challenges relating to filing insurance claims.

There are also privacy-related issues, as embedded insurance depends on leveraging customer data for personalised offers. However, despite these limitations, there are numerous opportunities to

cover a large proportion of the uninsured population. As different sectors and industries are digitised at a good pace, the future of embedded insurance has immense potential for customised and micro-insurance products catering to diverse consumer needs.

Summing Up Embedded insurance has redefined the delivery of insurance services through integration in daily transactions. In the Indian context, the overall increase in the number of digital users and rapid transformation of industries gives an excellent opportunity for insurance companies to bridge the existing insurance gap; the opportunities in this field will be immense.

(The writer is the founder of Alwrite; views are personal)

SYRIANS CELEBRATE BASHAR ASSAD'S EXIT

AP ■ DAMASCUS

Crowds gathered in Syria's Damascus on Sunday to celebrate the fall of Bashar Assad's government with chants, prayers and the occasional gunfire after opposition fighters entered the capital following a stunning advance.

Rami Abdurrahman of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Syrian opposition war monitor, said Assad took a flight from Damascus and left early Sunday. There was no immediate official statement from the Syrian government and Assad's whereabouts remain unknown.

It was the first time opposition forces had reached Damascus since 2018 when Syrian troops recaptured areas on the out-

Syria except for one that links Beirut with Damascus. Jordan closed a border crossing with Syria, too.

Yemen's leader welcomes the fall of Syria's government: The head of Yemen's internationally recognised government welcomed the fall of the government of President Bashar Assad of Syria.

"It's a historic moment," Rashad al-Alimi, who chairs the ruling presidential council, wrote on X platform of Assad's downfall. "It's time for the Iranian regime to stop meddling in Yemen, respect its sovereignty and identity."

Al-Alimi, who is backed by Saudi Arabia, was referring to Iran's support of Houthi rebels who are at war with Yemen's internationally recognised government for a decade.

couches against the backdrop of mosaiced walls, while others walked out with chairs and other items under their arms. On the massive parking lot off front, cars drove in circles honking ecstatically.

In central Damascus' Umayyad Square, drivers passing by also honked jubilantly, while young men piled onto a tank abandoned in the square.

Syrians cross over from Lebanon, facing an uncertain future but hopeful for change: At Lebanon's Masnaa crossing into Syria, the mood was festive Sunday with some local Lebanese residents handing out congratulatory sweets to Syrians lined up to return to their country.

Sami Abdel-Latif, a refugee from Hama who was heading to Syria to join his wife and four

lowing the downfall of Syria's Bashar Assad.

Many welcomed Assad's ouster after decades of repression under his rule and that of his father Hafez Assad. Others, however, expressed concerns about the future of Syria, mostly given the extremist past of rebel commanders, especially Abu Mohammed al-Golani who leads Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, labelled a terrorist by the United States.

EU top diplomat welcomes Bashar Assad's ouster: The European Union's top diplomat welcomed the fall of Bashar Assad and said that the collapse of his rule underlines how weak his supporters in Moscow and Tehran have become.

"The end of Assad's dictatorship is a positive and long-awaited development," EU for-



A giant picture of Syrian President Bashar Assad lies on the ground as a Syrian opposition fighter stands nearby, inside the Presidential Palace in Damascus, Syria on Sunday. AP/PTI



Syrians celebrate the arrival of opposition fighters in Damascus on Sunday. AP/PTI

Syria" "The Syrian people have experienced appalling suffering," the chancellor said in an emailed statement. "The end of Assad's rule over Syria is therefore good news."

Airstrikes reported in the area of the Mezzeh military airport: An Associated Press journalist in Damascus reported airstrikes in the area of the Mezzeh military airport, southwest of the capital Sunday. The airport has previously been targeted in Israeli airstrikes, but it was not immediately clear who launched Sunday's strike.

Opposition forces announce curfew in Damascus: The command of the Syrian armed opposition says it will impose Sunday a curfew in Damascus, starting at 4 pm local time till 5 am on Monday.

The Military Operations Administration, which posted the decision on Telegram, did not give a reason for the curfew.

France welcomes the fall of Bashar Assad: The French

Foreign Affairs ministry said France "welcomes" the fall of Bashar Assad's government "after more than 13 years of violent repression against its own people."

The ministry said in a statement: "The Syrian people have suffered too much. Bashar Assad has bled dry country, emptied of a large part of its people who, if not forced into exile, have been massacred, tortured and bombarded with chemical weapons by the regime and its allies."

UN envoy for Syria expresses hope but warns of immense challenges: The UN envoy for Syria says the ouster of President Bashar Assad has created an opportunity to address the country's deep problems and create a brighter future after years of conflict. But he says "immense" challenges remain.

Geir Pederson told reporters that the changes in Syria now raise hope for millions of refugees, internally displaced, political prisoners and families

whose loved ones have disappeared.

Turkish foreign minister calls on world to help stabilise Syria: Hakan Fidan said Sunday that "Syria has reached a stage where the Syrian people will shape the future of their own country," calling on the international community to support Syrians. Fidan is attending the Qatari diplomatic forum that started late Saturday and is hosting eight countries with an interest in Syria, including the US and Iran.

Assad's whereabouts are unknown: Syrian Prime Minister Mohammed Ghazi Jalali said in a video statement that the government was ready to "extend its hand" to the opposition and turn its functions over to a transitional government. A video shared on Syrian opposition media showed a group of armed men escorting him out of his office and to the Four Seasons hotel on Sunday. Rami Abdurrahman of the Syrian

Observatory for Human Rights told The Associated Press that Assad took a flight Sunday from Damascus.

A senior diplomat from the United Arab Emirates, which had sought to rehabilitate Assad's image and has welcomed high-profile exiles in recent years, declined to comment on his whereabouts when asked by reporters at a conference in Bahrain.

Anwar Gargash said Assad's destination at this point is a "footnote in history," comparing it to the long exile of German Kaiser Wilhelm II after World War I.

Assad has been accused of war crimes and crimes against humanity during the war, including a 2013 chemical weapons attack on the outskirts of the capital.

There was no immediate comment from Iran, which had been Assad's staunchest supporter. The Iranian Embassy in Damascus was ransacked after apparently having been abandoned.

skirts of the capital following a yearslong siege.

The night before, opposition forces had taken the central city of Homs, Syria's third largest, as government forces abandoned it. The rapidly developing events have shaken the region. Lebanon said it was closing all its land border crossings with

Families wander through the presidential palace in Damascus, taking pictures: Families wandered through the high-ceilinged halls of the presidential palace in Damascus on Sunday, along with some armed men. Some paused to take family portraits or selfies on the few remaining

children, said while the future in Syria is still uncertain, "anything is better than Bashar." He said he expected some chaos initially but that eventually the situation would settle down.

Egyptians express mixed feelings over collapse of Assad's government: Egyptians expressed mixed feelings fol-

eign policy chief Kaja Kallas posted on X.

German Chancellor calls for speedy return of order in Syria: Reacting to the fall of Bashar Assad's government, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said Sunday that "what matters now is that law and order are quickly restored in

China asks rebel forces to ensure safety of Chinese nationals

PTI ■ BEIJING

A concerned China on Sunday asked the rebel forces, which took control of the Syrian capital, overthrowing President Bashar al-Assad, to ensure the safety of Chinese nationals and its institutions in the country.

Reacting to the rebel takeover of Syria, China, which had backed the Assad regime, said it was closely following the situation in the Arab country and hoped that stability would return as soon as possible.

A Foreign Ministry statement here said the Chinese Embassy is open in Damascus and extending all possible assistance

to its nationals.

"We urge relevant parties in Syria to ensure the safety and security of the Chinese institutions and personnel in Syria," it said.

The Chinese government has been actively helping Chinese nationals who wish to leave the country to do so in a safe and orderly way, staying in contact with those still in Syria and offering them advice on how to stay safe, it said.

"The Chinese Embassy is still up and running and carrying out its duty in Syria. We will continue to make every possible assistance to Chinese nationals in need," it said.

Earlier, as the rebel forces

advanced towards Damascus, China voiced deep concern over the situation in Syria and said it would support the country in its efforts to safeguard national security and stability.

State-run Xinhua reported from Damascus on Sunday that opposition forces in Syria seized control of the capital "in a stunning turn of events following a rapid offensive that saw major Syrian cities 'falling like dominos within days'."

After taking over, opposition fighters appeared on state television channels to announce what they described as the fall of Damascus and the end of President Assad's rule, the report said.

al-Golani: Leader of insurgency that toppled Assad?

AP ■ BEIRUT

Abu Mohammed al-Golani, the militant leader whose stunning insurgency toppled Syria's President Bashar Assad, has spent years working to remake his public image, renouncing longtime ties to al-Qaida and depicting himself as a champion of pluralism and tolerance. In recent days, the insurgency even dropped his nom de guerre and began referring to him by his real name, Ahmad al-Sharaa. The extent of that transformation from jihadi extremist to would-be state builder is now put to the test.

Insurgents control capital Damascus, Assad has fled into hiding, and for the first time after 50 years of his family's iron hand, it is an open question how Syria will be governed.

Syria is home to multiple ethnic and religious communities, often pitted against each other by Assad's state and years of war. Many of them fear the possibility Sunni Islamist extremists will take over. The country is also fragmented among disparate armed factions, and foreign powers from Russia and Iran to the United States, Turkey and Israel all have their hands in the mix.

The 42-year-old al-Golani — labeled a terrorist by the United States — has not appeared publicly since Damascus fell early Sunday. But he and his insurgent force, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, or HTS — many of whose fighters are jihadis — stand to be a major player. For years, al-Golani worked to consolidate power, while bottled up in the province of Idlib in Syria's northwest corner as Assad's Iranian- and



Russian-backed rule over much of the country appeared solid.

He maneuvered among extremist organisations while eliminating competitors and former allies. He sought to polish the image of his de-facto "salvation government" that has been running Idlib to win over international governments and reassure Syria's religious and ethnic minorities. And he built ties with various tribes and other groups. Along the way, al-Golani shed his garb as a hard-line Islamist guerrilla and put on suits for press interviews, talking of building state institutions and decentralizing power to reflect Syria's diversity.

"Syria deserves a governing system that is institutional, no one where a single ruler makes arbitrary decisions," he said in an interview with CNN last week, offering the possibility HTS would eventually be dissolved after Assad falls. "Don't judge by words, but by actions," he said.

Al-Golani's beginnings in Iraq: Al-Golani's ties to al-Qaida stretch back to 2003, when he joined extremists battling US troops in Iraq. The Syrian native was detained by the US military but remained in Iraq. During that time, al-Qaida usurped like-minded groups and formed the extremist

Islamic State of Iraq, led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

In 2011, a popular uprising against Syria's Assad triggered a brutal government crackdown and led to all-out war. Al-Golani's prominence grew when al-Baghdadi sent him to Syria to establish a branch of al-Qaida called the Nusra Front. The United States labeled the new group as a terrorist organisation. That designation still remains in place and the US government has put a \$10 million bounty on him.

The Nusra Front and the Syrian conflict: As Syria's civil war intensified in 2013, so did al-Golani's ambitions. He defied al-Baghdadi's calls to dissolve the Nusra Front and merge it with al-Qaida's operation in Iraq, to form the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIS. Al-Golani nonetheless pledged his allegiance to al-Qaida, which later disassociated itself from ISIS. The Nusra Front battled ISIS and eliminated much of its competition among the Syrian armed opposition to Assad. In his first interview in 2014, al-Golani kept his face covered, telling a reporter for Qatari network Al-Jazeera that he rejected political talks in Geneva to end the conflict. He said his goal was to see Syria ruled under Islamic law and made clear that there was no room for the country's Alawite, Shiite, Druze and Christian minorities.

Consolidating power and rebranding: In 2016, al-Golani revealed his face to the public for the first time in a video message that announced his group was renaming itself Jabhat Fateh al-Sham — the Syria Conquest Front — and cutting its ties to al-

Qaida. "This new organisation has no affiliation to any external entity," he said in the video, filmed wearing military garb and a turban.

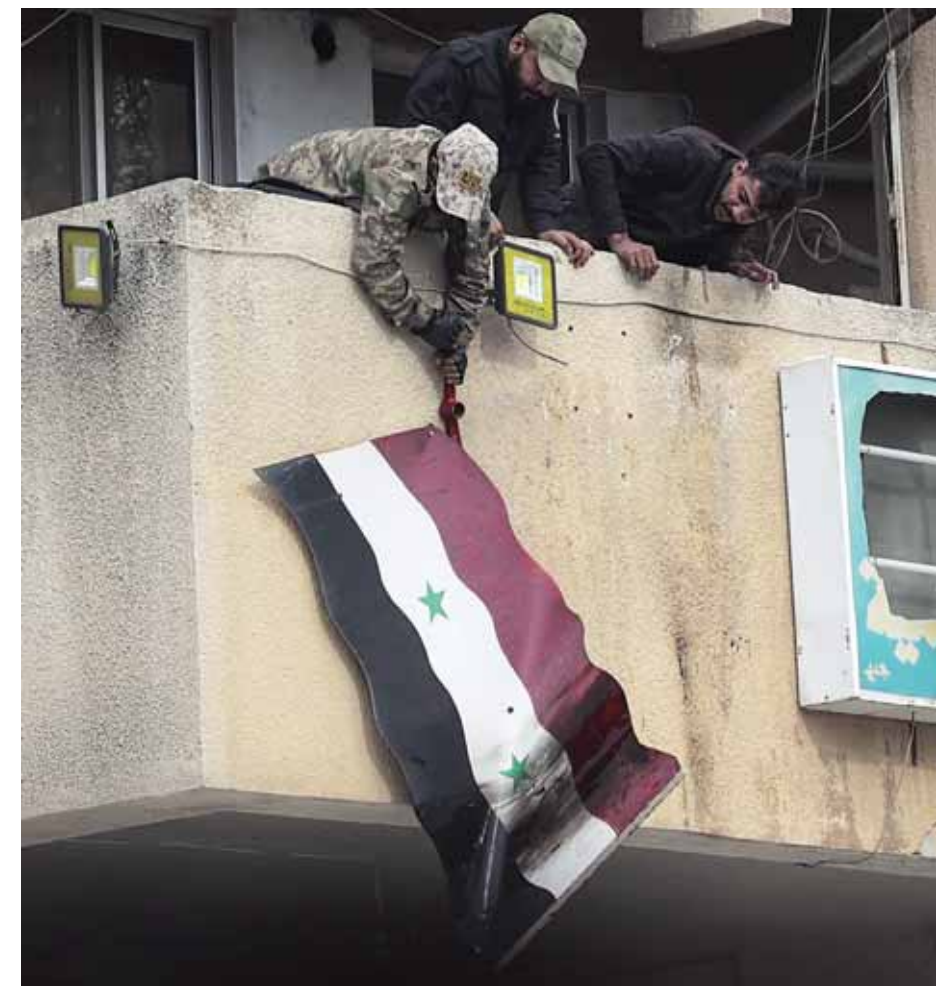
The move paved the way for al-Golani to assert full control over fracturing militant groups. A year later, his alliance rebranded again as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham — meaning Organisation for Liberating Syria — as the groups merged, consolidating al-Golani's power in northwest Syria's Idlib province.

HTS later clashed with independent Islamist militants who opposed the merger, further emboldening al-Golani and his group as the leading power in northwestern Syria, able to rule with an iron fist. With his power consolidated, al-Golani set in motion a transformation that few could have imagined. Replacing his military garb with shirt and trousers, he began calling for religious tolerance and pluralism.

He appealed to the Druze community in Idlib, which the Nusra Front had previously targeted, and visited the families of Kurds who were killed by Turkish-backed militias.

In 2021, al-Golani had his first interview with an American journalist on PBS. Wearing a blazer, with his short hair gelled back, the now more soft-spoken HTS leader said that his group posed no threat to the West and that sanctions imposed against it were unjust.

"Yes, we have criticised Western policies," he said. "But to wage a war against the United States or Europe from Syria, that's not true. We didn't say we wanted to fight."



Syrian opposition fighters remove a government Syrian flag from an official building in Salamiyah, east of Hama, Syria AP/PTI

Israeli forces have seized buffer zone in Golan Heights

AP ■ DAMASCUS

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu says Israeli forces have seized a buffer zone in the Golan Heights established by a 1974 ceasefire agreement with Syria.

He spoke on Sunday after a lightning rebel advance ended Syrian President Bashar Assad's rule.

Netanyahu said the decades-old agreement had collapsed and that Syrian troops had abandoned their positions, necessitating the Israeli takeover.

Israel captured the Golan Heights in the 1967 Mideast war and annexed it. The international community, except for the United States, views it as occupied Syrian territory.

Iran says Syrians should decide country's future

Damascus: Iran, which had strongly backed President Bashar Assad's deposed government, says Syrians should decide their country's future without "without destructive, coercive, foreign intervention."

The statement from the Foreign Ministry on Sunday was the country's first official reaction to the overthrow of Assad's government by rebel forces, who reached capital Damascus over the weekend.

Iran has been a staunch supporter of Assad throughout the nearly 14-year civil war.

Instructions to transfer power peacefully

Moscow: Russia's Foreign Ministry claimed Sunday that Bashar Assad had left Syria after negotiations with rebel groups, and gave "instructions" to "transfer power peacefully".

In a post on the Telegram messaging app on Sunday, the ministry said Moscow had not directly participated in these talks. It also said it has been following the "dramatic events" in Syria "with extreme concern". It also said Russian troops stationed in Syria have been put on high alert and that as of early after-

noon Sunday, there was "no serious threat" to the security of Russia's military bases there.

Russia has waged a military campaign in Syria since September 2015, teaming up with Iran to allow Assad's government to fight armed opposition groups and reclaim control over most of the country. While Russia now concentrates the bulk of its military resources in Ukraine, it has maintained a military foothold in Syria and keeps troops at its bases there.



FILE: Syrian President Bashar Assad (right) speaks with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi (left). AP/PTI

Trump calls for 'immediate ceasefire' in Ukraine after meeting Zelenskyy in Paris

AP ■ KYIV

US President-elect Donald Trump on Sunday called for an immediate ceasefire in Ukraine, shortly after a meeting in Paris with French and Ukrainian leaders, claiming Kyiv "would like to make a deal" to end the more than 1,000-day war.

to bring the fighting to an end. Trump's remarks came after a meeting Saturday with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and his French counterpart, Emmanuel Macron, that Zelenskyy later described as "constructive". Speaking to reporters later that day, Zelenskyy insisted that any peace deal "should be just" for Ukrainians, "so that Russia and Putin or any other aggressors will not have the opportunity to return". In a separate social media update Sunday, Zelenskyy asserted that Kyiv has so far lost 43,000 soldiers since Moscow's all-out invasion on Feb 24, 2022, while a further 370,000 have been wounded. Both Russia and Ukraine have been reluctant to publish official casualty figures, but

Western officials have said that the past few months of grinding positional warfare in eastern Ukraine have meant record losses for both sides, with tens of thousands killed and wounded each month. Meanwhile, President-elect Donald Trump on Sunday said Syrian President Bashar Assad has fled his country and his protector, Russia led by Vladimir Putin, "was not interested in protecting him any longer". In a post on social media platform Truth Social, Trump also wrote that Russia "lost all interest in Syria because of Ukraine, where close to 600,000 Russian soldiers lay wounded or dead". He added that "Russia and Iran are in a weakened state right now, one because of Ukraine and a bad economy,

the other because of Israel and its fighting success". Syrian refugees in Beirut say they want to go home: Syrian refugees in Beirut rejoice Assad's downfall on Sunday, with some saying they are considering returning to Syria. "After all these years of suffering, God granted us relief," Hilal Youssef, a Syrian from Hama, said on Sunday. "We will go back to Syria with pride and joy. We got rid of this army. We got rid of the injustice that we lived before and freed Syria. Now we can go there anytime we want." "For sure we want to go back," said Bilal al Khleif, also from Hama. Refugees will return "to Hama, to Damascus, to Idlib and all areas and chant Freedom," he said.

South Korean prosecutors detain ex-defence chief over imposition of martial law

AP ■ SEOUL

South Korean prosecutors on Sunday detained a former defence minister who allegedly recommended last week's brief but stunning martial law imposition to President Yoon Suk Yeol, making him the first figure detained over the case. The development came a day after Yoon avoided an opposition-led bid to impeach him in parliament, with most ruling party lawmakers boycotting a floor vote to prevent the two-thirds majority needed to suspend his presidential powers. The main opposition Democratic Party said it will prepare a new impeachment motion against Yoon. On Sunday, ex-Defence Minister Kim Yong Hyun was taken into custody at a Seoul detention facility after undergoing an investigation by prosecutors, a law enforcement official said, requesting anonymity in line with privacy rules. The official gave no further details. But South Korean media reported that Kim voluntarily appeared at a Seoul prosecutors' office, where he had his mobile phone confiscated and was detained. The reports said police searched Kim's former office and residence on Sunday. Repeated calls to Seoul prosecutors' offices and police agency were unanswered. Senior prosecutor Park Se-hyun said in a televised statement Sunday that authorities launched a 62-member special investigation team on the mar-

ital law case. Park, who will head the team, said the probe would "leave no suspicions". Yoon accepted Kim's resignation offer on Thursday after opposition parties submitted a separate impeachment motion against him. Kim is a central figure in Yoon's martial law enforcement, which led to special forces troops encircling the National Assembly building and army helicopters hovering over it. The military withdrew after the parliament unanimously voted to overturn Yoon's decree, forcing his Cabinet to lift it before daybreak Wednesday. In Kim's impeachment motion document, the Democratic Party and other opposition parties accused him of proposing martial law to Yoon. Vice Defence Minister Kim Seon Ho told parliament that Kim Yong Hyun ordered the deployment of troops to the National Assembly. The Democratic Party called Yoon's martial law imposition "unconstitutional, illegal rebellion or a coup". It has filed complaints with police against at least nine people, including Yoon and Kim, over the alleged rebellion. In a statement Wednesday, Kim said that "all troops who performed duties related to martial law were acting on my instructions, and all responsibility lies with me". Prosecutor General Shim Woo Jung told reporters on Thursday the prosecution plans to investigate the rebellion charges against Yoon following complaints. While the presi-

dent mostly has immunity from prosecution while in office, that does not extend to allegations of rebellion or treason. The Defence Ministry said it has suspended three top military commanders over their alleged involvement in the martial law imposition. They were among those facing the opposition-raised rebellion allegations. On Saturday, Yoon issued an apology over the martial law decree, saying he won't shirk legal or political responsibility for the declaration. He said he would leave it to his party to chart a course through the country's political turmoil, "including matters related to my term in office". Since taking office in 2022 for a single five-year term, Yoon has struggled to push his agenda through an opposition-controlled parliament and grappled with low approval ratings amid scandals involving himself and his wife. In his martial law announcement on Tuesday night, Yoon called parliament a "den of criminals" bogging down state affairs and vowed to eliminate "shameless North Korea followers and anti-state forces". The declaration of martial law was the first of its kind in more than 40 years in South Korea. The turmoil has sparked alarm among key diplomatic partners like the US and Japan. The scrapping of Yoon's impeachment motion is expected to intensify protests calling for his ouster and deep-

en political chaos in South Korea, with a survey suggesting a majority of South Koreans support the president's impeachment. Yoon's martial law declaration drew criticism from the conservative ruling party, but it is determined to oppose Yoon's impeachment apparently because it fears losing the presidency to liberals. Ruling People Power Party leader Han Dong-hun said Sunday the PPP will work with the government to determine Yoon's early and orderly exit from office in a way that minimises confusion, but he didn't say when that would happen. He also claimed Yoon will not be involved in state affairs, including foreign policy. Yoon's presidential office didn't immediately respond. The Democratic Party criticised Han Dong-hun's comments, saying that the exclusion of an incumbent president from state affairs isn't supported by the constitution. The party said authorities should immediately arrest Yoon and all others implicated in the case. The presidential office said Sunday that Yoon accepted the resignation offer by Safety Minister Lee Sang-min, who has also faced an opposition-led impeachment motion over his alleged role in the martial law enforcement. In a parliamentary hearing on Friday, Lee, one of Yoon's closest associates, defended Yoon's martial law decree, saying the president exercised his powers "within the boundaries of constitutional processes and law".

Search for UnitedHealthcare CEO's killer yields evidence, but few answers

AP ■ NEW YORK

They have seen him smiling on a hostel security camera, but don't know his name. They found the backpack he discarded while fleeing, but don't know where he's gone. As the search for UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson's killer goes on, investigators are reckoning with a tantalizing dichotomy: They have troves of evidence, but the shooter remains an enigma. Police don't know who he is, where he is, or why he did it — though they are confident that it was a targeted attack instead of a random act. "The net is tightening," New York City Mayor Eric Adams said Saturday. Hours after he spoke, police divers were seen searching a pond in Central Park, where the killer fled after the shooting. Officers have been scouring the park for days for any possible clues and found his bag there Friday. Retracing the gunman's steps using surveillance video,

police say, it appears he left the city by bus soon after the shooting Wednesday morning outside the New York Hilton Midtown. He was seen on video at an uptown bus station about 45 minutes later, NYPD Chief of Detectives Joseph Kenny said. With the high-profile search expanding across state lines, the FBI announced late Friday that it was offering a USD 50,000 reward for information leading to an arrest and conviction, adding to a reward of up to USD 10,000 that the NYPD has offered. Police say they believe the suspect acted alone. Police provided no updates on the hunt Saturday, but investigators are urging patience — even with a killer on the loose. Hundreds of detectives are combing through video recordings and social media, vetting tips from the public and interviewing people who might have information, including Thompson's family and coworkers and the shooter's randomly assigned roommates at the Manhattan hostel where

he stayed. "This isn't Blue Bloods! We're not going to solve this in 60 minutes," Kenny told reporters Friday. "We're painstakingly going through every bit of evidence that we can come across." The shooter paid cash at the hostel, presented what police believe was a fake ID and is believed to have paid cash for taxi rides and other transactions. He didn't speak to others at the hostel and almost always kept his face covered with a mask, only lowering it while eating. But investigators caught a break when they came across security camera images of an unguarded moment in which he briefly showed his face soon after arriving in New York on Nov 24. Police distributed the images to news outlets and on social media but so far haven't been able to ID him using facial recognition — possibly because of the angle of the images or limitations on how the NYPD is allowed to use that technology, Kenny said.

On Friday evening, investigators found a backpack in Central Park that had been worn by the gunman, police said. They didn't immediately reveal what, if anything, it contained but said it would be tested and analyzed. Another potential clue, a fingerprint on an item he purchased at a Starbucks minutes before the shooting, has so far proven useless for identifying him, Kenny said. Aided by surveillance cameras on nearby every building and block, police have been able to retrace the shooter's movements. They know he ambushed Thompson at 6:44 am as the executive arrived at the Hilton for his company's annual investor conference, using a 9 mm pistol that resembled the guns farmers use to put down animals without causing a loud noise. They know ammunition found near Thompson's body bore the words "delay," "deny" and "depose," mimicking a phrase used by insurance industry critics.

Blast in Dutch apartment kills at least 5

AP ■ THE HAGUE

Emergency services on Sunday searched for a second day through the debris of an apartment block that was destroyed by an explosion and fire, killing at least five people, but held out little hope of finding any more survivors. The cause of the Saturday morning disaster was unclear. Mayor Jan van Zanen said investigators were looking into "all possibilities". Police said they are looking for a car seen leaving the scene in case that helps with the investigation. The fire service said five bodies were found, and five injured people were rescued. The mayor said rescuers were no longer looking for survivors but for eventual bodies, given that the "slim chance of survival" under what's left of the apartments. However, one person was rescued alive many hours after the explosion.

Taiwan reports 14 Chinese warships near island

AP ■ TAIPEI

China sent 14 warships, seven military aircraft and four balloons near Taiwan between Saturday and Sunday, according to Taiwan's Defence Ministry, as Beijing ramps up pressure on the island it claims as its own. China's military activities came amid speculation Beijing might organise military drills around the island in response to Taiwanese President Lai Ching-te's recent visit to Pacific allies, including US stops in Hawaii and Guam. China claims Taiwan, a self-ruled democracy of 23 million people, as its own territory, and bristles at other countries' formal exchanges with Taiwan. The United States, like most countries, doesn't recognize Taiwan as a country but is its main unofficial backer and sells it arms.

The Chinese government has pledged to annex Taiwan, through military force if necessary, and sends ships and military planes near the island almost daily. The 14 warships, seven military planes and four balloons were reported over 24 hours between 6 am on Saturday and 6 am on Sunday, according to Taiwan's Defence Ministry. The ministry said six of the aircraft crossed the median line of the Taiwan Strait, an unofficial demarcation zone between Taiwan and China. One of the balloons brushed over the island's northern tip, according to the ministry. Lai on Friday called on China to refrain from threats and said Beijing's military exercises "will not be able to win the respect" of neighbouring countries. Lai's first overseas trip since taking office in May included visits to the Marshall Islands,

Tuvalu and Palau, three of the 12 countries that have diplomatic ties with Taiwan. The rest of the world, including the US, has official ties with China. Lai's stops in Hawaii and Guam — from where he had phone calls with US Congress leaders — angered China, which opposes US arms sales and military assistance to Taiwan. There was widespread speculation China might organize war games around Taiwan in response to the visit, though it was unclear when they might start. In October, China held drills around Taiwan involving a record one-day total of 153 aircraft, 14 navy vessels and 12 Chinese government ships in response to a Lai speech in which he rejected Beijing's claims over Taiwan. Beijing has labelled Lai a separatist and refuses to speak to him.

Trump's return may be boon for Netanyahu

AP ■ TEL AVIV

Shortly after Donald Trump's win in last month's US election, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu rushed to congratulate the president-elect: "History's greatest comeback!" he gushed. If Trump's staunchly pro-Israel first term and his nominations for top administration positions are any indication, Netanyahu's glee is justified. But much has transpired since Trump left office in early 2021. The wars in the Middle East, the lofty ambitions of Netanyahu's far-right governing coalition and Netanyahu's personal relationship with him could dampen that enthusiasm and complicate what on the surface looks like a seamless alliance. "For Bibi, this is his dream. He wanted this," said Mazal Muallem, an Israeli journalist and Netanyahu biographer, referring to the Israeli leader by his nickname. "For Bibi, it's too good to be true." With Netanyahu set to testify in

his corruption trial and facing an international arrest warrant over the war in Gaza, Trump's backing will be all the more significant. During Trump's first term, he adopted policies largely favorable to Netanyahu. Trump broke with longstanding US policy to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital, moving the US Embassy to the contested city over Palestinian objections. He recognized Israel's claim to the Golan Heights, which the international community considers occupied Syrian territory. He also turned a blind eye to Israeli settlement construction in the occupied West Bank and presented a peace plan that would leave dozens of settlements intact. The Palestinians seek all of the West Bank, captured in 1967, as the heartland of a future state, with east Jerusalem as its capital. The international community considers settlements in both areas illegal. At Netanyahu's urging, Trump withdrew the US from an Obama-era deal between world

powers and Iran over its nuclear program and ramped up sanctions against Iran, while also killing a top Iranian general. And in the final days of his presidency, Trump brokered a series of diplomatic deals between Israel and Arab countries, shattering a longstanding assumption that Arab countries would not normalize ties without progress on Palestinian statehood. The accords marked a major foreign policy achievement for Netanyahu. Likely to top Netanyahu's wish list this time around is for Trump to be tough against Iran or perhaps even provide Israel with the weaponry it needs for an effective strike against Iran's nuclear program. Netanyahu will also want to see progress on normalization with Saudi Arabia, but he will seek to minimize Israeli concessions to the Palestinians in return. And he will likely expect Trump to give Israel a free hand in Gaza and not pressure it to withdraw troops, even under a ceasefire deal.

In the weeks since Trump's reelection, Netanyahu and his allies have expressed hope that the good times will return after strained relations with the Biden administration. "The belief for now is that Trump will deliver," said Aviv Bushinsky, a former adviser to Netanyahu. He said Netanyahu's appointment of a hard-line settlement advocate as ambassador to Washington was a sign of the Israeli leader's confidence in the future under Trump. Netanyahu could certainly use the boost, especially after seeing his popularity drop after the Oct 7, 2023, Hamas attacks. Despite important battlefield gains against Hamas, including the death of its leader in October, and the recent ceasefire that ended nearly 14 months of fighting with the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah, opinion polls have repeatedly predicted that Netanyahu's governing coalition would fall far short of a required majority to stay in power if new elections were held now.

Imran's party to launch more protests

PTI ■ PESHAWAR

Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province Ali Amin Gandapur, the firebrand leader of Imran Khan's party, has warned of launching more protests against the federal government to secure the release of the jailed former premier. "We will continue launching attacks like the battle of Panipat. We will conquer if

demands are not met," Gandapur told reporters on Saturday, referring to a historic battle in the subcontinent. "We have launched just five attacks and will continue to launch the rest," he said while referring to the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party's march on November 24 in Islamabad to demand the release of Khan. Khan's party launched a protest on November 24 after he issued

a "final call", demanding the restoration of his party's electoral mandate, the release of detained party members, and the reversal of the 26th Amendment which he said had strengthened a "dictatorial regime". During the "do-or-die" protest in Islamabad, PTI leadership, including Gandapur and Khan's wife Bushra Bibi, vanished from the scene when the law enforcers launched an operation to clear Islamabad's Red Zone of protesters on the night between November 26-27. Gandapur's statement came

two days after Khan Friday warned the government of launching a "civil disobedience" movement if his demands, including the judicial probe into the crackdown on party supporters, were not met. Gandapur accused the government of killing his party's supporters after imposing Section 245.

'Reindeer' volunteers bring holiday magic to Ukrainian kids living on frontlines

AP ■ IZIU (UKRAINE)

Hopes for victory, a swift end to the war and prayers for their loved ones' survival or return from Russian captivity are among the wishes scattered throughout letters sent to a volunteer group by Ukrainian children living in frontline areas. While the volunteers, who are named reindeer after the magical beasts that pull Santa's sleigh, cannot fulfil many of these dreams, they strive to deliver on the simpler ones, such as requests for power banks to help families endure outages, bicycles, books, and even pets. Every winter, the volunteers travel to heavily damaged cities to deliver gifts and ensure that, despite the war, Ukrainian children can celebrate the holiday season just like their peers around the world. This year, the group received 2,310 letters, according to project manager Inna Achkasova from the NGO Ukrainian

Frontiers, who launched the St Nicholas' Reindeers initiative in 2015. The children's wishes are published on the project's website. Donors affectionately known as magicians then choose a letter and buy the requested gift to make that child's dreams come true. The reindeer then deliver those gifts. "Children are those who have no choice whatsoever. No one asks them whether they want to stay or leave," says project psychologist Kateryna Shutalova. "What happens to them is never their choice. And this makes them the most vulnerable." But every child gets only one childhood, even if it's shaped by war. That's why, in their letters, the horrors that have impacted their lives coexist with wishes similar to those of children everywhere. "My father is in captivity, and I live with my mother and brother," one boy wrote in his letter. He continued: "I love

playing football and practice it professionally. I want a leather football." Volunteers sift through all the letters, enduring the tragic stories of each child, to sort and deliver the gifts correctly. Among the writers are children who have lost loved ones to shelling, endured Russian occupation, seen their homes destroyed, have parents serving on the frontlines, or were forced to flee to escape the war. "What struck me wasn't their wishes but how deeply children feel the need to tell their stories," Shutalova says. Wearing reindeer antlers, the volunteers set out on their journey on Dec 6, when Ukraine celebrates St Nicholas Day. Their journey is expected to last until mid-January. On a frosty morning in Kharkiv, covered by the season's first snow, a team of volunteers departs in two buses filled with gifts, headed for the formerly Russian-occupied city of Izium, around 55 km from the

frontline. At first, when the celebration has started, the children observe cautiously, their expressions sombre, but that mood doesn't last. With each activity, they became more cheerful and engaged. One of them is 9-year-old Alina Soboleva, who remains detached despite the volunteers' efforts. She watches the festivities unfold with a quiet gaze. Her grandmother, Svitlana Lokotsh, explains that Alina has been withdrawn since witnessing the deaths of her mother and other grandmother in a shelling in the courtyard of their home. Alina had been watching through the window as her mother spoke on the phone. When the shell struck, a fragment hit her mother in the neck. Her grandmother rushed outside to help and was killed by another shell. In her letter, Alina asked for two pet mice. She said it was her dream. "Our only wish is for peace and

quiet," says Lokotsh, who took Alina in after her mother's death. "So the children don't have to be afraid." Shutalova explains that parents often find it hard to talk to their children about the war. They're either afraid, lack the emotional resources, or are overwhelmed by their feelings. "But for children to process what they've been through, they need to talk, play, and express those emotions," she says. At the celebration, parents stand against the walls, smiling as their children laugh and play despite having endured so much at such a young age. Among them is Anna Bolharska, a 32-year-old mother of two. Her father-in-law was killed and her brother-in-law was injured during the occupation. In the spring of 2022, she and her children fled Izium amid relentless shelling, only returning after Ukrainian forces liberated the city in September that year.

"I don't like to remember those times. We try to move forward because dwelling on it is too hard mentally," Bolharska says. "We try not to remind the children and to keep them distracted." Her 9-year-old daughter, Myroslava Bolharska, dreams of becoming a veterinarian. In her letter, she asked for a guitar. "During the war it seems everyone's dreams have changed - to wish for the war to end," she wrote. The reindeers' winter journey will take them to over 40 towns in the coming weeks. They hope to realise many dreams and bring joy to the kids, even though some of their wishes are impossible to fulfil. "Some children wrote in their letters that they want their childhood back," project co-founder Inna Achkasova says, adding that the reindeer volunteers aim to ensure that every child feels seen, heard and loved.

PUBLIC NOTICE

Whereas, Titan Infracon LLP is in the process of obtaining occupation certificate for Tower-2, in the I.T. Park Colony, area admeasuring 6.445 acres (License number-47 of 2008), Sector-48, Gurgaon, Haryana. And whereas, the office of Director, Town and Country Planning, Haryana, Chandigarh, has directed Titan Infracon LLP to seek objections from the allottees of Tower-2 in the project for construction of additional floor i.e. G+13, as against sanctioned of G+12 Floors (In sanctioned Plan 12" Floor is sanctioned as double height). Accordingly, vide this public notice objections are hereby invited from the allottees of Tower-2 in the Project seeking amendments in the existing Building plans as well as grant of occupation certificate. The copy of the existing approved building plan and as built drawings being approved is available at our office and on website www.titaninfracon.com. Any allottee of Tower-2 in the Project, may file his/her objection in the Senior Town Planner, Gurgaon, HUDA Complex, Sector 14, Gurgaon or to us at www.titaninfracon@gmail.com, within 30 days of publication of this public notice, failing which it shall be assumed that there are no objections towards the grant of occupation certificate as well as amendment in the existing building plans.

PUBLIC NOTICE

I, Rajender Kumar Vashisht, son of Late Chhattarpal Sharma resident of House No. 867P, Sector 15, Part 2, Gurgaon, Haryana, hereby declare that we have disowned our son, Tushar Vashisht, son of Shri Rajender Kumar Vashisht, in all respects. This disownment is due to his behaviour towards us and his lack of contact or cohabitation with us for more than three years. Consequently, Tushar Vashisht shall have no right, claim, or interest in any of our movable or immovable properties, bank accounts, or other assets. We further notify the general public that any dealings with Tushar Vashisht concerning any properties, accounts, or other assets belonging to us shall be deemed illegal and void, and the concerned parties will do so entirely at their own risk and responsibility.

THE PIONEER CLASSIFIEDS

CHANGE OF NAME

I, Anita Rawat D/o Late Sh. Satya Singh R/o H3/124 A and B, Flat No.C-2, SE Mahavir Enclave, Palam Village, New Delhi-45 declare that the name of my father has been wrongly mentioned as Sate Singh my matriculation certificate. The actual name of my father Late Sh. Satya Singh, which may be amended accordingly.

PD(1038)C

FDI inflows in India cross \$1 Trillion

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows into India have crossed the USD one trillion milestone in the April 2000-September 2024 period, firmly establishing the country's reputation as a safe and key investment destination globally. According to data from the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT), the cumulative amount of FDI, including equity, reinvested earnings and other capital, stood at USD 1,033.40 billion during the said period. About 25 per cent of the FDI came through the Mauritius route. It was followed by Singapore (24 per cent), the US (10 per cent), the Netherlands (7 per cent), Japan (6 per cent), the UK (5 per cent), UAE (3 per cent) and Cayman Islands, Germany and Cyprus accounted for 2 per cent each. India received USD 177.18 billion from Mauritius, USD 167.47 billion from Singapore and USD 67.8 billion from the US during the period under review, as per the data. The key sectors attracting the maximum of these inflows include the services segment, computer software and hardware, telecommunications, trading,



construction development, automobile, chemicals, and pharmaceuticals. According to the Commerce and Industry Ministry, since 2014, India has attracted a cumulative FDI inflow of USD 667.4 billion (2014-24), registering an increase of 119 per cent over the preceding decade (2004-14). "This investment inflow spans 31 states and 57 sectors, driving growth across diverse industries. Most sectors, except strategically important sectors, are open for 100 per cent FDI under the automatic route. FDI equity inflows into the

manufacturing sector over the past decade (2014-24) reached USD 165.1 billion, marking a 69 per cent increase over the previous decade (2004-14), which saw inflows of USD 97.7 billion, an official has said. To ensure that India remains an attractive and investor-friendly destination, the government reviews FDI policy on an ongoing basis and makes changes from time to time after having extensive consultations with stakeholders. The overseas inflows into India are likely to gather momentum in 2025, as

healthy macroeconomic numbers, better industrial output and attractive PLI schemes will attract more overseas players amid geopolitical headwinds, experts said. They added that despite the global challenges, India is still the preferred investment destination. Avimukt Dar, Founding Partner, INDUSLAW, said the inflows are likely to continue in a robust form. There is strong anticipation that private equity financing in the tech sector, which had slowed down in the past, will pick up again since various funds

have enjoyed good exits in the public markets and are ready to deploy again. "The government can continue with structural reforms, particularly in the space of M&A, by nudging SEBI to make the public takeover regime more friendly for foreign players," Dar said. Rumki Majumdar, an economist at consultancy Deloitte India, said FDI inflows are likely to remain modest amidst expected policy changes in the US and the impact of policy stimulus on China's economy. Geopolitical situations may alter supply chains, and trade regulations would dampen investors' sentiments, keeping capital flows volatile, she said, adding that the government will have to prioritise infrastructure capex with timely project execution, boost workforce skilling via PPPs and incentives, invest in digital ecosystems for productivity gains, and foster R&D for digital solutions that help inclusion and formalisation of the economy. Commenting on the data, Manav Nagaraj, Partner, Shardul Amarchand Mangaldas & Co, said FDI in India is likely to continue to rise in all areas - early stage investments, growth capital and strategic investments.

"India as an investment destination has historically been and continues to be attractive for foreign investors across various countries, whether from the US, UK, continental Europe or Asian countries," he added. FDI is allowed through the automatic route in most of the sectors, while in areas like telecom, media, pharmaceuticals and insurance, government approval is required for foreign investors. Under the government approval route, a foreign investor has to get a prior nod from the ministry or department concerned, whereas, under the automatic route, an overseas investor is only required to inform the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) after the investment is made. At present, FDI is prohibited in some sectors. They are lottery, gambling and betting, chit funds, Nidhi company, real estate business, and manufacturing of cigars, cheroots, cigarillos and cigarettes using tobacco. FDI is important for India as it will require huge investments in the coming years for the infrastructure sector to boost growth. Healthy foreign inflows also help in maintaining the balance of payments and the value of the rupee.



FPIs return to Indian equities with ₹24,454 Crore inflow in December first week

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

After heavy selling in the past two months, foreign investors have staged a strong comeback to Indian equities with a net investment of Rs 24,454 crore in the first week of December amid stabilising global conditions and expectations of potential US Federal Reserve rate cuts. This revival follows significant outflows in the preceding months, with foreign portfolio investors (FPIs) pulling out a net Rs 21,612 crore in November and a massive Rs 94,017 crore in October - the worst monthly outflow on record. Interestingly, September had marked a nine-month high for FPI inflows, with a net investment of Rs 57,724 crore, highlighting the volatility in foreign investment trends.

According to the data with the depositories, FPIs have made a net investment of Rs 24,454 crore this month (till December 6). Trivesh D, COO, Tradejini, a stock trading platform, attributed the latest inflow to improving global conditions and the possibility of US Fed rate cuts. Also, the recent correction in the market could have prompted FPIs to build some exposure, Srivastava said. Additionally, uncertainty over Chinese equities on the back of proposed tariffs by US President-elect Donald Trump on China and other several nations could have prompted FPIs to look back at Indian equities, which offer much clearer long-term growth prospects, despite relatively high valuations, he added.

With the latest inflow, FPI investments have reached Rs 9,435 crore in 2024 so far, data with the depositories showed. Looking ahead, the flow of foreign investments into Indian equity markets will hinge on several key factors. These include the policies implemented under Donald Trump's presidency, the prevailing inflation and interest rate environment, and the evolving geopolitical landscape, Himanshu Srivastava, Associate Director, Manager Research, Morningstar Investment Research India, said. Additionally, the third-quarter earnings performance of Indian companies and the country's progress on the economic growth front will play a crucial role in shaping investor sentiment and influencing foreign inflows,

VK Vijayakumar, Chief Investment Strategist, Geojit Financial Services, said the shift in FPI strategy is evident in stock price movements, especially in large-cap banking stocks, where FPIs have been selling. This segment still has upside potential as it remains fairly valued and continues to grow at a steady pace, with more domestic institutional and retail investments expected to flow in, he added. Additionally, the IT sector is poised to perform well and attract increased FII interest. On the other hand, FPIs pulled out Rs 142 crore in the debt general limit and invested Rs 355 crore in the debt Voluntary Retention Route (VRR) during the period under review. So far this year, FPIs invested Rs 1.07 lakh crore in the debt market.

Markets to track inflation data, global trends, FII trading this week: Analysts

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Investors' sentiments will be guided by a host of domestic and global macroeconomic data announcements this week, along with the trading activity of foreign investors and trends in world stocks, analysts said. Besides, the rupee-dollar trend and movement of global oil benchmark Brent crude will also be crucial in dictating terms in the market, experts added. "The domestic stock market is likely to be shaped by a mix of global cues, domestic economic indicators, and the flow of investments from foreign and domestic institutional investors. Key factors like the rupee's exchange rate and crude oil prices will play a critical role in determining market trends. "Globally, geopolitical tensions, particularly the ongoing Russia-Ukraine



conflict, continue to pose challenges. However, recent declines in the dollar index and US bond yields have created a more favourable environment for emerging markets like India," Pravesh Gour, Senior Technical Analyst, Swastika Investmart Ltd, said. On the economic front, significant macroeconomic releases, including retail inflation and industrial production data from India as well as US core CPI, are expected to influence overall

market sentiment, Gour added. Last week, the BSE benchmark jumped 1,906.33 points or 2.38 per cent, and the NSE Nifty climbed 546.7 points or 2.26 per cent. "FIIs turning buyers in early December, in a total reversal of their sustained selling strategy during the last two months, has altered the market sentiments. The change in FII (Foreign Institutional Investors) strategy is getting reflected in stock price

movements, particularly in large-cap banking stocks in which FIIs have been sellers," VK Vijayakumar, Chief Investment Strategist, Geojit Financial Services, said. The release of US CPI inflation data will give some insights into the Fed's December meeting, an expert said. "The markets' attention is expected to turn towards macroeconomic indicators like IIP and CPI inflation. Additionally, the trend of FII inflows, following their recent buying spree, will remain a key focal point for market participants," Ajit Mishra - SVP, Research, Religare Broking Ltd, said. Siddhartha Khemka, Head - Research, Wealth Management, Motilal Oswal Financial Services Ltd, said this week will see significant economic data releases, including GDP numbers from Japan and the UK, along with China's CPI and India's CPI.

Mcap of six of top 10 most valued firms jump ₹2 lakh Crore

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The combined market valuation of six of the top-10 most-valued firms jumped Rs 2,03,116.81 crore last week, with Tata Consultancy Services and HDFC Bank emerging the biggest gainers, in-line with an optimistic trend at the Dalal Street. Last week, the BSE benchmark jumped 1,906.33 points, or 2.38 per cent, and the NSE Nifty climbed 546.7 points, or 2.26 per cent. While Reliance Industries, Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), HDFC Bank, ICICI Bank, Infosys, and State Bank of India were the winners from the pack, Bharti Airtel, Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC), ITC, and Hindustan Unilever emerged the

laggards. The market valuation of TCS surged Rs 62,574.82 crore to Rs 16,08,782.61 crore. HDFC Bank added Rs 45,338.17 crore taking its market valuation to Rs 14,19,270.28 crore. The valuation of Infosys jumped Rs 26,885.8 crore to Rs 7,98,560.13 crore and that of Reliance Industries soared Rs 26,185.14 crore to Rs 17,75,176.68 crore. State Bank of India's market capitalisation (mcap) climbed Rs 22,311.55 crore to Rs 7,71,087.17 crore and that of ICICI Bank rallied Rs 19,821.33 crore to Rs 9,37,545.57 crore. However, Bharti Airtel's valuation eroded Rs 16,720.1 crore to Rs 9,10,005.80 crore. The mcap of ITC declined Rs 7,256.27 crore to Rs 5,89,572.01 crore.

Cars set to get expensive from January as OEMs announce price hikes



PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Prices of various car models - ranging from entry-level hatchbacks to high-end luxury offerings - are set to rise as automakers have announced price hikes with effect from January. Carmakers cite an increase in input costs and operational expenses as the main reason to implement price increases from the next month. Industry experts, however, note that the exercise is also undertaken by automakers every year in December to shore up sales volume in the last month of the year, as customers postpone buyouts to later months to get the new year manufactured units. "We have seen a few cycles of price increase in India. It happens at the beginning of the calendar year and financial year, but few OEMs pick the timing based on their planned launches as well," Deloitte India Partner Rajat Mahajan said. While there could be multiple factors for the price increase, the key one is due to a decline in profitability of a few large

auto OEMs in the second quarter, he added. "Due to the festive season, the price revisions were not done. Hence, this is expected at the beginning of Q4. "Rising input costs of few materials, shifting consumer preferences on advanced features but a low willingness to pay, clubbed with the pressure of supporting dealers to offset high inventory carrying costs despite high festive discounts are putting a burden on profitability," Mahajan stated. Ica Vice President & Sector Head - Corporate Ratings Rohan Kanwar Gupta said automakers generally take a price increase at the start of the calendar year to help offset factors like the increase in operational costs on account of inflationary pressures and commodity prices etc. "The recent price hikes announced by various car makers are for the same reason. It must be noted that there are already healthy discounts on offer across a variety of models in the passenger vehicle industry, with the industry focused on

bringing down inventory levels," he added. The country's largest carmaker Maruti Suzuki India plans to hike vehicle prices by up to 4 per cent from January. The company, which sells models ranging from entry-level Alto K10 to multi-utility vehicle Invicto, said it is taking a price hike in light of rising input costs and operational expenses. "While the company continuously strives to optimise costs and minimise the impact on its customers, some portion of the increased cost may need to be passed on to the market," it stated. Rival Hyundai Motor India is also looking to increase prices of its model range by up to Rs 25,000 from January 1, 2025. The price increase has been necessitated due to an increase in input costs, adverse exchange rate and increase in logistics costs, the maker of Verna and Creta said. Mahindra & Mahindra will hike prices of its SUVs and commercial vehicles by up to 3 per cent from January. The adjustment is in response to the rising costs due to inflation and increased commodity prices, Mahindra & Mahindra said. Similarly, JSW MG Motor India said it will increase prices of its entire model range by up to 3 per cent from next month. The price increase is a result of continuously rising input costs and other external factors, the automaker stated. Honda Cars India is also considering a price increase but is yet to decide on the quantum.



Khorlochhu Hydropower Project in Bhutan to commission in 2029: Tata Power CEO

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The construction work of the Rs 6,900 crore Khorlochhu Hydropower Project in Bhutan has started, and the plant is likely to be commissioned by 2029, Tata Power CEO and MD Praveer Sinha has said. The 600 MW project is being developed on the Kholongchu River in the eastern part of the neighbouring nation. "We are looking at Bhutan. Work has already started for the 600 MW project in Khorlochhu...The tunnel diversion work," Sinha told PTI in reply to a question on plans for hydro projects outside India. The project is expected to be commissioned in September 2029, he said. In August, Tata Power and Bhutan-based Druk Green Power Corporation Ltd (DGPC) announced entering into a strategic partnership with Druk Green Power Corporation Ltd (DGPC) to develop a portfolio of 5,000 MW of clean energy capacity in the Himalayan nation. DGPC, a subsidiary of Druk Holding and Investments Ltd, is the sole generation utility of Bhutan. As part of the partnership, another project of 1,125 MW will be set up in Bhutan, the CEO said. The pre-construction work of Dorjilung HEP (hydroelectric project) will start in January 2025, and the project is expected to be commissioned by mid-2031, Sinha said. When asked if the company is also looking to set up any such projects in Nepal, he said that as of now, there are no such plans. However, if any opportunities come, it can be evaluated, Sinha said.

investment by Tata Power in Khorlochhu Hydro Power Ltd, a public-private partnership company. Later in November, Tata Power announced entering into a strategic partnership with Druk Green Power Corporation Ltd (DGPC) to develop a portfolio of 5,000 MW of clean energy capacity in the Himalayan nation. DGPC, a subsidiary of Druk Holding and Investments Ltd, is the sole generation utility of Bhutan. As part of the partnership, another project of 1,125 MW will be set up in Bhutan, the CEO said. The pre-construction work of Dorjilung HEP (hydroelectric project) will start in January 2025, and the project is expected to be commissioned by mid-2031, Sinha said. When asked if the company is also looking to set up any such projects in Nepal, he said that as of now, there are no such plans. However, if any opportunities come, it can be evaluated, Sinha said.

CII urges govt to stick to fiscal deficit target

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Industry body CII has suggested the government to stick to the fiscal deficit target of 4.9 per cent of GDP for 2024-25 and 4.5 per cent for 2025-26, cautioning that "overly aggressive targets" beyond these could adversely affect India's economic growth. "India has been growing rapidly amidst a slowing global economy. Prudent fiscal management for macroeconomic stability has been pivotal to this growth," said Chandrajit Banerjee, Director General, CII, elaborating on suggestions for the forthcoming Union Budget. CII also highlighted the announcement in the Union Budget 2024-25 to keep the fiscal deficit at levels that help reduce the debt-to-GDP ratio. In preparation for this, the forthcoming budget could lay out a glide path to bring the central government's debt to below 50 per cent of GDP in the medium term (by 2030-31), and below 40 per cent of GDP in the long term, CII has suggested. Such an explicit target will have a positive impact on India's sovereign credit rating and further on the interest rates in the economy, the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) stated. "To aid longer-term fiscal planning, the government should consider instituting Fiscal Stability Reporting. This could include issuing annual reports on fiscal risks under different stress scenarios and



the outlook for fiscal stability. The exercise will help forecast potential economic headwinds or tailwinds and assess their impact on the fiscal path," it said. The reporting can also include long-term (10-25 years) forecasting of fiscal positions, accounting for the impact of factors like economic growth, technological change, climate change, demographic changes, etc. Several countries have adopted this proactive ranging from 10 years in Brazil to 50 years in the UK. "Looking at the next year's budget, CII has suggested sticking to the fiscal deficit target of 4.9 per cent of GDP for FY25 and a target of 4.5 per cent for FY26. However, CII has also pointed out that overly aggressive targets beyond the ones mentioned could adversely affect growth," the industry body said. CII has suggested three interventions to nudge states towards fiscal prudence. Firstly, the states could be encouraged to institute state-level Fiscal Stability Reporting. Secondly, states have been allowed to borrow directly

from the market, following the recommendations of the 12th Finance Commission. States also provide guarantees in case of borrowing by state PSEs, which have implications for the state's fiscal health. Third, the central government could create an independent and transparent credit rating system for states to incentivise them to maintain fiscal prudence. The rating of states could be used to grant them greater autonomy in deciding how to borrow and spend. Additionally, the central government can use the Credit Rating of states as one of the parameters in deciding transfers to states, including for schemes like Special Assistance as Loan to States for Capital Expenditure. "Such rewards will act as a strong incentive for state governments to prioritise fiscal prudence and fiscal sustainability of state finances," said Banerjee. In addition to the fiscal prudence at the state level is equally crucial for the overall macroeconomic stability and fiscal sustainability.



REVOLUTIONISING CHILDREN'S SKINCARE



IT IS IMPORTANT FOR THE PARENTS' TO FIND THE CORRECT SKINCARE FOR THEIR KIDS, WRITES **ABHI SINGHAL**

Children's skincare is a growing concern in today's world. As children are increasingly exposed to environmental factors and social media trends, maintaining their delicate skin's health becomes essential. Unlike adults, children's skin requires gentle, age-appropriate products that cater to their unique needs, promoting healthy hygiene habits from an early age. However, finding solutions that balance safety, effectiveness, and appeal can be challenging. Parents often struggle to navigate between harsh commercial products and ineffective alternatives, making it crucial to develop skincare routines tailored for children. Addressing these concerns, brands are stepping in to make skincare safe, enjoyable, and child-friendly. Today we talk about *Y Play Z*, a self-care and grooming product brand that is tailored for children. On talking to *Vidya Madhavan*, Founder and CEO, of

Y Play Z, she told *The Pioneer* that the inspiration behind *Y Play Z* has stemmed from a glaring gap in personal hygiene awareness for kids in India. Despite the growing exposure to trends through social media, children lack access to products designed specifically for their unique needs. Many existing options are either too harsh, ineffective, or unappealing for this age group, leading to poor hygiene habits. As a parent herself, *Vidya* noticed how challenging it was to find gentle, age-appropriate solutions that children could use independently and confidently. This realisation of her fueled the idea of creating a brand that not only addresses their skincare and hygiene concerns but also makes the process enjoyable. Everyone would get the harsh thought of exposing their child's skin to skincare at such an early age, addressing this the founder explained that the one thing everyone must understand is that



children today are growing up in a digital age where exposure to skincare trends on social media is inevitable. But her brand's goal is to help everyone do

safe and responsible skincare for their little ones. *Vidya Madhavan* also talked about the challenges she faced while designing

products specifically for children and teenagers. On the same, she said that designing skincare products for the same presented unique challenges, particularly in balancing safety, efficacy, and appeal. Children's skin is delicate, requiring formulations free from harsh chemicals while teenagers face hormonal changes that demand targeted solutions, collectively after which she made the products. Also, *Vidya* said that through their pan-India research, *Y Play Z* identified key skin and body concerns among children and teenagers, such as dry skin, irritation, and the need for gentle hygiene solutions. Some *Y Play Z* products that are available are all-over soothing and restorative balm (Soothe Operator) is specially formulated to alleviate dry skin conditions, a common issue across age groups. Similarly, our natural, aluminum-free deo sticks (Slide & Glide) are uniquely curated

for teen skin, offering a safe and effective option for body odour management while being gentle and skin-friendly. The founder recommends *Grime Buster*, a 2-in-1 Face & Body Wash with a nourishing, hydrating formula for the ones with ultra-sensitive, eczema-prone skin. With that the *2-in-1 Face & Body Lotion* (Hydration Hub), enriched with Mumuru Butter, Olive Squalane, and Rice Water effectively relieves dryness and soothes sensitive skin with its anti-inflammatory properties. In a world where children's skincare is often overlooked, *Y Play Z* emerges as a brand that understands and prioritises the unique needs of young skin. With a focus on safety, efficacy, and appeal. The brand not only addresses common skincare challenges but also empowers parents to adopt safe and responsible skincare routines for their little ones.



As the winter chill sets in, the allure of warm, nutrient-dense foods becomes undeniable. Among these seasonal delights, walnuts shine as a superfood that not only enhances the taste of comfort foods but also fortifies your body against the rigors of winter. With their rich, buttery flavour and exceptional nutritional profile, walnuts are the perfect addition to your winter wellness routine.

[1] Winter-Proof Your Health with Nutritional Power: Walnuts are more than just a delightful snack; they are a treasure trove of nutrients that can keep your body thriving during the colder months.

□ A Boost of Antioxidants for Immunity: Walnuts contains some of the highest levels of antioxidants among nuts, with most found in their delicate skin. These antioxidants, including polyphenols that help strengthen the immune system and are crucial during winter when colds and flu are common. By neutralising harmful free radicals, walnuts can help your body fend off seasonal illnesses.

□ Heart Health During the Holiday Season - The indulgent foods of winter often lead to concerns about heart health. Walnuts, with their omega-3 fatty acids, monounsaturated fats, and magnesium, can mitigate these effects. They support heart health by reducing blood pressure and cholesterol levels, making them a guilt-free addition to festive treats.

□ Aiding Blood Sugar Stability: Winter celebrations can challenge blood sugar balance, but walnuts come to the rescue. Their low carbohydrate content and high fibre, protein, and healthy fats help regulate blood sugar levels. Regular consumption supports better insulin sensitivity, which is particularly helpful during a season of rich meals and sweet temptations.

□ Nourishing Your Mind in the Darker Months: The shorter days and longer nights of winter can affect cognitive function and



THE WARM COMFORT OF WALNUTS

A NUTRIENT-PACKED SUPERFOOD FOR WINTERS

mood. Walnuts, abundant in omega-3 fatty acids, vitamin E, and folate, are known to enhance brain health. Incorporating them into your diet can improve focus, memory, and emotional well-being can be a natural antidote to winter blues.

[2] Walnuts in the Kitchen: Perfect for Winter Recipes: The versatility of walnuts makes them ideal for winter cuisine.

□ As a Snack: Toasted walnuts with a sprinkle of cinnamon and honey are a warming, nutritious treat.

□ In Savoury Dishes: Add a crunch to creamy soups, winter salads, or hearty grain bowls with chopped walnuts.

□ For Baking: They're a star ingredient in festive cakes, spiced loaves, and chewy cookies.

□ As Garnish: Sprinkle over roasted vegetables or hot porridge for a delightful

combination of texture and flavour.

[3] Chilean Walnuts: A Winter Staple for Indian Consumers: Chilean walnuts have carved a niche in the Indian market by offering year-round access to premium-quality nuts. During India's off-season for walnuts, Chile steps in with its counter-seasonal production, ensuring a steady supply. Known for their light colour, consistent freshness, and superior flavour, Chilean walnuts align perfectly with the culinary traditions and health aspirations of Indian consumers.

[4] Chile's Natural Advantage: A Perfect Growing Environment: Chile's unique geography provides an ideal environment for cultivating world-class walnuts. Natural barriers such as the Andes Mountains and the Pacific Ocean shield walnut orchards from pests and diseases, resulting in high-quality produce. These nuts are celebrated for their uniform size, high yield, and rich taste, making them a favourite among health-conscious consumers.

[5] Seamless Seasonal Supply: Freshness Guaranteed: Chile's harvest season, from April to June, complements India's September to October walnut season. This ensures that Indian consumers have access to fresh walnuts even in the winter months. The consistent quality and availability of Chilean walnuts have made them a trusted choice for Indian households during the festive and winter seasons.

Walnuts are the ultimate winter superfood, providing essential nutrients to bolster your health during the colder months. From enhancing heart health to supporting cognitive function and boosting immunity, their benefits are as diverse as their culinary applications. So, this winter, make walnuts your go-to ingredient for health and comfort. A handful a day keeps the chill away!

— The article has been authored on behalf of the Chile Walnut team



Prioritising self-care and stress management enhances productivity and creates a fulfilling work-life balance, says **UPASANA ARORA**

Women juggle demanding careers with personal responsibilities. Whether they're leading teams, managing complex projects, or making critical decisions, the constant drive to excel in their professional lives can result in chronic stress and burnout. However, prioritising self-care and stress management is crucial not only for personal well-being but also for sustaining professional success over the long term. Nurturing one's mental and physical health can improve resilience, increase productivity, and build a greater sense of balance in life. Mindfulness is one of the most effective tools for managing stress. Mindfulness practices like meditation, deep breathing, and grounding techniques help women stay focused in the moment, reducing anxiety and preventing negative thought spirals that often arise in high-pressure situations. Mindfulness practices are effective tools for managing stress, especially for women in high-pressure roles. Techniques like meditation, deep breathing, and grounding exercises help individuals stay focused and present, reducing anxiety and breaking negative thought cycles that often arise in stressful situations. 10 to 15 minutes of daily meditation can promote calmness and mental clarity by encouraging a focus on the breath, allowing thoughts to come and go without judgment. Similarly, deep breathing exercises like diaphragmatic breathing help activate the body's relaxation response, lowering heart rate and blood pressure, which can have a profound impact on reducing overall stress levels. Women should try to maintain effective time management skills in high-pressure roles. By prioritising tasks, delegating responsibilities, and setting clear boundaries, women can manage their workload without sacrificing personal time or well-being. Further, physical activity is another powerful tool for stress management. Regular exercise not only maintains physical health but also releases endorphins, which help boost mood and energy levels. Women should aim to incorporate regular physical activity into their schedules, such as jogging, yoga, or even a brisk walk during lunch breaks, to improve mental clarity and reduce stress. Additionally, taking short movement breaks throughout the day can relieve physical tension and help clear the mind, especially for those who spend long hours at a desk or in meetings. Combining exercise with adequate rest and relaxation can significantly improve both mental and physical well-being. Sometimes, the pressures of high-pressure roles can



become overwhelming. In these instances, seeking professional help is not a sign of weakness but a necessary step toward maintaining mental health. Speaking with a therapist can help women manage stress, develop coping strategies, and gain a new perspective on work-related challenges. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and other therapeutic techniques can be particularly effective for stress management. Professional coaching or attending stress management workshops can provide women with specific tools and techniques for managing high-pressure situations more easily. Self-care and stress management are important components of sustaining long-term success, both professionally and personally, for women in high-pressure roles. By integrating mindfulness practices, managing time effectively, incorporating physical activity, setting boundaries, building a supportive network, and seeking professional help when needed, women can overcome the complexities of their roles without compromising their health. Self-care is not a luxury—it is a necessity.

— The author is the Managing Director, Yashoda Super Speciality Hospital, Kaushambi

Bumrah can't bowl from both ends, others need to take responsibility: Rohit

PTI ■ ADELAIDE

Jasprit Bumrah is only human and cannot always shoulder the responsibility of bowling opposition out all by himself, skipper Rohit Sharma said on Sunday, urging others to share the load with the premier fast bowler. India lost to Australia by 10 wickets in the second Test and during the home team's first innings, only Bumrah stood out with a four-wicket haul.

"We are not just playing with one bowler. There are other bowlers also who will have to take responsibility and get the job done for the team, be it (Mohammed) Siraj, Harshit Rana, Nitish Reddy, Akash Deep or Prasadh (Krishna)," skipper Rohit had a loud and clear message for his bowling unit.

The captain understands that there is a bit of inexperience in the line-up and they will grow in confidence with time.

"These bowlers have just arrived in Test cricket, it's important to give them confidence. Whenever they play a match, it's important to give them confidence. We keep planning and discussing. But you



because then what confidence does the team get? "It happens, sometimes the team doesn't get what it wants. He came up against a good batsman who put pressure on him. But he has a heart and a passion so we should back such (qualities in a player)," Rohit said. "The player might think that you give me one match but leave me out in the next. This is not good

for any player or any team, that's what I think. We should assess what the situation is and how helpful the conditions are," he elaborated.

While he doesn't want to judge Rana on the basis of one game but if change is warranted it would be done for benefit of the team.

"But judging someone after one match is not the right thing. We always keep (all) options open for any player to play since we have to win a Test match. If we must make such changes to win a Test, we will do that."

Rohit doesn't want to read too much into Siraj-Head incident. The Indian skipper feels that one doesn't need to read too much into the verbal altercation between Travis Head and pacer Siraj after the latter gave the left-hander angry send-off after a brilliant century.

While Head insisted that he acknowledged Siraj, saying "well bowled" after his dismissal, the Indian pacer countered by alleging that the Aussie batter was lying.

"There is a thin line between getting aggressive and over-aggressive. It is my job as captain to see that no one crosses the line. But a few words can be exchanged. Siraj knows what he needs to do for the team and he will do everything required," Rohit defended his teammate.

Probed further by the Australian media, Rohit said: "When India and Australia play, these things happen. My job is not to look at one incident but at bigger picture." We didn't bat well enough, skipper admits

Not even being able to score 200 across both innings is certainly disappointing, and the skipper made no bones about it.

"When you come to Australia, I feel the best chance of winning a Test match is by putting runs on the board. We knew that there would be challenges with that ball. "But in the past, we've done that many times where the conditions have been a little challenging, and we've batted really well to put runs on the board, and then try and put pressure on the opposition," Rohit said.

"Like I said, that is the disappointing part, that we didn't bat well enough. We probably were 30-40 runs short with the bat in the first innings."



We left Perth in Perth and shut outside noise: Starc after Adelaide success

PTI ■ ADELAIDE

Mitchell Starc, one of the architects of Australia's comeback win in Adelaide, said the hosts had left the Perth debacle behind by shutting the "outside noise" following their heavy defeat in the series-opener.

A 295-run embarrassing defeat despite bowling India out for just 150 in the first innings invited criticism for the hosts from all quarters.

Living up to his reputation with the pink ball, left-arm quick Starc handed Australia a dream start by dismissing Perth centurion Yashasvi Jaiswal in the very first ball of the second Test en route to finishing with an impressive match haul of 8/108.

"There was a lot of outside noise after the game but we left Perth in Perth. Cannot really put my finger on it," Starc said after the end of the match.

About his approach with the pink ball, he said: "Nothing changes in my approach. Probably slightly fuller lengths. It (pink ball) is more like the white ball than the red ball.

"We were really positive with bat and ball and got the rewards. It's nice when the ball hits the stumps."

He further credited his skipper Pat Cummins for helping in his growth and highlighted improvements in his bowling,

World Chess Championship: Gukesh takes lead in 11th game as Ding Liren blunders

PTI ■ SINGAPORE

Grandmaster D Gukesh made a huge strike forward towards becoming the youngest-ever world champion defeating Ding Liren of China in the 11th game of the World Chess Championship here on Sunday.

With just three games to come, Gukesh took the lead for the first time in the match, with scoreline now reading 6-5 in favour of the 18-year-old Indian.

History is now on Gukesh's side as no challenger in modern chess has ever scored a win after being tied 5-5 after the 10th game.

For Liren, the only comforting thing could be the fact that he had won the 12th game in the last World Championship match against Ian Nepomniachtchi of Russia.

The Indian started off with the Knight move on his first turn and was surprised as Liren went for a reverse Benoni opening.

The move was shocking as it



looked like it was an over-the-board decision rather than a planned one. After only five moves, Gukesh had a lead of over an hour on the clock, which is never too easy for the opponent to recover in crunch games.

However, if everyone thought that the opening had gone seriously wrong for Liren, the Chinese had different ideas as he capitalised on an erroneous plan by Gukesh in the early middle game.

Things turned upside down when Liren went for completing his development and missed out on a simple manoeuvre that would have probably given the defending champion slightly better prospects.

Gukesh himself spent a lot of time in the middle game but the nature of the position remained double-edged.

As the clouds began to clear, Gukesh came up with a spectacular pawn sacrifice on

the queen side to give moving space for his rooks. Just as he doubled them on the file to exert pressure, Liren simply crashed and made the blunder in a blink. The Chinese player was left dejected as he immediately realised the mistake. Gukesh played the winning move in quick time.

In the remaining three games, Liren will have two games as white and this would be the best chance for him if he has to stage a comeback. Gukesh is just three draws away from winning his maiden world championship title.

The moves: D Gukesh - Ding Liren
1.Nf3 d5 2.C4 d4 3.B4 c5 4.E3 Nf6 5.A3 Bg4 6.Exd4 cxd4 7.H3 Bxf3 8.Qxf3 Qc7 9.D3 a5 10.B5 Nbd7 11.G3 Nc5 12.Bg2 Nfd7 13.0-0 Ne5 14.Qf4 Rd8 15.Rd1 g6 16.A4 h5 17.B6 Qd6 18.Ba3 Bh6 19.Bxc5 Qxc5 20.Qe4 Nc6 21.Na3 Rd7 22.Nc2 Qxb6 23.Rab1 Qc7 24.Rb5 0-0 25.Na1 Rb8 26.Nb3 e6 27.Nc5 Re7 28.Rdb1 Qc8 29.Qxc6 black resigned.



Don't waste time in hotel, no room for optional practice sessions, says Gavaskar

PTI ■ ADELAIDE

Batting legend Sunil Gavaskar has urged India not to "waste" time in their hotel rooms after the early finish of the pink ball Test, but utilise the two extra days by sweating it out in training so they can bounce back in the third game.

India were thoroughly exposed in their 10-wicket loss in the second Test of the Border Gavaskar Trophy with the match ending in less than two-and-a-half days as Australia bounced back to level the five-game series 1-1.

"Look at the remainder of the series as a three-match series. Forget it was a five-Test series. What I would like this Indian team to do is use the next couple of days for practice," Gavaskar told the official broadcaster.

"It's very important. You can't be sitting in your hotel room or wherever you're going because you have come here to play cricket.

"You don't have to practice the whole day. You can practice a session in the morning or afternoon, whichever time you choose, but do not waste these days. You would have been here playing a Test match if the Test match were to go on for five days," he added.

The third Test begins on December 14 and Gavaskar said the Indians should utilise the intervening time to get their rhythm back.

"You have to get yourself that much more time to get into the rhythm because you have not got the rhythm. There are others too who need time in the middle," he added.

Indian pacers were found wanting on a fast wicket that offered lateral movement, giving away plenty of runs in the first innings and allowing Australia, especially centurion Travis Head, to take a huge 157-run lead.

Gavaskar added that he did not believe in the concept of optional practice sessions, stating that the decision should solely rest with the captain and coach, not the players.

"This optional practice session is something that I don't believe. The decision for optional training should rest with the captain and the coach. The coach should say, 'Hey, you hit 150, you don't need to come to practice. Hey, you bowled 40 overs in the match, you don't need to come to practice.'"

"They should not be given the option. If you give the players that option, a lot of them, especially the certainties, will say, 'No, I am going to stay in my room.' And that's not what Indian cricket needs."

He reminded the players that it was a privilege to play for India and they should do it wholeheartedly.

England beats New Zealand by 323 runs in 2nd test to take 2-0 lead in three-match series

AP ■ WELLINGTON

England conquered the Wellington gale Sunday to seal a 323-run win over New Zealand on the third day of the second test and to take a 2-0 lead in the three-match series.

Joe Root completed his 36th century as England batted for less than 30 minutes in the morning before declaring with a lead of 582 runs and New Zealand crumbled under the weight of the deficit and was all out for 259 in its second innings.

England's win followed its comprehensive eight-wicket win in the first test at Christchurch, capping its first series victory in New Zealand since 2008 ahead of

the final test in Hamilton which begins on Saturday.

The third day differed from the first two in Wellington which were warm and sunny. It was cool, gloomy and windy but otherwise England's thorough command of the series continued.

Root resumed on 73 with England already 533 ahead. He sped to his century from 127 balls with 10 boundaries and then was out for 106 at which point Ben Stokes declared England's second innings at 427-6.

Stokes left himself high and dry at 49 not out, just short of his 49th half century.

Chris Woakes had the job at first of bowling into the Wellington wind and he was



rewarded with the wickets of Devon Conway (0) and Kane Williamson (4) as New Zealand slumped to 59-4 by lunch.

Brydon Carse removed captain Tom Latham (24) and Rachin Ravindra (6) before the break to lift his tally of wickets for the series to 16 at an average of 12.8.

New Zealand showed more resistance in the afternoon and evening as wicketkeeper Tom Blundell, under pressure to hold his place, compiled his fifth test century from 96 balls.

Blundell put on 94-run partnership with Nathan Smith which saw England having to chase leather for the first extended period in the series. He was out for 115

which included 13 fours and five sixes and Smith followed for a career-best 42 just before the end.

Carse and Harry Brook have been in the engine room for England throughout the series. Brook's 171 at Hagley Oval in the first test and Carse's 10-106 — his 4-64 in

the first innings and 6-42 in the second — propelled England's to its emphatic win.

Brook then scored 123 from only 115 balls in the first innings at Wellington to lead England's recovery from 43-4 to 280.

"It's amazing to be stood here winning the series and particularly after being 40-4 on day one and I think looking back to the start of this game I think that's a huge reason why we have (won)," Stokes said.

"Harry Brook and Ollie Pope were just amazing on day one to play like that. That wicket in cricket terms was what we call a snake pit. Especially on day one it was doing plenty and providing a lot of assistance for the bowlers."

"To have the bravery and the backing of your own ability and to also have the skill to go out and play like that was just absolutely phenomenal."

Carse took 4-46 and Gus Atkinson took 4-31 including a hat-trick as New Zealand was bowled out for 125, giving England a lead of 155.

Atkinson took the last three New Zealand wickets to become the first England bowler since Moeen Ali in 2017 to compete a test hat-trick.

England's second innings of 427-6 in the second innings included contributions of 96 by Jacob Bethell — out just short of a maiden century — 92 by Ben Duckett, 55 by Brook and then Root's 106.

Brook has scored 349 runs in the series so far at an average of 116 and now has three centuries and three half centuries in four tests against New Zealand.

After a stunning 3-0 series win away in India last month, New Zealand has slumped in this series, particularly with the bat and changes may be considered before the final test.

"We're obviously hurting," Latham said. "It's disappointing to lose in that fashion."

"I think after the first innings, putting them under pressure, Harry Brook played a fantastic innings there. Obviously when you only score 125 in the first innings you're on the back foot.