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INSIDE



MONEY 10
ONGC INKS DEAL WITH BP TO BOOST MUMBAI HIGH OUTPUT

NEW DELHI, WEDNESDAY FEBRUARY 12, 2025; PAGES 12 ₹4

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PUBLISHED FROM: DELHI | LUCKNOW | BHOPAL | BHUBANESWAR | RANCHI | RAIPUR | CHANDIGARH | DEHRADUN | HYDERABAD | VIJAYWADA



Jammu attacked, two dead

MOHIT KANDHARI ■ JAMMU

A Captain rank officer of the Indian army was among two soldiers 'killed in action' and three other jawans sustained grievous injuries when a suspected improvised explosive device (IED) was detonated near the Line of Control (LoC) in the Akhnoor sector of Jammu division on Tuesday. The martyred soldiers have been identified as Capt Karamjit Singh Bakshi and Naik Mukesh. Lt Gen MV Suchindra Kumar, Army Commander, Northern Command and all ranks of Dhruva Command solemnly salute the supreme sacrifice of Bravehearts. Dhruva Command stands firm with the bereaved family in this hour of grief. The Army confirmed the fatalities in the blast and said "own troops are dominating the area and search operations

are underway". Confirming the incident, Nagrota-based White Knight Corps posted on X, "Suspected Improvised Explosive Device blast reported in Laleali in Akhnoor Sector during a fence patrol resulting in two fatalities. Own troops are dominating the area and search operations are underway". However, it was not immediately known who detonated the IED planted along the route of the patrolling party of the Indian army close to the Anti-infiltration Obstacle system (AIOS) in the Laleali area of Akhnoor. The injured soldiers were airlifted by Indian Army helicopters and shifted to a military hospital for treatment. Two among them succumbed to their fatal injuries in the hospital. Senior army officers from Akhnoor rushed to the spot to ascertain whether it was the handiwork of the Pakistani

army regulars or a group of suspected terrorists, who may have been pushed inside the Indian territory to launch a surprise attack on the Indian army patrol, detonated the IED. This is the third incident in a row where jawans of the Indian army have been targeted from across the line of control in the Jammu region in the last four days. A soldier of the Indian army was hit by a stray bullet while he was standing guard along the LoC in the Kalal area of Nowshera in Rajouri on Monday. On February 8, a patrolling party of the Indian army came under attack in the Keri sector. All these incidents were reported after seven members of the Border Action Team (BAT) of the Pakistan army were killed in a powerful landmine explosion in the Battal area of Mendhar in Poonch on February 4.

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PM pushes for global AI framework

PTI ■ PARIS

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Tuesday made a strong case for collective efforts to establish a global framework for artificial intelligence (AI) based on open source which enhances trust, transparency and is free from biases. Co-chairing the AI Action Summit along with French President Emmanuel Macron here, Modi said that AI is changing the polity, economy, security and society, and is writing the code for humanity in this century. Modi also offered to host the next AI Action Summit in India, supporting the decision taken at the first summit hosted by France to set up the 'AI Foundation' and the 'Council for Sustainable AI'. "There is a need for collective global efforts to establish governance and standards that uphold our shared values, address risks and build trust," Modi said, adding that governance is not just about managing risks and rivalries but is also about promoting innovations and



French President Emmanuel Macron shakes hands with India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi as they arrive at the Artificial Intelligence Action Summit at the Grand Palais in Paris, France

deploying them for global good. "We must democratise technology and create people-centric applications. We must address concerns related to cyber security, disinformation and deep fakes," the Prime Minister said.

Stressing on the need to develop quality data sets free from biases, the Prime Minister said there is a need to develop open-source AI ecosystems that enhance trust and transparency.

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Sensex tanks 1,018.20 pts

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Benchmark stock indices Sensex and Nifty tanked more than 1 per cent on Tuesday amid unabated foreign fund outflows and fresh US tariffs that reignited trade war fears. Declining for the fifth day running, the 30-share BSE Sensex dropped 1,018.20 points or 1.32 per cent to settle at a two-week low of 76,293.60. During the day, it tumbled 1,281.21 points or 1.65 per cent to 76,030.59. The NSE Nifty cracked 309.80 points or 1.32 per cent to 23,071.80 with 44 of its constituents closing lower and six with gains. Among 30 Sensex shares, Zomato tanked over 5 per cent. Tata Steel, Bajaj Finserv, Tata Motors, Power Grid, Larsen & Toubro, Kotak Mahindra Bank, Hindustan Unilever and ITC were the biggest laggards. Bharti Airtel was the only gainer among Sensex scrips.

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Kejriwal dismisses rumours of Punjab discord

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

Amidst reports of exodus of MLAs, Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) convener Arvind Kejriwal met Punjab chief minister Bhagwant Mann and 91 state MLAs in Delhi on Tuesday and dismissed speculation of internal discord within the party stating that "all is well" in the party. After the meeting, which lasted for about an hour, Mann and other leaders outright rejected the possibility of Kejriwal becoming the Chief Minister of Punjab and about 35 MLAs in Punjab breaking away and joining the Congress.



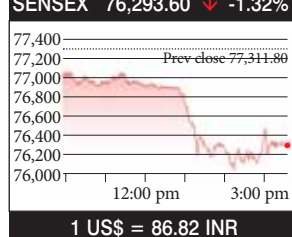
Punjab CM Bhagwant Mann with AAP MLAs talks to the media after a meeting at the Kapurthala House

"Our MLAs arrived here for a meeting with party national convener Arvind Kejriwal, who expressed his gratitude for their efforts in campaigning during the Delhi Assembly elections," the chief minister said. He said

the party accepts the verdict of the people in the Delhi Assembly elections while praising the AAP's 'Delhi model' of governance. The meeting sent out a strong signal about there being no threat to the party's government in Punjab amid claims by the rival Congress about a brewing discontent after the AAP's defeat in Delhi. Mann said Kejriwal used the meeting to thank MLAs for their efforts during the polls. Sharing details, Mann said Punjab will set an example with its work in education, healthcare, electricity, and water.

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MARKETS



WEATHER

AQI	293
MAX	29.7°C (+6)
MIN	9.8°C (-0.4)



Shri Narendra Modi
Prime Minister



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- Common Facility Centre



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EC faces SC heat over EVM verification

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Tuesday sought the Election Commission of India's response on the pleas seeking verification of the burnt memory and symbol loading units in EVMs in compliance of its judgement. A special bench comprising Chief Justice Sanjiv Khanna and Justice Dipankar Datta asked the poll panel to refrain from erasing or reloading data during the verification process. The pleas sought a direction to the poll panel to check and verify burnt memory/micro-controllers and the symbol loading unit (SLU) of electronic voting machines (EVM). The bench asked the poll panel to file its response within 15 days and explain the procedure adopted and posted the matter in the week commencing March 3. Irked over suppression of the fact relating to a similar petition which was dismissed as withdrawn, the bench said it would not hear a fresh plea filed by former Haryana minister and five-time MLA Karan Singh Dalal seeking a policy for the verification of EVMs. The bench issued notices to the poll panel on the interim application filed by NGO Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) and a losing candidate Sarv Mitter, represented by senior advocate Devadatt Kamat. The top court, in its judgement of April 26, last year, rejected the demand for reverting to



the old paper ballot system, saying the polling devices were "secured" and eliminated booth capturing and bogus voting. It, however, opened a window for aggrieved unsuccessful candidates securing second and third places in poll results and allowed them to seek verification of micro-controller chips embedded in 5 per cent EVMs per assembly constituency on a written request upon payment of a fee to the poll panel. The top court directed that from May 1, last year, the symbol loading units should be sealed and secured in a container and stored in a strongroom along with the EVMs for a minimum of 45 days post-declaration of results.

ADR in a fresh plea, said the standard operating procedure of the poll panel for verification of the EVMs was not in accordance with the 2024 judgement passed on its petition in the EVM-VVPAT case. On Tuesday, the bench asked the poll panel on the erasure and reloading of polling data. The bench said the judgement did not mandate such actions but merely required verification of the EVMs by an engineer of the manufacturing company. "What we intended was that, after the polls somebody asks, the engineer should come and certify that, according to him, in their presence, there is no tampering in any of the burnt memory or microchips. That's all. Why do you erase the

data?" asked the CJI. He went on, "We didn't want such a detailed process that you reload something. Do not erase the data, do not reload the data - all you need to do is have someone verify and examine." The bench also raised concerns over the cost of verification set by the EC after being informed that Rs 40,000 was charged for verifying one EVM. "Reduce the cost of 40,000 - that's too high," it said. Seeking the poll panel's response, the bench recorded its assurance that no modification or correction of EVM data would take place during the verification process. "Mr Singh (ECI counsel) states that they will clarify the

position by filing a short affidavit explaining the procedure adopted by them. He also states they won't be doing any modification/correction of the data," it said. Advocate Prashant Bhushan, representing ADR, said the SOP on EVM verification was insufficient as per the court's ruling. "What we want is for someone to examine the software and hardware of the EVMs to see whether they contain any element of manipulation," he said. The NGO on December 23 last year filed the plea in a decided case for directions to the poll panel to ensure a strict compliance of the judgement. The miscellaneous application stemmed from the April 26, 2024 judgment in which the top court laid down specific protocols for the checking and verification of EVM components, including their memory systems and symbol loading units. The plea sought compliance with the court's judgment requiring verification of the "burnt memory" and microcontrollers of EVMs to ensure their integrity and security. It underscored the need to verify the symbol loading unit, a critical component of the EVM infrastructure, to maintain transparency in the electoral process. The plea urged the court to direct the EC to refrain from clearing or deleting the contents of the original burnt memory of EVMs, particularly in cases where verification applications were pending.

VP Dhankhar questions missing Constitution illustrations



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Rajya Sabha Chairman Raja Singh on Tuesday said the Constitution signed by its framers that includes 22 miniatures together with amendments through Parliament is the only authentic one that needs to be promulgated and any violation be taken seriously and dealt with sternly. He said this in the House after BJP MP Radha Mohan Das Agrawal raised the issue of 22 illustrations missing in most copies of the Constitution sold in the country today. He demanded inclusion of the original illustrations, which he alleged have been removed "unconstitutionally". The issue led to a heated discussion in the House with the Congress staging a walkout, alleging that Leader of Opposition Mallikarjun Kharge was not allowed to complete his point on the issue. "I have no doubt and I am categorical, the Constitution signed by the founding fathers of the Constitution, carrying 22 miniatures, is the only authentic one and it can include amendments by the Parliament. If there is any change effected by judiciary or any institution, it is not acceptable to this House. I will appeal to the Leader of the House to ensure that in the country only the authentic version of the Indian Constitution be promulgated. Any violation of this should be taken quite seriously by the government and severe action taken," the Chairman said in the House. Kharge was first given the floor to speak on the issue, who alleged that the BJP was

unnecessarily raising the issue to create a controversy. "They are unnecessarily raising the issue and want to create a controversy on Ambedkar's Constitution. They never raised this issue when Ambedkar, Patel, others were alive. Now they are bringing new issues. This is an attempt to create a controversy and defame Ambedkar. This is wrong," Kharge alleged. When Kharge sought to speak further, the Chair gave the floor to the Leader of the House J P Nadda, who refuted the charges made by Kharge. At this, the Congress members staged a walkout from the House. Nadda wondered what objection does the Congress have on the issue and they should have supported it and urged the government to take action. "It is unfortunate that the Congress leader is trying to seek advantage of the issue by making it political by alleging that attempts are being made to defame Ambedkar and this should be expunged," he said, adding that the publishers should publish the Constitution keeping in view the spirit of the framers. He said they all respected Ambedkar. Nadda said the copies of Constitution being published by publishers do not have the illustrations as pointed out by Agarwal. He further said the government will ensure publishers publish copies depicting spirit of Constitution and only those are available in the market. The Chairman later said this was an extremely serious issue as the 22 illustrations carry the depiction of India's 5,000 year old tradition and heritage. "A very valid issue has come to the attention of the Council of

States. Dr. Radha Mohan Das Agarwal has rightly pointed out that the act of omission or commission either on our iPads or in any book without carrying the 22 miniatures of that Constitution of which architect is Dr. B R Ambedkar and signed by our founding fathers and the only variation, I reiterate, please note my words, the only change that can take place in the Indian Constitution can emanate only from the Indian Parliament," Dhankhar said. He said any change emanating from the Indian Parliament duly signed by the President of India under Article 111 must invariably find mention in the Indian Constitution, irrespective of any intervention from judiciary or otherwise. "Therefore, it is not optional for the government or anyone else to adhere to it. This is the only way and everyone in the country is required to have Indian Constitution which is duly sanctified," he asserted. Earlier, TMC member Derek O'Brien said that the 400-plus page copy of the Constitution made available in his computer also did not have the illustrations as pointed out by the BJP MP. "Derek O'Brien has a point, before him it is not there. We must regret it, we must make amends and amends be made as quick as possible by everyone concerned including the government. If there is any publication from your side, strict steps should be taken and I'm sure in the shortest possible time the government will make it convenient that people come to know only and only the authentic version of the Indian Constitution as it holds the field today," the Chairman also said.

Former Delhi top cop, BSF chief Ajai Rai passes away

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Credited as one of the Architects of the Special Task Force in Uttar Pradesh, former Delhi Police Commissioner and senior IPS officer who later became chief of the Border Security Force (BSF), Ajai Rai Sharma passed away in Noida after a prolonged illness. He was 80. During his tenure as police commissioner, the Delhi Police, with the help of central intelligence agencies, cracked the 2001 Parliament and Red Fort terror attack cases. Sharma, was the first Delhi Police Commissioner appointed outside the AGMUT cadre, brought in by then-Home Minister Lal Krishna Advani. Sharma is survived by his wife and two children. According to Sharma's son Yash, the 1966-batch Indian Police Service (IPS) officer was admitted to Kailash Hospital in a critical condition on January 25. Yash said that his father had trouble breathing and also had diabetes and high blood pressure. His cremation will be done in Delhi on Wednesday. After retirement, Sharma was living in a house in B-block of Sector 44 in Noida. He originally belonged to the Mirzapur district of Uttar Pradesh. Sharma's last rites will be performed on Wednesday at the crematorium on Lodhi Road in Delhi, Yash added. Sharma's team eliminated notorious gangster Shriprakash Shukla in 1988. An IPS officer of Uttar Pradesh cadre, he was brought from the state to lead the prestigious Delhi Police at a time when the national capital had been on target list of terror groups operating from Pakistan.

BJP withdraw PIL over Ayushman Bharat in Delhi

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Day after winning in Delhi Assembly, Seven BJP MPs on Tuesday withdrew from the Delhi High Court their plea for the implementation of the Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (AB-PMJAY). The counsel appearing for the MPs said BJP won the Delhi assembly elections and the ruling government promised to implement the scheme in its first cabinet meeting. "I am withdrawing the petition as the new dispensation in Delhi has promised to implement the Ayushman Bharat scheme in the first cabinet meeting," said the counsel before the Bench of Justices Prathiba M Singh and Manmeet Pritam Singh Arora. The petitioners -- Harsh Malhotra, Ramvir Singh Bidhuri, Praveen Khandelwal, Yogendra Chandolia, Manoj Tiwari, Kamaljeet Sehrawat and Bansuri Swaraj-- argued Delhi citizens were facing a serious issue of high out-of-pocket health and medical expenses and even resorted to borrowing or selling assets

during a medical emergency. The petitioners said Delhi was the only union territory where the healthcare scheme for the underprivileged was yet to be implemented which deprived them of an essential health coverage of Rs 5 lakh. Earlier, the High Court expressed shock over the Delhi government reportedly not accepting the financial aid through the Centre-funded health scheme when there was "no money" with it for its healthcare system. It had said the central scheme was just an aid being given to a particular segment of citizens and steps must be taken to iron out the differences within the Delhi administration. The petitioners argued the "clash of political ideologies must take a back seat" in the interest of welfare of the residents of Delhi and sought a direction to the Delhi government and its health department to implement the scheme. "Of 36 states/UTs, 33 have implemented the scheme and at present the Government of Odisha is actively considering the implementation of the scheme. However, the scheme has not been implemented in NCT of Delhi," they claimed.

JMI student protest action against PhD candidates

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The students at Jamia Millia Islamia (JMI) are protesting against the university's disciplinary action against two PhD scholars, who were also served show-cause notices for allegedly organizing a demonstration last year. The protest, which began on Monday, continues in the campus with students condemning what they call the administration's "crackdown on student activism". The university administration has not yet responded to their demands. The disciplinary committee is set to meet on February 25 to review the role of the two PhD students in organizing "Jamia Resistance Day" on December 15, 2024, an annual event marking the 2019 anti-Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) protests. Holding banners with slogans like "Dissent is the legacy of Jamia" and "Restore Campus Democracy", students are demanding the withdrawal of the disciplinary action. The protest is being led by Left-affiliated student organizations, including the All India Students Association (AISA) and the All India Revolutionary Students

Organisation. On December 15, 2019, Delhi Police allegedly entered the Jamia campus and baton-charged students inside the library while searching for "outsiders" during anti-CAA demonstrations. The action led to nationwide protests. AISA member Sonakshi said the protesters have four key demands: revoking the show-cause notices issued to the two PhD students, repealing the 2020 Office Memorandum that restricts protests on campus, scrapping the Rs 50,000 fine for graffiti and posters, and ensuring no future disciplinary action against students for participating in protests. She also alleged that the administration had turned off campus lights, locked toilets and shut down the canteen since the protest began. Some students claimed that restrictions on campus activism have intensified since Mazhar Asif took over as the vice-chancellor in October last year. "We observed Resistance Day in 2023 without facing any disciplinary action, but in 2024, students received notices and inquiries were initiated," said Arpan, a member of AISA.

Sensex tanks 1,018.20 pts

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In the past five days, the BSE bellwether gauge has slumped 2,290.21 points or 2.91 per cent, while the Nifty tanked 667.45 points or 2.81 per cent. Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth Rs 2,463.72 crore on Monday, according to exchange data. "The ongoing uncertainty surrounding US trade policies and tariffs, coupled with domestic economic growth concerns and persistent selling by FIIs, is dampening market sentiment. The mid and smallcap stocks experienced significant declines due to demand concerns and higher valuations," Vinod

Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services, said. The BSE smallcap gauge plunged 3.40 per cent and midcap index tumbled 2.88 per cent. In Asian markets, Shanghai and Hong Kong settled lower while Seoul ended higher. European markets were trading mostly lower. US markets ended in positive territory on Monday. Global oil benchmark Brent crude climbed 1.15 per cent to USD 76.74 a barrel. The Sensex dropped 548.39 points or 0.70 per cent to settle at a week's low of 77,311.80 on Monday. The Nifty declined 178.35 points or 0.76 per cent to 23,381.60.

Kashmir attacked, two dead

From page 1

The Indian army has been kept on high alert and massive search and combing operations are already underway in the higher reaches of frontier Rajouri and Poonch districts to neutralise the foreign terrorists hiding in the thickly forested areas. In another related development, a ban has been imposed on the storage, use and transportation of drones in the Doda district of Jammu division for a period of two months. The decision was taken to stop misuse of the flying objects by anti-national elements in the

region. However, police and other security agencies were exempted from the purview of the ban, while government departments using such gadgets for various activities, including mapping, surveys, surveillance in construction works and agriculture, were directed to seek proper permission. Additional District Magistrate, Doda, Sudershan Kumar said those already in possession of drone cameras or flying objects or similar gadgets are directed to deposit them in the nearest police station within a week's time of the issuance of this order against proper receipt.

Kejriwal dismisses rumours of Punjab discord

From page 1

The government is accelerating progress and exceeding its guarantee-shutting down 17 toll plazas and ending multiple pensions for MLAs, actions never even promised. According to AAP insiders, besides Kejriwal, AAP leaders Manish Sisodia and Sandeep Pathak were also present at the meeting in which Delhi leaders thanked Punjab leaders for their efforts in the party's campaign and dissected the loss in the national capital to take forward the learnings from it. The meeting was held at Kapurthala House. Responding to Congress leader Partap Bajwa's claims that he might leave AAP, Bhagwant Mann dismissed them as baseless. Mann also rubbished Congress's claim of dissent in the AAP's state unit, asserting dedication of its leaders and workers. Partap Singh Bajwa, Leader of Opposition in the Punjab Assembly, alleged that Arvind Kejriwal might now seek to replace Bhagwant Mann as the state's chief minister and

over 30 AAP MLAs were in touch with his party. AAP sources said the agenda of the meeting included assessing the Delhi election outcome and devising a roadmap for the 2027 Punjab elections. Tuesday's meeting carries added significance amid speculations that Kejriwal could consider a more direct role in Punjab politics now. With Ludhiana's assembly seat currently vacant, political observers are also discussing the possibility of Kejriwal contesting from there and becoming a part of the Punjab government. AAP, which had governed Delhi for a decade, suffered a major setback in the February 5 elections, winning only 22 seats out of 70 in the Assembly elections. The BJP's victory ended AAP's rule in the capital, raising concerns over the party's future. Punjab MLA Narinder Kaur also refuted claims of internal dissent before the meeting, calling the recent meeting a routine strategy session. "Congress should focus on why they got zero seats in Delhi instead of commenting on our party," she said.

PM pushes for global AI framework

From page 1

He said the technology should be rooted in the local ecosystem for it to be effective and useful. Modi started his address with an observation on the potential of AI by stating that AI can cut through jargon and summarise medical prescriptions in a language that can be understood easily. "If you upload your medical report to an AI app, it can explain in simple language, free of any jargon, what it

means for your health. But, if you ask the same app to draw an image of someone writing with their Left hand, the app will most likely draw someone writing with their Right hand. Because that is what the training data is dominated by. "It shows that while the positive potential of AI is absolutely amazing, there are many biases that we need to think carefully about," he said, Modi pitched for inclusive development of AI especially for the Global South. "We must think deeply and

discuss openly about innovations and governance. Governance is also about ensuring access to all, especially in the global south. It is where the capabilities are more lacking, be it compute, power, talent, data or the financial resources," Modi said. The Prime Minister further said that AI can help transform millions of lives by improving health, education, agriculture and so much more. It can help create a world in

which the journey to sustainable development goals become easier and faster. To do this, we must pool together resources and talent. Referring to apprehensions about job losses on account of AI, Modi said history has shown that work does not disappear due to technology but its nature changes and new types of jobs are created. "AI is developing at an unprecedented scale and speed and being adopted and deployed even faster. There is

also a deep inter-dependence across borders. We need to invest in skilling and re-skilling our people for an AI-driven future," Modi said. India, he said, leads in AI adoption and techno-legal solutions on data privacy. "We are developing AI applications for public good. India is ready to share its experience and expertise to ensure that the AI future is for good, and for all," Modi said. In his concluding remarks at the summit, Modi said that the discussions have clearly

brought out that there is "unity in vision and unity in purpose across stakeholders." Observing that the partnership for AI is truly global in nature, Modi said, "To build on the momentum of this Action Summit, India would be happy to host the next Summit." "We must also make the 'Global Partnership for AI' truly global in nature. It should be more inclusive of the Global South and its priorities, concerns and needs," Modi said.

MCD Budget 2025-26: No tax hikes, focus on cleanliness, education and healthcare

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) is unlikely to impose tax hikes in its upcoming budget and will prioritise cleanliness, education, and healthcare. The MCD budget 2025-26 will be presented on Thursday by Commissioner Ashwani Kumar in a special House session. The budget is expected to increase total outlay from last year's ₹16,683 Crore, source said. According to them, the special budget is likely to allocate nearly ₹4,900 Crore for sanitation, up from ₹4,305 Crore, and education around ₹1,660 Crore, up from ₹1,645 in the previous budget last year. More than ₹1,830 Crore may be allotted to health and medical relief, up from ₹1,814 Crore in the previous budget, while ₹393.2 Crore is likely to be set aside for horticulture. Sources said that there won't be any increments or



Civic Centre

Photo: File photo

additional taxes. The civic body had sought approval from Lieutenant Governor Vinai Kumar Saxena to allow the commissioner to present the budget in the absence of a standing committee. While the Election Commission had initially withheld clearance due to

the model code of conduct, the LG has now given his green light to the proposal. Traditionally, the MCD budget is presented by the Standing Committee by January 30, allowing opposition parties and councillors time for discussion. However, delays in forming

the committee and the enforcement of the model code of conduct led to disruptions. A total of 22 MCD councillors contested the recently concluded elections, of which 11 managed to win. This includes eight councillors from the BJP and three from the AAP.

The winning BJP candidates included Ravinder Negi from Patparganj, Neelam Pehalwan from Najafgarh, Rekha Gupta from Shalimar Bagh, Shikha Roy from Greater Kailash, Umang Bajaj from Rajendra Nagar, Gajender Drall from Mundka, Poonam Sharma from Wazirpur and Chandan Choudhary from Sangam Vihar. From AAP, three councillors won—Punardeep Sawhney from Chandni Chowk, Prem Chauhan from Deoli and Aaley Mohammad Iqbal from Matia Mahal. According to Delhi Municipal Corporation (DMC) Act, the budget estimates, after being presented before the standing committee, are amended by the panel and forwarded to the house of councillors to be finalised. The budget process to finalise various municipal tax rates, the Act says, must culminate before February 15 in the house of councillors.

BJP MP Ramvir Singh Bidhuri demands regularisation of 69 Delhi colonies

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

BJP MP from South Delhi Ramvir Singh Bidhuri on Tuesday raised the demand in the Lok Sabha to regularize 69 colonies like Sainik Farm and provide all civic amenities in them. He also said just as a decision has been taken to regularize 1,700 unauthorized colonies, in the same way these colonies should also be regularized. The matter of these colonies is stuck for a long time. Bidhuri said in the House that Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government has regularized more than 1,700 colonies of the capital. The work of giving ownership rights and providing civic amenities in these colonies is going on at a fast pace, but a decision has not been taken about 69 colonies like Sainik Farm. He said the announcement of giving ownership rights and providing civic amenities to these colonies should also be made soon. Permission should also be given to make layout plans of these colonies and to build houses in them as per building bylaws. Bidhuri said he has also raised this matter before Union Housing and Urban



BJP MP from South Delhi Ramvir Singh Bidhuri

PTI

Development Minister Manohar Lal Khattar and the Lieutenant Governor of Delhi. The Delhi High Court also feels that civic amenities should be provided in these colonies. Last week, the Delhi High Court has asked the Centre to decide on the regularisation of south Delhi's Sainik Farms colony saying the "fate of the colony has to be decided". A bench of Chief Justice DK Upadhyaya and Tushar Rao Gedela, while dealing with petitions, including one filed in 2015, for the colony's regularisation, said the matter could not be kept pending and asked the Centre's counsel to take "complete instructions". The Centre's affidavit filed earlier said it took a conscious decision to not get into the regularisation of illegal colonies that were categorised as affluent colonies, like Sainik Farms, and it was presently focusing on the redevelopment work of the 1,797 unauthorised colonies, sub-divided into two classes. Constructions raised in the affluent colonies like Sainik Farms are protected by law up to December 2023, it added.



BJP keeps Delhi CM suspense alive, announcement expected after PM Modi's US return

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

A group of newly-elected Delhi BJP MLAs met party's national president JP Nadda on Tuesday in what was described as a courtesy meeting amid continuing suspense over who will be the next chief minister. Several MLAs said after the meeting that no discussion over the legislature party meeting or likely chief ministerial choices occurred in the meeting. The Chief Minister face of Delhi is still a suspense as BJP has not made any announcement yet. It is expected that the chief minister for the national capital will be announced upon the return of Prime Minister Narendra Modi from his France and US visit. The legislature party is likely to meet after Prime Minister Narendra Modi returns from his visit to France and the US. Those who have observed the recent politics are aware of the process of selection. In most of the states, the party's central leadership decided the Chief Minister name after the results and almost all were surprise choices whether it is BJP or Congress.

Many of the senior leaders from the organisational point-of-view are first or second time MLAs. Hence, MLAs like Satish Upadhyay, Ashish Sood, Pawan Sharma, and Shikha Roy have very limited legislative experience. Even a leader like Parvesh Verma, who remained MP for two consecutive terms, has neither any experience of governance nor has ever worked at any important organisational post. As they had been wanting to meet Nadda following the party's big win over the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in the Delhi Assembly polls, they were asked to see him at his office in the Parliament building, the MLAs said. Newly elected BJP MLAs—Anil Sharma, Shikha Roy, Satish Upadhyay, Arvinder Singh Lovely, Vijendra Gupta, Ajay Mahawar, Rekha Gupta, Kapil Mishra, Kulwant Rana and Dr Anil Goyal, paid a courtesy call to BJP National President JP Nadda in Parliament. Ending its over 26 years spell out of power, the BJP won 48 seats in the elections to the 70-member assembly, relegating the AAP to a distant second with 22 seats.

Delhi Secretariat prepares for new BJP Government after 26-year wait

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Delhi Secretariat is being readied to serve as the seat of the new BJP government in power, with changing nameplates of former ministers, repairs and other routine maintenance works. The BJP, which won 48 of the 70 assembly seats in the polls held on February 5, has returned to power in Delhi after 26 years. A meeting of the BJP legislative party is yet to take place to elect the leader of the House who will be the new chief minister of Delhi. The security at the Delhi Secretariat was ramped up on Saturday itself while the counting of votes was progressing to ensure safety



of official records. A senior general administration department (GAD) officer said that routine maintenance works were being speeded up to

ensure the Delhi Secretariat premises was ready to receive the new government. The nameplates of the ministers in previous

government were removed, their offices were also being spruced up for the new council of ministers. Atishi, who resigned as the chief minister on Sunday,

was urged by the lieutenant governor to continue on the post till formation of the new government. The nameplate outside the working chief minister's office was also removed. The files at different departments were also secured to maintain sanctity of the official records. The GAD of the Delhi government had last week issued an order for all the departments to ensure that no files, electronic records, documents were moved out of the Delhi Secretariat and camp offices of the ministers without its prior permission. It directed the department heads for necessary instructions to the branch in charges concerned to ensure safety of records, files, documents, electronic files etc. Under their section/branches. In another order, the department stated that the entry of private individuals into the Secretariat complex will be allowed only after proper verification of their identity and purpose of visit. Private security guards have been instructed to intensify surveillance on all floors of the Delhi Secretariat, and officials have been directed to ensure that CCTV cameras remain operational on all floors 24x7. The formation of the new government in Delhi by the BJP is expected after Prime Minister Narendra Modi returns from his foreign visit in the weekend.

AAP's Amanatullah Khan booked for allegedly assaulting Crime Branch Officers

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

A joint Delhi Police team is looking for AAP MLA from Okhla, Amanatullah Khan, who has been booked for allegedly threatening and assaulting Crime Branch officers during an operation in Jamia Nagar. According to sources, multiple raids were also conducted but the MLA was not found and his mobile phone was also switched-off. The FIR, registered at Jamia Nagar police station, accuses Khan and his associates—Laddan, Muneer, and Farman—of obstructing a police raid and facilitating the escape of a wanted criminal. According to the FIR, on February 10, a Crime Branch team was tracking down Shavej, a proclaimed offender wanted for attempt to murder. Acting on a tip-off, a police team led by Sub-Inspector Bir Pal reached Jogabai Extension near Al Taqua Mosque around 3:00 p.m. and located Shavej,



However, before the officers could take further action, Khan allegedly arrived with 20-25 men, aggressively questioning the presence of law enforcement, as per FIR. The FIR further revealed that despite police identifying themselves and displaying their ID cards, Khan allegedly snatched an officer's ID, physically assaulted the team, and made grave threats. The FIR quotes Khan and his supporters as saying: "This area belongs to us. If you do not

leave immediately, you will not make it out alive. If we raise our voice, so many people will gather that you will disappear without a trace. Your police and court documents will be of no use here. Do you even know who I am? I can have your uniform removed. Another case against me makes no difference—I will get rid of you right here, and no one will be left to testify against it." Khan and his associates then allegedly freed Shavej by force, preventing officers from

making calls for backup. By the time reinforcements arrived, the accused had fled the scene, leaving behind the snatched ID card. The case has been registered at Jamia Nagar police station, which falls under southeast district jurisdiction, under sections 221 (obstruction of public servants while they are performing their duties), 132 (criminal force or assault against a public servant while they are performing their duties), 121 (voluntarily causing hurt or grievous hurt to deter public servant from his duty), 191 (rioting), 190 (unlawful assembly), 263 (resistance or obstruction to lawful apprehension of another person), 351 (criminal intimidation), and 111 (organised crime) of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS). Amanatullah Khan is a prominent AAP leader who has been representing the Okhla constituency since 2015.

Delhi Traffic Police collects ₹46 Crore in fines in 2024

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Union Minister of State for Home Nityanand Rai informed the Lok Sabha on Tuesday that Delhi Traffic Police collected over ₹46 Crore in 2024 by issuing more than 74 lakh challans and notices. Responding to a written reply about the number of traffic violations in various categories, Rai said the city police have issued a total of 23.09 Lakh challans and 51.41 Lakh notices regarding traffic violations for various offences in 2024 and collected ₹46.29 crore. According to the police, challans are issued by the traffic personnel on-site while notices are generated online through the traffic violation detection cameras. In last five years, the maximum amount of ₹213 Crore was collected in 2020 when police had issued 10.99 lakh challans and 85.94 Lakh notices. This was followed by ₹98.45 Crore in 2021 when there were 13.23 Lakh challans and 66.03 lakh notices, ₹74.46 Crore in 2022 having 14.69 Lakh challans and 59.87 Lakh notices, ₹46.29 Crore in 2024, and ₹40.31 Crore in 2023 with 17.26 Lakh challans and 56.53 Lakh notices, Rai stated. The Delhi Police has informed that the main reasons behind reported increase in traffic violations in the city are an increase in vehicular traffic in Delhi and adjoining areas, lack of awareness among the commuters and strict enforcement of rules by Delhi Police among others, he mentioned. The city police has taken various measures to create awareness in the public about diligent driving and road sense, which inter-alia include road safety programmes in schools, colleges, and public places; awareness programmes conducted with road users and commuters; training of both drivers and traffic police officers on road safety and accident prevention; and Intensified enforcement efforts, etc., Rai added.

Delhi LG Vinai Kumar Saxena and Netherlands Ambassador Marisa Gerards inaugurate NDMC Tulip Festival

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi Lieutenant Governor Vinai Kumar Saxena and Ambassador of the Kingdom of Netherlands Marisa Gerards on Tuesday inaugurated the NDMC Tulip Festival - 2025 and both participated in Tulip walk. They also visited Tulip exhibition organized by New Delhi Municipal Council (NDMC) at Shanti Path, Chankyapuri in the presence of NDMC Chairperson Keshav Chandra and Vice Chairman Kuljeet Singh Chahal. After inaugurating the NDMC Tulip Festival, Saxena congratulated NDMC for its effort and the gardeners who have nurtured the flowers with hard work and have spread beauty here with the bloom of these flowers and said that this year 3.25 lakh tulips have

been planted. Some Tulips have also been planted in 20 parks of DDA this time. As many as 15, 000 tulips have been produced in Palanpur at Himachal Pradesh, developed in India itself which are also planted in New Delhi. Our aim is to minimize the dependence on imports in the next four years. He said we have to make Delhi more beautiful, for which such efforts will continue. The friendship that has been formed with the Netherlands due to this cooperation, a tulip plant has been named "Maitri". On the occasion, Ambassador of Netherlands said we're planting the tulips to celebrate, the friendship between our two countries. We could see that the city of Delhi was doing so well by growing the tulips. But, of course, there is much more that binds our two countries



Delhi LG Vinai Kumar Saxena and Netherlands Ambassador Marisa Gerards during the inauguration of Tulip Festival

PTI

together than just tulips. We share a strong and friendly relationship that goes back a long way. We

collaborate in many important sectors, such as agriculture, health, water management, and

innovation. We are very strong partners in these areas, she added. After the success and

appreciation from the large public of different walks of life in the last two years, NDMC is going to welcome the spring season with its blooming Tulips in the heart of Capital City of India - New Delhi by organizing its third edition of NDMC Tulip Festival - 2025. NDMC began planting its Tulip Bulbs in 2017-18 as a trial to assess the seasonal suitability. Starting with 17,000 bulbs of Tulip, this initiative has since grown significantly becoming an annual tradition of floral beautification of New Delhi. This initiative has proved a great success, making NDMC the first civic body in India to plant these precious flowers in public space. This year, NDMC imported 3.25 Lakh Tulip Bulbs and planted 2.25 lakhs in open space in which 1.46 Lakh Tulip Bulbs alone were

planted at Shanti Path in Chankyapuri area. As a trial through storage and multiplication, 10,880 large bulbs were produced and these also have been planted. In collaboration with the Institute of Himalayan Bio resources Technology - CSIR, 14735 Bulbs were produced at Palanpur in Himachal Pradesh and received to plant in this Tulip Festival. For the first time NDMC has made the potted plants of one lakh Tulip Bulbs and has put it up for sale to make them available to the general public at Shanti Path Lawn, Lodhi Garden, Nehru Park, Talkatora Garden, Central Park, and NDMC nurseries (Safdarjung Madarsa, Gurudwara Park, Purana Quila Road etc). In this spring session, the Tulip Bulbs are blooming at the different location of New

Delhi area like Shanti Path Lawn, Central Park at Connaught Place, NDMC Convention Centre Lawn, Lodhi Garden, Talkatora Garden, Sardar Patel Marg, Mandi House, Windsor Place, Shershah Suri Marg and at many Roundabouts. New Delhi is adorned with vibrant shades of blooming Tulips in red, white, yellow, purple, pink, bicolor and orange. Tulips are now in full bloom adding a spectacular splash of color to prominent NDMC areas. The public is enjoying these floral displays in open spaces. An exhibition is also organized based on the history of Tulips and the variety of Tulips with history of monuments around the Shantipath that are displayed at Shantipath, Chanakyapuri, New Delhi in surrounding of the blooming Tulips.

Indian economy seeing speedy rebound: Nirmala Sitharaman

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Tuesday said that the Indian economy is seeing a "speedy rebound" from 5.4 per cent growth clocked in the second quarter of the current fiscal, and the government shall take measures to ensure that India remains the world's fastest-growing economy.

Replying to discussions on the Union Budget for 2025-26 in the Lok Sabha, the finance minister said the Budget has taken various steps to increase liquidity in the hands of people while maintaining fiscal prudence by using 99 per cent of the borrowing in FY26 to fund capital expenditure. She also said that inflation management receives the highest priority of this government with retail inflation within the tolerance band of 2-6 per cent. Inflation trend, particularly in food, appears to be moderating, she added. Speaking about GDP growth, Sitharaman said in the three years prior to 2024-25, the country's GDP growth rate averaged about 8 per cent. The Indian economy is projected to grow at 6.4 per cent in the current fiscal - the lowest pace in four years. The Finance Ministry's Economic Survey has projected growth in next fiscal FY26 to be between 6.3 per cent to 6.8 per cent.



Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman speaks in the Lok Sabha during the Budget session of Parliament, in New Delhi PTI

Sitharaman said only in two out of 12 quarters, India's growth rate touched 5.4 or remained below it. The GDP growth in the second quarter (July-September) slowed to 7 per cent-quarter low of 5.4 per cent.

"...On account of strong economic foundation, a speedy rebound is happening, and we shall take measures which will go forward, help in keeping our economy growing fastest as in the last few years. We will continue to remain the fastest-growing economy," the minister said.

Sitharaman said the private final consumption expenditure is expected to grow by 7.3 per cent in the current fiscal driven by a good rural demand. The private final consumption expenditure is estimated to be 61.8 per cent of the nominal GDP, which is the highest since 2002-03, she added. Sitharaman said the effective capital expenditure in FY26 is ₹15.48 Lakh Crore, which is 4.3 per cent of GDP. The Government is targeting a fiscal deficit of ₹15.68 Lakh Crore, which is 4.4 per cent of

the GDP in FY'26. Fiscal deficit is the difference between government revenue and expenditure and the gap is met by market borrowings. "...The government is using almost the entire borrowed resources for financing effective capital expenditure. So the borrowings are not going for revenue expenditure or committed expenditure, or any of those kinds. It is going only for creating capital assets. So, in effect, the government intends to use about 99 per cent of borrowed resources to

finance effective capital expenditure in the upcoming year," she said in the Lok Sabha.

Sitharaman said the Budget has come in a time of immense uncertainties, changes in the global macro-economic environment, stagnating global growth and sticky inflation. The world's scenario in the last 10 years turned 180 degrees, and making Budget is more challenging now than ever before, she said, adding Budget balances national development necessities with fiscal priorities.

On the weakening of rupee against the US dollar, the minister said various global and domestic factors are influencing the value of rupee against the US dollar. The Indian rupee has depreciated 3.3 per cent against the US dollar between October 2024 and January 2025, but the decline has been lower than that in some of its Asian peers. South Korean Won and Indonesian Rupiah depreciated by 8.1 per cent and 6.9 per cent, respectively in this period. Further, all G-10 currencies also depreciated during this period by more than 6 per cent with Euro and British Pound depreciating by 6.7 per cent and 7.2 per cent, respectively.

Sitharaman also said there has been no cut in transfer to states and ₹25.01 Lakh Crore will be transferred in FY'26.

Speaker Om Birla defends Sanskrit interpretation amid DMK objections



Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla and DMK MP Dayanidhi Maran during the Budget session of Parliament, in New Delhi Photo: File photo

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

DMK MP Dayanidhi Maran on Tuesday alleged that taxpayers' money was being wasted by providing simultaneous interpretation of Lok Sabha proceedings in Sanskrit due to RSS ideology, prompting Speaker Om Birla to hit back saying Sanskrit has been the primary language of India.

A visibly upset Birla said simultaneous interpretation of House proceedings was not limited to Sanskrit alone but other recognised languages too. "Simultaneous interpretation will be available in Hindi and Sanskrit," Birla said.

Soon after the Question Hour

concluded, Birla said he was happy to announce that six more languages - Bodo, Dogri, Maithili, Manipuri, Sanskrit and Urdu - have been included in the list of languages in which simultaneous interpretation was available for members.

He said besides English and Hindi, simultaneous interpretation is available in Assamese, Bangla, Gujarati, Kannada, Malayalam, Marathi, Odiya, Punjabi, Tamil and Telugu.

When Birla made the announcement, DMK members started raising slogans prompting the Speaker to ask Maran what his "problem" was. Maran said while he welcomed simultaneous

interpretation of official state languages, he had objections to Sanskrit interpretation as it was "not communicable". He cited the 2011 population survey to claim that Sanskrit was spoken by 73,000 people. "Why should taxpayers' money be wasted because of RSS ideology," he said.

Birla hit back, asking the DMK member which country he was residing in. "This is Bharat and its primary language has been Sanskrit. I said 22 languages, not Sanskrit alone. Why do you object to Sanskrit. There are 22 recognised languages in Parliament. Simultaneous interpretation will take place in Hindi as well as Sanskrit," he asserted.

Government to use AI to crack down on Cyber fraud

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The government is planning to use Artificial Intelligence (AI) to identify 'mule' accounts, where cyber fraudsters park swindled funds, Union Home Minister Amit Shah has said.

Chairing a meeting of the Parliamentary Consultative Committee for the Ministry of Home Affairs on the topic of 'Cyber Security and Cyber Crime' on Monday, Shah also said that for national security reasons, 805 apps and 3,266 website links have been blocked based on the recommendations of the Indian Cybercrime Coordination Centre (I4C), the government's cyber-crime monitoring and detection wing.

Additionally, he said, 399 banks and financial intermediaries have come on board, over six lakh suspicious data points have been shared, more than 19 lakh mule accounts have been caught, and suspicious transactions worth ₹ 2,038 Crore have been prevented.

Shah said efforts are underway to use Artificial Intelligence (AI) for identifying mule accounts, in coordination with the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) and all banks to establish a system for their detection, an official statement said.

The home minister said the government will ensure the closure of mule accounts before they even become operational. A mule account is a bank account used by criminals to move stolen money. He said a total of 1,43,000 FIRs have been registered on the I4C portal which has been used by more than 19 Crore people. In light of financial cyber fraud, the '1930' helpline provides a one-



point solution offering various services, such as blocking cards, Shah said.

He said the government has also ensured that people are made aware of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's mantra 'STOP-THINK-TAKE ACTION' to make them more vigilant against cybercrime.

In recent years, there has been an expansion of digital infrastructure in India, which has naturally led to an increase in the number of cyber attacks, the home minister said.

When the cyberspace is looked at from a different perspective, it forms a complex network of 'software', 'services', and 'users', he noted.

"Until we consider controlling cyber fraud through software, services, and users, it will be impossible to resolve the issues of cyberspace," he said.

Under the leadership of Prime Minister Modi, the Ministry of Home Affairs has taken several significant steps towards making India a cyber-safe nation, Shah said.

He added that cybercrime has erased all geographical boundaries and called it a 'borderless' and 'formless' crime, as it has no limits or fixed form. India has witnessed a 'digital revolution' in

the last decade and without understanding the size and scale of this digital revolution, "we cannot face the challenges in the cyber domain", the home minister said.

Today, 95 per cent villages in the country are digitally connected, while one lakh gram panchayats are equipped with Wi-Fi hotspots, he said.

In the past 10 years, the number of internet users has increased by 4.5 times and in 2024, a total of 246 trillion transactions worth ₹17.221 Lakh Crore were made through UPI.

In 2024, 48 per cent of global digital transactions took place in India, and in terms of the start-up ecosystem, India has become the third-largest country in the world, Shah said. In 2023, he said, the contribution of the digital economy to the gross domestic product (GDP) was around ₹32 Lakh Crore, which is 12 per cent, while nearly 15 million jobs were created in this period.

Shah also said that today India has become the third-largest country in the world in terms of digital landscape, and the digital economy contributes 20 per cent to the total economy of the country. The Ministry of Home Affairs' goal is to ensure zero cybercrime case, he said.

Trouble mounts for Ranveer Allahbadia: YouTube blocks controversial episode

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

A day after he hit the spotlight with a comment on parents and sex, trouble mounted for influencer Ranveer Allahbadia on Tuesday with Mumbai police at his doorstep, YouTube pulling down the episode of "India's Got Latent" and the issue being raised in Parliament.

The internet personality, with over 16 Million followers across social media platforms, landed in soup after the clip with his comments started making the rounds on social media on Monday and led to massive debate on freedom of speech and what constitutes decency.

Allahbadia tried to defuse the situation by issuing a video apology where he called his comment a "lapse in judgement" but the issue has refused



to die down.

Raising the matter in Parliament during Zero Hour, Shiv Sena MP Nareish Mhaske called for a law to regulate social media. He said there was a need to enact a law to regulate social media platforms where influencers are posting "all kinds of nonsense" in the name of freedom of speech. "The inappropriate things they said yesterday should

be censored. There should be censorship on influencers' content, and today I also raised this issue in Parliament, suggesting that action should be taken against them. If such individuals continue to spread negativity, action should be taken against them," Mhaske said PTL.

The National Commission for Women (NCW) on Tuesday expressed strong concern and

asked Allahbadia, Samay Raina, Apoorva Makhija, Jaspreet Singh, and Ashish Chanchlani, as well as the show's producers Tushar Poojari and Saurabh Bothra to appear before it on February 17 in New Delhi.

The summons came after Women and Child Development Minister Annapurna Devi said her ministry will seek a report from the NCW in this regard.

The NCW also urged Information and Broadcasting Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw to take immediate regulatory measures to address the prevalence of obscene content on various Over-The-Top (OTT) platforms and social-media streaming sites. Following orders from the government, YouTube India has blocked the episode in which the controversial comment was made.

"The 'India Has Latent' (India's Got Latent) episode on @YouTube with obscene and perverse comments by Ranveer Allahbadia has been blocked following Government of India orders," Kanchan Gupta, senior adviser in the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, said in a post on X.

A team of Mumbai Police was spotted outside Allahbadia's residence on Tuesday. The YouTuber is facing police complaints in Guwahati and Indore. The Maharashtra Cyber Department has also registered the case under relevant sections of the IT Act and sought removal of all episodes - total 18 - of the comedy show.

Summonses are being sent to about 30 guests who have participated in the show from the first episode till now, a police official said.

India, Egypt kick off Joint Special Forces Exercise Cyclone-III

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The third edition of Joint Special Forces Exercise Cyclone involving India and Egypt commenced at Mahajan Field Firing Ranges, Rajasthan on Monday, defence ministry announced on Tuesday. The exercise will end on February 23.

It is an annual event conducted alternatively in India and Egypt.

Last edition of the same exercise was conducted in Egypt in January last year.

The Indian contingent comprising 25 personnel will be represented by troops from two Special Forces Battalions. Egypt contingent also com-

prising 25 personnel will be represented by Special Forces Group and Task Force of Egyptian Special Forces.

Aim of Exercise Cyclone is to promote military-military relationship between the two countries through enhancement of interoperability, jointness and mutual exchange of special operations tactics.

The exercise will focus on high degree of physical fitness, joint planning and joint tactical drills.

Drills aspects to be rehearsed during the exercise will include advanced special forces skills and various other tactics, techniques and procedures as per the current operational paradigm.

The exercise will culminate in a 48-hour long validation exercise to rehearse and validate the tactical drills for counter terrorism operations in desert semi-desert terrain.

The exercise will also include a display of indigenous military equipment and an overview of the defence manufacturing industry for the Egyptian side. The drill will enable the two sides to share their best practices in tactics, techniques and procedures of conducting tactical operations. The exercise will also facilitate developing bonhomie and camaraderie between soldiers of both the sides.

Panchayati Raj Ministry to release Devolution Index Report

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Minister of State for Panchayati Raj S P Singh Baghel will release the comprehensive Devolution Index Report on panchayats in the country on Thursday. It will provide insights into the progress of decentralisation across states and Union Territories, the ministry said on Tuesday.

The Panchayati Raj Ministry in a statement issued here said the report titled "Status of Devolution to Panchayats in States - An Indicative Evidence Based Ranking 2024", will be released by the Minister on February 13. The ministry said it marks a milestone in India's journey towards empowering Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and realizing the vision of "Local Self Government" of the 73rd



Minister of state for Panchayati Raj S P Singh Baghel Photo: File photo

Constitutional Amendment. "The Devolution Index, a result of meticulous research and empirical analysis, provides insights into the progress of decentralisation across States and Union Territories," the ministry said.

Going beyond conventional metrics, the Index evaluates six critical dimensions: Framework, Functions, Finances,

Functionaries, Capacity Building, and Accountability of the Panchayats. "The Index specifically examines how 'free' Panchayats are to make and implement independent decisions, reflecting the true spirit of Article 243G of the Constitution. This article empowers State legislatures to devolve powers and responsibilities to Panchayats across 29 subjects listed in the

Eleventh Schedule," they said. The ministry added that the Devolution Index will serve as a tool for strengthening cooperative federalism and local self-governance, enabling States to identify areas for improvement and adopt best practices for more empowered and effective Panchayats.

It said the index will provide transparency in tracking Panchayat functioning and resource allocation for citizens, data-driven insights for advocacy and reform for elected representatives, and will serve as a roadmap for implementing effective decentralization policies for government officials.

Policymakers can use the Devolution Index to assess the overall health of local governance and identify where reforms are most urgently needed, the ministry added.

Haryana to build jungle safari in Gurugram

STAFF REPORTER ■ GURUGRAM

The Haryana Government is making all efforts to ensure that tourists get international-level facilities in the world's largest jungle safari proposed in Gurugram.

In continuation of this, Environment, Forest and Wildlife Minister Rao Narbir Singh is constantly visiting major wildlife rescue centers and jungle safaris in the country and abroad, taking stock of the measures taken to preserve wildlife there and the facilities being provided to visitors in the jungle safari.

The Environment Minister, along with departmental officials associated with the project, visited the Gorewada Wildlife Safari in Nagpur, Maharashtra and Vantara Wildlife Rescue Center in Jamnagar, Gujarat and directed the concerned officials to study the best services and facilities provided there. He said the jungle safari to be built in Gurugram will be the world's largest jungle safari, so his effort is to provide the best mix of all the best wildlife rescue centers and jungle safaris in the world here.

He said the start of this project in the Aravalli mountain range will increase the footfall of tourists, create employment opportunities locally and promote tourism.

Pilgrims fleeced as costs soar at Maha Kumbh

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■
PRAYAGRAJ

With an unprecedented 45 Crore devotees converging at the Sangam for the Maha Kumbh, pilgrims are facing severe price gouging for essential services. From exorbitant boat fares to overpriced food and transport, those arriving with faith and devotion are being forced to shell out thousands even before stepping foot into the sacred ghats.

A boat ride to the Sangam, which is officially priced at ₹150 per person, has become a luxury few can afford. Boatmen are demanding anywhere between ₹1,000 and ₹1,500, leaving pilgrims with little choice. "This is extortion in the name of religion," fumed Ashok Verma, who had come from Lucknow with his family. "We wanted to take a holy dip, not be robbed blind!"

Some pilgrims, especially the elderly, are struggling to pay such hefty amounts. "I saved for years to come to the Kumbh, but I never imagined I would be spending thousands just to get to the Sangam," said a visibly upset Geeta Devi from Madhubani, Bihar.



Devotees converging at the sangam for the Maha Kumbh Mela in Prayagraj PTI

Parking to mela ground: A pricey journey

The ordeal does not end at the river. Pilgrims arriving by car or bus are facing another financial hurdle—transport from the parking bays to the mela ground. With no regulated local transport, opportunistic youth are charging ₹500 for a ride covering barely two kilometers. "I could have walked if I was not

carrying my luggage," said Somnath Sanyal, a Prayagraj resident. "But ₹500 for such a short ride? It feels like we are being looted at every step before we even reach the Kumbh!"

Even basic necessities like food and tea have seen a steep price hike. "A simple meal that should cost ₹50 is being sold for ₹150," complained Sunita Yadav, a school teacher from Jhansi.

"And tea? ₹30 for a cup of water with a hint of milk. If this is not loot, what is?" Some vendors are justifying the prices, citing high demand and transportation costs. But for middle-class and poor devotees, the sudden spike in expenses is forcing them to cut back. "We are sharing one meal between three people," said Anwar Sheikh, who traveled from West Bengal with his fam-

ily. "Faith alone cannot fill an empty stomach."

Relief and comfort inside the mela grounds

However, once inside the Kumbh Mela grounds, pilgrims breathed a sigh of relief. "Everything is well-organised here. The police are managing crowds, toilets are available, and langars (community kitchens) are feeding thousands," said Rajesh Mishra from Varanasi. "The trouble is just getting here!"

Many were also touched by the kindness of locals, especially women who allowed female pilgrims to use their home toilets due to the lack of proper sanitation along the roads. "These women are our saviors," said Sarojini Devi, a devotee from Chhattisgarh. "Had it not been for them, the journey would have been unbearable."

With the Kumbh attracting millions daily, the unchecked overpricing has left pilgrims frustrated. Many are now calling for stricter enforcement of government rates. "The government has done a great job inside the Kumbh, but what about outside? Who is controlling the looters?" questioned Ramesh Gupta from Kanpur.

Rajnath Singh calls for innovative approaches in global security

PNS ■ BENGALURU

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh on Tuesday asserted that the evolving global security scenario demands innovative approaches and stronger partnerships.

Addressing the Defence Ministers' Conclave organised as part of the Aero India 2025, he said, India believes that international order and peace cannot be ensured from a position of weakness.

"Today, increasing number of conflicts is making our world, a more unpredictable place. New power plays, new methods and new means of weaponisation, increased role of non-state actors and disruptive technologies, have made the world order more fragile," the defence minister said.

At the same time, the distinction between security of the borders and internal security is getting blurred, as hybrid warfare can target critical national infrastructure even during the peace time, he said. "The definition of front line is changing fast today. Moreover, the dimensions of cyberspace and outer space are challenging the established definition of sovereignty."

"It is my firm belief that the evolving global security scenario demands innovative approaches and stronger partnerships. India's engagements in the global stage exemplify our commitment to fostering security and growth for all," he added.

According to officials, the Defence Ministers' Conclave, organised in hybrid mode, is aimed at strengthening defence cooperation with friendly nations amidst a rapidly-evolving global security landscape, and this year's theme 'Building Resilience through International Defence and Global Engagement (BRIDGE)' underscores the importance of supply chain resilience and strategic collaboration in defence.

Officials had earlier said that representatives from more than 80 countries were likely to participate in the conclave and around 30 defence ministers in addition to defence, service chiefs and permanent secretaries from friendly nations would attend the event. Reiterating India's conviction



Union Minister for Defence Rajnath Singh addresses the Defence Ministers' Conclave 'Bridge' at Aero India, in Bengaluru PTI

on being strong to ensure peace, the defence minister said, "We have been working very hard, to bring about a transformation in our defence capabilities. We have put in place a very conducive policy regime which encourages investment in and production of an entire range of modern state-of-the-art land, maritime and air systems."

India's emergence as a global hub for research, development, and innovation in defence is a testament to our capabilities and aspirations, he added.

"Today, we have a vibrant defence startup ecosystem within the larger Indian startup ecosystem, which ranks third globally in terms of unicorn count," Rajnath said.

"Our thriving aerospace and defence sectors, supported by a significant research and development base and an entrepreneurial spirit, offer unparalleled opportunities for collaboration," he added.

Pointing out that India's skill base enables it to produce at highly competitive costs, and the country is committed to share state-of-the-art defence equipment, hardware, services and technology with friends and partners, Rajnath told

countries attending the conclave, "I invite you to join us in co-developing and co-producing advanced systems and fostering innovation together." India's defence diplomacy reflects our commitment to building enduring bilateral and multilateral relationships. "Our

approach emphasises mutual capacity building, prosperity and security for the sovereignty of our partner nations," he said.

"We do not believe in transactional relationships or imposing solutions. Indian solutions are not prescriptive. Instead, we aim to empower our partners to chart their own paths, through support that aligns with their national priorities," he added. India's position as a preferred partner for defence exports is reinforced by adherence to quality, reliability and commitment to the specific needs of partners, the defence minister said.

"Our defence industry is well-equipped to meet diverse requirements, from cutting-edge technology to cost-effective solutions," he added. The challenges like terrorism, cyber-crime, humanitarian crises and climate-induced disasters, transcend borders, and they demand a united response, he said.

"The BRIDGE initiative represents our commitment to transforming dialogue into actionable outcomes, fostering partnerships that are resilient, adaptable and forward-looking," he said.

"India stands ready to work with all nations in crafting solutions that are innovative, equitable and sustainable. Together, we can build a future where security and prosperity go hand in hand, ensuring peace and stability for generations to come," he added.

Unprecedented crowd chokes Kashi

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■
VARANASI

Varanasi witnessed an unprecedented influx of visitors, causing massive traffic congestion across the city and its highways. According to police estimates, around 12 Lakh people arrived from outside, bringing with them more than 60,000 vehicles. This marked the highest single-day surge of visitors in Kashi's history.

With the municipal corporation area's population standing at approximately 15 Lakh, the city found itself overwhelmed, resembling a 'Maha jam' (massive traffic jam). Roads were gridlocked from highways to inner streets, making movement nearly impossible.

Schoolchildren faced severe delays, taking up to three hours to reach home. By evening, food supplies in hotels and dhabas were exhausted, while many visitors with hotel and guesthouse bookings were

unable to reach their accommodations due to border restrictions.

The city's traffic management collapsed under the pressure. Autos and e-rickshaws were rendered immobile, and school buses were stuck at multiple locations. The Prayagraj-Varanasi highway remained choked throughout the day, with not a single moment of respite. By 4 pm, authorities halted vehicle entry from Varanasi, Ghazipur, Gorakhpur, Deoria, and Mau at the Kaithi toll plaza.

The situation worsened as borders were sealed at multiple points. The Ghazipur city entry was blocked before Chaubepur toll plaza, resulting in long queues of vehicles. Similarly, traffic from Prayagraj was halted at Jansa. The Akhri-Mohansarai-Mirzamurad stretch was completely gridlocked, with even the service lanes unfit for pedestrian movement. Meanwhile, the Harhua ring road intersection to Lohrapur

saw an unbroken queue of vehicles. The congestion severely hampered emergency response. Two ambulances were caught in the jam on the Rathyatra-Gurubag route, raising concerns about access to critical medical services. With thousands of stranded commuters and overwhelmed roads, the city struggled to cope with the unexpected deluge of visitors.

The massive congestion left locals and pilgrims with mixed reactions. Residents expressed frustration over the traffic mismanagement, with many struggling to carry out their daily activities. Commuters were stranded for hours, and businesses faced disruptions due to supply delays. Pilgrims, however, viewed the overwhelming crowd as a testament to Kashi's spiritual significance. Despite the inconveniences, many devotees remained determined to complete their religious journey, expressing awe at the city's vibrancy and devotion.



Devotees perform rituals at Sangam after taking a holy dip on the eve of 'Maghi Purnima' bath festival during ongoing Maha Kumbh Mela, in Prayagraj PTI

Maha Kumbh records 45 Crore taking dip

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■
PRAYAGRAJ

Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath had predicted that this year's grand Mahakumbh would set a historic record with 45 Crore devotees. His forecast proved right 15 days before the event's conclusion.

By 8 am on February 11, the official count had surpassed 45 Crores, with nearly 50 Lakh devotees taking a holy dip in the Triveni Sangam that morning alone.

With 15 days remaining and two major bathing festivals yet to occur, the total number of bathers is expected to surpass 50 Crores-55 Crores. The sacred confluence of Maa Ganga, Maa Yamuna, and the invisible Maa Saraswati continues to witness an overwhelming surge of faith and devotion. Saints, devotees, Kalpvasis, and pilgrims from all walks of life are taking the holy dip, fulfilling the vision that Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath had foreseen even before Mahakumbh began.

Even after the three significant Amrit Snans-Makar Sankranti, Mauni Amavasya, and Basant Panchami-the enthusiasm and devotion of pilgrims remain unwavering. Millions continue to arrive from across India and the world, drawn by the spiritual magnetism of Prayagraj. The

fever of faith persists even beyond the last Amrit Snan as devotees flock to the sacred banks of the Sangam.

By Tuesday morning, 49.68 Lakh people had taken a holy dip in the Triveni, bringing the total count of bathers past 45 Crores. Among them were 10 Lakh Kalpvasis and saints and devotees from across the globe, further solidifying Mahakumbh 2025 as an unprecedented spiritual spectacle.

An analysis of the total footfall so far reveals that Mauni Amavasya saw the highest turnout, with eight Crore devotees taking a holy dip. In comparison, 3.5 Crore devotees participated in the Amrit Snan on Makar Sankranti. On February 1 and January 30, over two Crore devotees bathed each day, while Paus Purnima saw 1.7 Crore pilgrims take a dip. Additionally, 2.57 Crore devotees bathed in the Triveni on Basant Panchami. Even before Magh Purnima, over one crore devotees arrived daily at the Sangam banks for the sacred ritual.

President Draupadi Murmu took a holy dip in Triveni Sangam on Monday. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Home Minister Amit Shah, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, and Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath (including cabinet) also took a holy dip in Sangam.

Collective effort essential to empower common man: Andhra CM

PTI ■ AMARAVATI

Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu on Tuesday said here that a cohesive and collective brainstorming among all government departments is crucial to empower the common man.

Addressing a meeting of ministers and secretaries at the Secretariat in Amaravati, the Chief Minister underscored that effective coordination, integration and execution is the government's responsibility.

"I can say it is a brainstorming session for reorienting ourselves. We organised the meeting to get clarity on what we should do," he said.

Outlining the state's challenges, the Chief Minister alleged that nearly 90 centrally sponsored schemes had become non-functional due to mismanagement and funds diversions in the erstwhile YSRCP government.

The government is now prioritising the optimal implementation of central schemes and to ensure that right people are placed in key positions, he said.

Stressing on the long-term vision of Swarna Andhra 2047, which aligns with the national vision of Viksit Bharat 2047, Naidu said this strategy focuses on

achieving a sustained growth rate of 15 per cent.

Further, he stressed on the need to strengthen family welfare services, ensuring streetlights, roads, drainage, garbage collection and a circular economy model to build a healthier and wealthier society.

"Accelerating revenue growth, streamlining bureaucratic processes, and fostering a culture of innovation is the need of the hour," he added.

Naidu directed officials to leverage the 'first mover advantage' to secure central funds under the newly announced Union Budget schemes.

The CM called upon all officials to rededicate themselves to the mission of building a prosperous and developed Andhra Pradesh, among other targets, including transforming the state to achieve a GSDP of USD 2.4 Trillion. Naidu also instructed officials to expedite the process of file clearance in the e-office system, emphasising the need for speed in government offices.

Calling on secretaries and departmental heads to find out where files are getting stuck and identify the reasons for delays, he said these hindrances should be promptly resolved. CM said non-financial files should never

be left pending and added that budget-related matters should be reviewed for swift clearance in case of financial files.

The Chief Minister highlighted that Andhra Pradesh has ₹87,000 Crore shortfall in GSDP compared to Telangana and stressed that declining purchasing power must be addressed. He emphasised that a strategic approach is required to meet GSDP targets as economic growth is contingent upon achieving these goals.

Naidu also said a Vision Monitoring Unit (VMU) will be established at the state level and districts must prepare constituency-level plans. He called upon the districts to identify key projects contributing to GSDP growth which will be tracked through a dedicated portal.

He also said department mapping with GSDP will be conducted, and a 15.76 per cent overall growth rate has been set as the target.

Naidu directed officials to ensure quality service delivery, utilizing technological touchpoints and implementing QR codes to gauge people's satisfaction especially for programmes such as pension distribution, anna canteens, paddy procurement, temple services, government hospital services and others.

Manipur government urges calm amid leadership crisis

PTI ■ IMPHAL

The Manipur government on Tuesday urged people to stay calm and not to fall prey to unverified news, rumours or misinformation that may cause unnecessary panic or disrupt peace and harmony in the state.

The appeal was made amid a leadership crisis following the resignation of N Biren Singh from the post of chief minister on February 9.

"It has also come to the notice of the government that certain unscrupulous individuals and groups may deliberately attempt to incite unrest, disrupt harmony and spread fear among the public using false information, inflammatory content or fabricated narratives," a statement issued by Chief Secretary PK Singh said. "Such attempts are intended to create lawlessness, and the public is strongly advised not

to give heed to such misinformation or incitement," it added. To ensure that people receive accurate information, the government has set up a control room, where citizens can verify any news or information they come across. The control room can be reached at 9485280419 and is operational 24x7, it said.

"Maintaining peace and law and order is a collective responsibility, and the government strongly advises all residents to remain vigilant against those trying to create disturbances. Any attempt to incite violence or disrupt harmony will be dealt with strictly as per the law," the statement said.

It also urged community leaders, civil society organisations, religious leaders, student bodies, intellectuals and citizens to come together "to foster unity and work towards rebuilding trust amongst all communities".

Prayagraj tightens traffic regulations ahead of Maghi Purnima festivities

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■
PRAYAGRAJ

With a massive influx of devotees expected for Maghi Purnima, a key bathing occasion at the ongoing Maha Kumbh, authorities in Prayagraj have enforced strict traffic regulations to manage the anticipated crowd. Given that crores of pilgrims are likely to gather at the Sangam for the holy dip, officials have introduced extensive movement restrictions to prevent overcrowding. These measures come in the aftermath of the January 29 stampede, which resulted in the tragic loss of at least 30 lives.

To ensure smooth crowd management, the fairground has been designated a no-vehicle zone from 4 am on Tuesday. The restrictions will expand

citywide starting at 5 pm, with designated parking zones arranged for incoming pilgrims. These traffic controls will remain in force until Wednesday to facilitate an orderly dispersal of devotees. However, emergency and essential services will not be affected by the curbs.

Additionally, the restrictions will extend to Kalpvasis-pilgrims who observe extended stays near the Sangam as part of their religious practice.

On Monday night, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath convened a high-level meeting with police and civic officials to assess readiness for Maghi Purnima.

Stressing the importance of seamless traffic and crowd management, he instructed authorities to fully utilise parking facilities capable of accom-



Rush of devotees on pontoon bridge on the eve of 'Magh Purnima' during the ongoing Mahakumbh Mela, in Prayagraj PTI

modating over five Lakh vehicles.

"Under no circumstances

should there be long vehicle queues. Ensuring smooth traffic flow is a top priority," he

directed. He noted that over the past week, the influx of devotees

into Prayagraj has significantly increased from all directions. In addition to public transport, a large number of private vehicles are also arriving, and this number is expected to rise further on the bathing festival. In light of this, a well-structured traffic and crowd management plan must be implemented.

"Parking facilities at Prayagraj's borders should be operated efficiently. The available parking capacity of over five Lakh vehicles must be fully utilised. While providing necessary support to children, women, and the elderly, no vehicle should be allowed to enter the fair premises in violation of regulations. Shuttle buses should be used as required, with an increase in their numbers as per demand. Devotees must be encouraged to follow

the designated parking system, and they should be treated cooperatively and respectfully," Yogi instructed officials.

No long queues of vehicles should be allowed to form on the roads, and traffic congestion must be prevented at all costs. Strict measures should be taken to ensure that vehicles are not parked on the roads, and vehicular movement remains continuous and unobstructed. District Magistrates of all districts sharing a border with Prayagraj must maintain constant coordination with the Prayagraj administration to ensure smooth vehicle movement. Mutual coordination should be maintained to prevent congestion in the fair area, and barricading should be installed where necessary. There should be no traffic jams due to toll collection.

CM said, "Railway stations in Prayagraj are witnessing a large number of devotees returning home after taking a holy dip. Authorities have been directed to ensure their safe journey. Continuous operation of trains should be ensured by maintaining coordination with the Railways, and additional Transport Corporation buses should be deployed for better passenger movement."

He also ordered deployment of 28 administrative officers of ADM and SDM levels, along with several police officers. "Their services should be utilised as needed, with police officers specifically assigned to traffic management," he said and added: "Continuous police patrolling should be ensured on all routes leading to Prayagraj to regulate traffic effectively and maintain order."



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PAPER WITH PASSION

A push for AI and defence

The Prime Minister Modi's France visit underscores a shared vision on technological innovation and global stability

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to France marked a significant chapter in Indo-French relations, focusing on advancements in artificial intelligence (AI), defence collaboration and honouring shared historical ties. AI Action Summit co-hosted by President Emmanuel Macron and Prime Minister Modi convened global leaders, tech industry executives and researchers to deliberate on the ethical deployment of AI and its potential benefits for the society. The summit aimed to position France and India at the forefront of the AI revolution, emphasising the need for responsible and democratic AI governance. Notable outcome of the summit was the announcement of the 'Current AI' partnership, a public-interest initiative with an initial investment of \$400 million. This partnership seeks to provide open-source access to databases, software, and tools for trusted AI actors, promoting the use of AI in addressing global challenges such as healthcare and environmental sustainability.



In a groundbreaking development, France is in advanced discussions to procure India's domestically developed Pinaka multi-barrel rocket launcher system. This potential deal signifies a shift in defence dynamics, as it would be the first instance of one of India's major arms suppliers purchasing Indian-made weaponry. The Pinaka system, with a range of up to 90 km, has been demonstrated to a French delegation and met with positive feedback. During his visit, Prime Minister Modi paid tribute to Indian soldiers who sacrificed their lives in the World Wars by visiting the Mazargues War Cemetery in Marseille. This gesture underscored the deep historical ties between India

and France and highlighted the shared values and sacrifices that bind the two nations. The visit also marked a milestone in diplomatic outreach with the inauguration of India's first consulate in Marseille. This move is expected to bolster bilateral relations, facilitate consular services for the Indian diaspora, and enhance cultural and economic exchanges between the two countries. Prime Minister Modi and President Macron reviewed progress on the Horizon 2047 Roadmap, an initiative launched in 2023 to chart the course of Indo-French relations up to 2047. The roadmap focuses on collaboration in key sectors such as nuclear energy, defence and technology, aiming to strengthen the strategic partnership between the two nations. Engaging in global AI dialogues and partnerships positions India to harness AI for public good, addressing challenges in healthcare, agriculture and education. The prospective sale of the Pinaka system to France not only boosts India's defence exports but also signifies international recognition of India's indigenous defence manufacturing capabilities. The inauguration of the consulate in Marseille and the review of the Horizon 2047 Roadmap reflect India's commitment to deepening bilateral ties with France, fostering cooperation across various sectors.

PICTALK



Farmers pluck Gladiolus flowers at an orchard, in Nadia

The US humanitarian legacy under siege

USAID faces an existential crisis as the Trump administration's aggressive restructuring and Elon Musk's vocal opposition threaten its very survival

AMAL CHANDRA

USAID, long regarded as a pillar of American humanitarian aid and soft power, now finds itself embroiled in an existential crisis that threatens its very survival. Founded in 1961 by President John F Kennedy, the agency has historically been at the forefront of global development efforts, providing critical support in areas such as food security, healthcare, and economic development. Over the decades, USAID has built a complex legacy—on one hand, saving millions of lives through vaccination programmes, disaster relief, and poverty alleviation initiatives, while on the other, facing criticism for allegedly serving as a tool for American political influence and intervention abroad.

Now, under the Trump administration's aggressive restructuring plans and the unexpected involvement of billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk, USAID's future hangs precariously in the balance. At the centre of this upheaval is the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), a newly created federal body with a mandate to streamline government operations by cutting budgets, eliminating inefficiencies, and reducing the federal workforce. With its expansive global footprint and substantial funding, USAID has become a prime target. The Trump administration, which has already frozen the majority of foreign aid programs, is pushing to either drastically curtail USAID's power or absorb it into the State Department—an action that would effectively end its independent operation.

The situation reached a boiling point when DOGE agents attempted to force their way into USAID's Washington, DC headquarters, leading to a tense standoff with security personnel. Eventually, the agents gained access to USAID's control systems, locked out employees, and combed through internal communications. Allegations have since surfaced that DOGE operatives were attempting to seize classified documents, though the department has denied any wrongdoing. The ease with



which USAID's offices were infiltrated has raised troubling concerns about the security of other government institutions. Elon Musk, known for his ventures in electric vehicles, space exploration, artificial intelligence, and social media, has emerged as one of USAID's most vocal critics. He has publicly labelled the agency a "criminal organisation" and a "viper's nest" of corruption, accusing it of funding radical leftist causes and supporting groups that oppose American interests. Musk has called for the complete dismantling of USAID, arguing that American taxpayers should not be footing the bill for foreign aid that, in his view, does not serve the nation's interests. While President Trump has not explicitly endorsed Musk's rhetoric, sources within the administration suggest that his views have influenced internal discussions about USAID's future. Signs of this shift are already visible—nearly 100 USAID employees have been placed on administrative leave, including two security officers who attempted to prevent DOGE's entry. Additionally, the agency's website and official X (formerly Twitter) account have been taken offline, signalling that a fundamental transformation is



THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION, WHICH HAS ALREADY FROZEN THE MAJORITY OF FOREIGN AID PROGRAMS, IS PUSHING TO EITHER DRASTICALLY CURTAIL USAID'S POWER OR ABSORB IT INTO THE STATE DEPARTMENT

underway. If these trends continue, USAID's six-decade existence may soon come to an unceremonious end. The ramifications of this crisis extend far beyond the political infighting in Washington, DC USAID operates in over 50 countries, funding programs that provide clean water, healthcare, sanitation, and education. At the same time, India has increasingly scrutinised foreign-funded NGOs, with the Modi administration tightening restrictions on organisations perceived as meddling in domestic affairs. In this light, a reduced USAID presence may align with India's push for self-reliance. Moreover, as the US pulls back from global aid commitments, India may see an opportunity to expand its influence in South Asia, filling the void left by Washington's retreat. The broader question at stake is what role the United States intends to play in the world moving forward. Should it continue investing in foreign aid as a means of exercising global leadership, or should it prioritise a more insular, America-first approach? Supporters of USAID argue that America's strength is not merely derived from military power but also from its ability to assist those in need.

A retreat from humanitarian efforts would create a vacuum that rival powers—especially China—are eager to exploit. Beijing has already made significant inroads through its Belt and Road Initiative, offering infrastructure financing and economic partnerships to nations that might otherwise have sought aid from Washington. If the US abandons its foreign aid commitments, it risks ceding valuable influence to geopolitical competitors. The coming months will determine whether USAID's fate is sealed or if political resistance will salvage some version of the agency. What is certain, however, is that this is not just a bureaucratic dispute—it is a battle over the values that America chooses to uphold. If humanitarian aid is sacrificed in favour of a purely transactional foreign policy, the consequences will reverberate not only in the nations that once relied on US assistance but within America itself. The world is watching, and history will judge whether this moment signifies the decline of American global responsibility or the dawn of a more ruthless, self-serving era in US foreign policy. (Amal Chandra is an author, political analyst, and columnist; views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

PM MODI ENCOURAGES STUDENTS

Madam — Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in the eighth edition of Pariksha Pe Charcha, imparted the invaluable mantra of confidence and positive thinking to students. He emphasised that exams are merely a milestone, not the final destination of life. They serve as a powerful medium to assess one's knowledge and preparation. Encouraging students, Modi advised them to master the art of handling mental pressure, just as a skilled batsman focuses on the next ball despite the loud cheers of the audience. This initiative reflects that the nation's leadership is not confined to policies alone but is also deeply concerned about the bright future of the younger generation. He urged parents not to compare their children with others and to stop treating them merely as a means of performance evaluation. Every child is unique and should be encouraged according to their individual capabilities. Highlighting the importance of mental balance, a healthy diet and adequate rest, Modi introduced students to the art of effective time management and emphasised that every student deserves the opportunity to fulfil their dreams. The Prime Minister encouraged students to focus on their studies without stress and to challenge themselves continuously. This interactive session not only helps students overcome the fear of exams but also instils confidence in them, fostering a positive outlook on life.

R K Jain | Barwani

ROHIT SHARMA BACK IN FORM

Madam — Form is temporary, class is permanent was at last proved by the Indian skipper Rohit Sharma by his scintillating century at Cuttack against England in the second ODI, which has come at the appropriate time by winning the match with a series lead. However big a player is, self-confidence matters most when it comes to a comeback when in a bad patch. The board and the selection panel have given more than the required time for Rohit to perform. He must be thankful for

Security forces kill 31 Naxalites



In another successful encounter, security officers killed 31 Naxalites in Bijapur district of Bastar division in Chhattisgarh, which is regarded as a den of red terrorism. The magnitude of the success in the recent elimination spree of the security forces against the Naxalites proves that Left Wing Extremism is heading to its end in the country. Their dream of establishing a red corridor from Nepal to Andhra Pradesh has been devastated

by the security forces. The success also reflects Union Home Minister Amit Shah's resolve to completely eliminate naxalism by March 2026.

The better coordination in the now BJP-ruled states of Chhattisgarh and Maharashtra has led to an effective implementation of the anti-naxalite operation. There were reports that some elements connected with left-wing student unions in JNU celebrated the massacre of 76 CRPF jawans by naxalites in Chhattisgarh. On the contrary, the Modi government has zero tolerance against Naxal violence. Besides counterinsurgency, welfare and development schemes launched in naxalite-affected areas have also made the tribal youths disillusioned with naxalism.

Manoj Parashar | Ghaziabad

the selectors to repose faith in him. It will be prudent for Rohit to keep the past memories aside and ascertain his position as an invincible hitman to bring the ICC Champions Trophy for Team India as his next milestone. The upright decision to have included the mystery spinner Varun Chakravarthy for the second ODI has been a success when he made the breakthrough to begin with by adding salt to the wound of Englishmen by dismissing Phil Salt, the opener. The kind of form maintained by Ravindra Jadeja, both with the bat and ball, would do a world of good with the company of Varun Chakravarthy for Team India in the ICC Champions Trophy, giving them a certain edge to win the title.

A.P. Thiruvadi | Chennai

SAFEGUARD INDUSTRY INTERESTS

Madam — The US President Trump knows pretty well the global impacts of imposing tariffs and duties unilaterally. The industries in India apparently were least prepared to face this tariff war and the consequences. It should be noticed and recognised by our Union Government how

strongly the US and China safeguard their industry's interests while we let our industry face the global pressures and turbulence and trade deficits on their own. The US and China advance their policies of trade and strategic interests of futuristic two decades. We have to safeguard our industry's interests, exports and trade balance.

The steel industry obviously may not be impacted on a substantial basis as hardly a fraction of its production is exported to the US but as detailed in the news, the Indian steel industry may be stressed if the major producers divert their exports to India, high on steel consumption. If the US continues with tariff escalation, it takes risks of consequent higher cost of domestic production. India will continuously face competition and rivalry in the global trade from the US and China, so there is a need to divert and set up our manufacturing bases in African countries, Southeast Asia and Europe and even in the US.

Vinod Johri | Delhi

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

The comfort of relationships that need no validation



ASHA IYER KUMAR

Let's free our relationships from the weight of constant maintenance, trusting that true bonds don't fade in silence but grow stronger in the depths of our affection

This is a sequel to my column of last week, wherein I underlined the need for us to stay in touch with people to build a robust circle of love, care, and compassion around us. The article, which was lauded by many, also raised a slew of questions. What do people who don't genuinely find the time to make calls and retain personal connections in a tangible way do?

They accepted the merits of what I had highlighted in the column but doubted if, in this age when generations are passing in a jiffy and the race to the finish line seems to go on forever, we could squeeze in little niceties like making a call or strengthening our links with people by going beyond pleasantries. I was even asked if I have been able to maintain relationships in the manner I had suggested. The answer is, "No, I haven't been able to keep pace with my growing connections," but there is something that I do in order to spare myself the guilt of not calling people as often as I would like: keep them close to my heart even when there is prolonged silence, and when the oppor-



tunity to meet them or speak to them knocks, pick it up from where we had left off the last time, without complaints or frowns.

Now, that's a different equation altogether, and not all are primed to keep up incognito relationships where love and care thrive even without regular check-ins. We look for reinforcements and reassurances, and when they aren't forthcoming, tend to blame it on the other for their lack of affinity. I have many connections where the foundations of the association are so firm and deep-rooted that no time or space can dislodge us from each other's lives. Months and years may pass, but when we meet, it is as if the bond has only grown stronger and our love for each other more pristine, untouched by the patina of time.

Why can't we allow our social bonds the freedom to exist without yoking them to formalities? Why don't we come to terms with the fact that there is no lack of love, but each one of us is just bogged down by the demands of life in the fast lane?

There is an unspoken comfort in relationships that do not demand constant validation. Some bonds flourish in silence, in the spaces between meetings, in the warmth that lingers even when words are absent. It is a reassuring truth that not all relationships require the crutch of routine communication to remain strong. Yet, the modern mind struggles to accept this form of connection, often mistaking silence for indifference and distance for detachment. In an age where instant responses are expected, where friendships are measured in the currency of texts and calls, we have begun to equate attention with affection and availability with authenticity. And when someone does not reach out as often as we desire, we assume they have relegated us to the margins of their lives. The expectation that rela-

tionships must be constantly tended to, like fragile saplings that require perpetual watering, stems from a fear of being forgotten. But relationships built on mutual respect and a deep-seated connection are not fragile; they are resilient. Perhaps, instead of lamenting the lack of frequent contact, we should cherish the moments when reconnections happen naturally, without resentment or reproach. True companionship does not wilt under the weight of time—it endures, sustained by the simple yet profound act of keeping someone close in thought and heart.

So let us release our relationships from the burden of constant upkeep. Let us trust that genuine bonds, once formed, do not wither in silence but gather strength in the depths of our affection. And when the moment to reconnect arrives, let it be a celebration of love that time could never diminish. This, perhaps, is the only way we can realign our relationships with the changing world. (The author is a Dubai-based columnist and children's writing coach. She has published six books. Views are personal)



FIRST COLUMN PROTECT YOUR SPINE

The spine plays a crucial role in maintaining overall health, yet we often neglect it



RAVI VALLURI

How many of us get up in the morning and virtually struggle to get out of bed as the body feels sore, the neck remains stiff, knees wobble, shoulders and feet pain? In fact, the entire day is torturous. Such individuals run to doctors, seeking a magical cure for the pestilence. Unless the problem is genetic or hereditary, humans get afflicted with such disorders because of a deficient lifestyle, stress accumulated over a period of time and poor dietary habits. The vertebra and our skeletal frame are an extremely important part of the human body, which we ignore at our own peril.

Therefore, a healthy spine leads to a healthy life. Do we recall when a child begins to walk, the preliminary baby steps are raising his/her thumbs; this is called the 'Merudanda Mudra'. The vertebra consists of a series of small bones which form the backbone or the spine, having several projections for articulation and muscle attachment, and a hole through which the spinal cord passes. The spine is the first identifiable structure that provides us with a shape and form rather than being a ball of cells without any differentiation. It keeps us upright, allows us to bend



and twist and connects the different parts of our skeleton. Office goers are programmed – for making a living – to undertake a typical quotidian 9 to 5 routine, and several among them use computers for prolonged hours, or those professionals who are compelled to drive long distances to their places of work from their dwelling paces ought to necessarily know how to protect their backs, necks and hand muscles. Not only are these muscles to be protected and fortified but the tissues should be sufficiently strengthened.

Such working men and women should be educated regarding deploying the correct posture. Many homemakers at times develop severe middle or lower back medical problems for a variety of reasons. Continuously undertaking repeated chores and even activities involving the handling of small or no weights, performed with an incorrect posture, can damage tissues and muscles, which causes irreparable damage to the back and neck. The afflicted suffer from the debility for years together in pain. Awareness about the structure of the spine and adopting the right postures along with simple strengthening stretches significantly helps to avoid these misadventures in one's life. In the cases where these problems assume the shape of chronic disorders the patient suffering can be guided through simple stretching exercises under the supervision of a physiotherapist or an orthopaedic. To ameliorate the condition of those suffering from these debilitating health issues, the patients should take treatment for it. Those in particular suffering from spondylitis, frozen shoulder, middle and lower back problems, and knee problems benefit immensely upon undergoing the rehabilitation process and will certainly see visible dramatic changes in their lifestyle patterns and daily routines. Such programmes generally encompass the techniques mentioned below with the required sensitivity to an individual's health condition:

- Power Walk: alignment of vertebrae and to open energy channels
- Posture Awareness and its correction
- Ergonomics
- Simple but powerful stretches and yoga – for inner surgical alignment of the spine to release the nerves that were being continually pressed
- Gait Training
- Guided Meditation techniques to release stress

(The writer is the CEO of Chhattisgarh East Railway Ltd. and Chhattisgarh East West Railway Ltd. He has authored both fiction and nonfiction and is a faculty member of the Art of Living. Views are personal)

Trump's 'America first' policy causes chaos

As Donald Trump embarks on his second term as the US President, the nation faces a turbulent landscape of climate disasters and economic uncertainty



B K SINGH

One of the first executive orders signed by Donald Trump after his inauguration as US President was the withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accord, overlooking a whole lot of climate disruptions that the country has faced since his election campaign. At least 335 human deaths were attributed to Hurricane Beryl and Hurricane Milton, making 2024 the deadliest hurricane season in the continental US since 2005. What followed each time was damaged buildings, roads and bridges and power outages for several days, forcing people to live without electricity for days and weeks. The year 2025 welcomed the US with unprecedented snowfall in the central and eastern part forcing the shifting of Trump's second term inauguration indoors, and a week earlier, catastrophic wildfires ravaged the Los Angeles region in the western part of the country.

The fire lasted for ten days and climate experts have attributed it to strong Santa Ana winds and extremely dry weather making forest vegetation readymade fuel. Los Angeles fire killed at least 25 persons, damaged more than 15,000 structures and ravaged more than 200 square km area. 60,000 persons including Hollywood stars left home for safety. The largest fire in the region the Palisades and Eaton have continued to burn for ten days. After El Nino and neutral weather conditions, La Nina arrived and pushed the storm back to the northern part of the US making the northern part wetter than usual and the southern part drier than usual. Santa Ana winds common in January and February in the region have been aggressive with wind speeds up to 120 km per hour.

This made damage control difficult. The temperature contrast between cooler inland areas (southern California deserts) and warmer coastal areas is the recipe for these winds. The extent of dryness of the area can be understood by the fact that the last half-inch of rain received in the region was only a year ago. In his America First policy, Trump has been continuously announcing to increase tariffs on goods imported from Canada, Mexico, China and several more. He has also named Brazil and India among the countries that harm the US, through their tariffs. Trump's action has the potential to initiate a trade war among countries and impact many developing economies. He has offered two million federal workers the option to resign but get paid till September 2025, in his effort to cut the federal workforce and push out those who do not support his political agenda.

Though federal law has long protected civil servants from pressure and political interference, yet President is testing his power. The process of deportation of illegal immigrants has started in a big way. Search for other undocumented immigrants is aggressively going on. Religious places like Gurudwaras have been searched in New York and New Jersey, at the cost of antagonising Sikh and other religious groups. He has also said that he will hold some in Guantanamo Bay away from legal and social services and support. Some of these migrants are so bad that countries cannot be trusted to



THOUGH FEDERAL LAW HAS LONG PROTECTED CIVIL SERVANTS FROM PRESSURE AND POLITICAL INTERFERENCE, YET PRESIDENT IS TESTING HIS POWER. THE PROCESS OF DEPORTATION OF ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS HAS STARTED IN A BIG WAY. SEARCH FOR OTHER UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS IS AGGRESSIVELY GOING ON

hold them back. Time will tell whether Trump's agenda to bring manufacturing back to the US would succeed in the absence of a labour force that is largely being deported/ housed in Guantanamo Bay where 30,000 beds are being added to expand the government's detention capacity. Renaming the Gulf of Mexico as the Gulf of America would hardly carry any meaning, but it can irritate a neighbouring country and may be a spoilsport in their relationship. Donald Trump wants Canada to become the 51st state of the USA and his justification is that the US is the only country Canada shares its boundary along the land and makes it secure. The countries have a free trade agreement and Canada takes full advantage of it. Further Trump has expressed to take over the Panama Canal from Panama and purchase Greenland from Denmark for strategic reasons and security of the USA.

These steps are needed to have a check over growing Chinese control on trade with Latin American countries. Greenland is approachable by China from the Arctic side, while the Panama Canal is crucial for Chinese ships to cross from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean, which provides a shorter route for trade to all countries in South America. The taking over of the Panama Canal and Greenland can have serious environmental fallout. World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) secretary-general Celeste Saulo, while addressing the 150th Foundation Day celebration of the Indian Meteorological Department referred average global temperature rise of 1.55 degrees Celsius in 2024 over the preindustrial period and she termed it as a "very grave danger"

and called for decisive climate action in 2025 and speed up the transition to renewable energy. Trump has again withdrawn from the Paris Climate Accord and prioritised energy self-sufficiency through domestic drilling and exploration of oil and natural gas with the sole justification of cutting the cost of energy and thereby bringing down inflation.

It is feared that the gains achieved by Biden through the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) 2022, where \$369 billion was invested in clean energy initiatives and that also created jobs in the US, will be dismantled. He has declared a National Energy emergency, a first in US history, which may lead to the suspension of environmental rules and grant permission for mining projects. He has halted the lease of federal water for offshore wind farms and called for shutting wind turbines that cause wildfire.

The prohibition on drilling of oil and gas in Polar Bear Wildlife Sanctuary in Alaska has been lifted. It will not only threaten the life of wildlife species but would accelerate the melting of ice in the region, causing undue concern such as sea level rise etc. Why US is keeping an eye on Greenland? It has a history. Immediately after World War II, they planned there to build 600 nuclear missile bases to be mounted on a train riding 3000 km of track. It never took off. In the late 1950s and early 1960s US Army made a camp there for the 'Project Iceworm'. A small nuclear reactor was brought to power the camp. Once they realized after a few years that the project was not feasible, they gave up but left a lot of nuclear waste water at the camp. They also left thousands of litres of diesel fuel in the middle of Greenland's ice sheet, expect-

ing that it would remain buried in the ice forever. But climate change happened, the planet has warmed and ice has melted.

It has the potential to contaminate water in Greenland. While China has deployed its vast foreign exchange reserve to secure long-term control over strategic minerals critical for advanced technologies in the defence sector, climate change etc. in resource-rich nations like copper and cobalt from Congo and Peru, nickel from Indonesia and lithium from Argentina, the Trump administration is looking to counter it by accessing rare earth and critical mineral deposits in Greenland.

The southern pointed mountains of Greenland are gold belts, which is another temptation for the new US administration. Panama Canal, an engineering marvel constructed in 1913 enables ships to cross from the lower water level of the Atlantic to the higher water level of the Pacific Ocean, saving the costs and journey time in trades. A dam was built on river Cagres and water was impounded in Gatun Lake, where ships pass.

The level of water in Gatun is managed through gates. With the rising water level ships from the Atlantic side gain height and sail towards the Pacific. The flow of water in River Cagres and many other rivers from Amazon forests has been depleted due to massive degradation and deforestation. Panama Canal efficiency is lowered and hardly half the ships can cross. Trump should strive to conserve river catchments, rather than owning the Panama Canal.

(The writer is Retd Principal Chief Conservator of Forests, Head of Forest Force, Karnataka. Views are personal)

Union budget 2025: Transforming agriculture for a sustainable and inclusive future

Union Budget 2025 introduces a bold vision for agricultural transformation, addressing key challenges such as soil degradation, climate change and rural distress

Agriculture has been the backbone of India's economy, sustaining growth and the livelihoods of millions, thus correctly referred to as the primary engine for India's accelerated and inclusive growth in the annual budget presented on February 1, 2025. However, the sector is facing numerous challenges, including deteriorating soil quality, stagnating crop yields, inadequate technologies, shrinking farmlands, poor infrastructure and heightened vulnerability to climate change, which poses a threat to food security and the wellbeing of our Anndatta. Further, these difficulties have led to a troubling trend: many marginal farmers and agricultural labourers from rural areas are being forced to



PUSHPLATA SINGH

migrate to cities in search of better opportunities. Agricultural sustainability is also closely tied to climate change, which affects nearly all of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). With a population still heavily reliant on farming, the need for sectoral

reforms is undeniable. New policies and regulations are crucial for inclusive and accelerated growth. India's 2025 budget addresses issues in the agriculture sector with a forward-thinking framework, by enabling improved credit access, and infrastructure development, and preparing farmers for future growth. One standout initiative is the Pradhan Mantri Dhan Dhanya Krishi Yojana (PMDDKY).

India's agricultural sector is marked by significant regional disparities, with certain districts lagging in infrastructure, productivity, and economic opportunities. This ambitious program stands as a transformative initiative for rural India, focusing on the 100 most underdeveloped districts, and directly benefiting around 1.7

crore farmers. PMDDKY focuses on these underdeveloped areas, directing resources to regions that have been overlooked in the broader development process. This initiative seeks to ensure that farmers in these areas have access to the same opportunities as their counterparts in more prosperous regions. The program aims to address long-standing agricultural challenges and empower farmers, particularly those affected by climate change and those from marginalised communities. With proper execution, PMDDKY can spark a ripple effect of development, improving infrastructure, technology access, and financial services in these districts thus enabling equitable growth across the country. By focusing on sus-

tainability, inclusivity, and empowerment, PMDDKY strives to uplift farmers, women, and marginalised communities while ensuring resilience against future challenges. The program also offers access to high-yielding varieties of seed and irrigation techniques and training to address the root causes of agricultural stagnation. By supporting farmers in overcoming unpredictable weath-

er patterns, outdated techniques, and limited market access, PMDDKY provides a pathway to more stable and productive farming. A distinctive feature of PMDDKY is its focus on empowering marginalised groups, particularly the poorest farmers.

These communities often face barriers such as limited access to credit, technology, and education. PMDDKY seeks to address these gaps by providing women farmers with greater control over land, improved training, and better market access. For marginalised communities, the program aims to ensure they are included in the benefits of agricultural development, promoting equality and empowerment. PMDDKY is not only about boosting agricultural

output but also ensuring sustainable practices. One of the unfortunate consequences of rural stagnation is the mass migration of farmers to urban areas in search of better opportunities. By strengthening agriculture in rural areas, PMDDKY aims to create conditions where farmers can thrive while cultivating their farmlands. If executed well, PMDDKY could be the catalyst for a brighter, more inclusive future in agriculture, where every farmer has the tools to thrive. The hope is that migration for farmers will become a choice, not a necessity—allowing agricultural communities to thrive where they are. The budget also emphasises investment in innovation and technology, particularly in

developing high-yield, climate-resilient crop varieties. The creation of germplasm banks to restore and introduce local crop varieties will strengthen domestic production. Additionally, the government is working to enhance the agricultural value chain, focusing on better storage, transportation, and export infrastructure, benefiting both farmers and consumers. Targeted schemes for crops like cotton, pulses, oilseeds, and vegetables will help mitigate the effects of climate change on farmers. These programs aim to boost food security and export potential, all while securing farmers' livelihoods. (The writer is Associate Director, The Energy and Resources Institute; views are personal)

27 religious groups sue Trump administration to protect houses of worship from immigration arrests

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

More than two-dozen Christian and Jewish groups representing millions of Americans — ranging from the Episcopal Church and the Union for Reform Judaism to the Mennonites and Unitarian Universalists — filed a federal court lawsuit Tuesday challenging a Trump administration move giving immigration agents more leeway to make arrests at houses of worship.

The lawsuit, filed in US District Court in Washington, contends that the new policy is spreading fear of raids, thus lowering attendance at worship services and other valuable church programmes. The result, says the suit, infringes on the groups' religious freedom — namely their ability to minister to migrants, including those in the United States illegally.

"We have immigrants, refugees, people who are documented and undocumented," said the Most Rev Sean Rowe, the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church.

"We cannot worship freely if some of us are living in fear," he told The Associated Press. "By joining this lawsuit, we're seeking the ability to gather and fully practice our faith, to follow Jesus' command to love our neighbours as ourselves."

The new lawsuit echoes and expands on some of the arguments made in a similar lawsuit filed Jan 27 by five Quaker congregations and later joined by the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and a Sikh temple.

It is currently pending in US District Court in Maryland. There was no immediate Trump administration response to the new lawsuit, which names the Department of Homeland Security and its immigration enforcement agencies as defendants. However, a memorandum filed Friday by the Department of Justice, opposing the thrust of the Quaker lawsuit, outlined arguments that may also apply to the new lawsuit.

In essence, the memo contended that the plaintiffs' request to block the new enforcement policy is based on speculation of hypothetical future harm — and thus is insufficient grounds for issuing an injunction. The memo said that immigration enforcement affecting houses of worship had been permitted for decades, and the new policy announced in January simply said that field agents — using "common sense" and "discretion" — could now conduct such operations without pre-approval from a supervisor.

One part of that memo might not apply to the new lawsuit, as it argued the Quakers and their fellow plaintiffs have no basis for seeking a nationwide injunction against the revised enforcement policy.

"Any relief in this case should be tailored solely to the named plaintiffs," said the DOJ memo, contending that any injunction should not apply to other religious organisations.

The plaintiffs in the new lawsuit represent a vastly larger swath of American worshippers — including more than 1

million followers of Reform Judaism, the estimated 1.5 million Episcopalians in 6,700 congregations nationwide, nearly 1.1 million members of the Presbyterian Church (USA), and the estimated 1.5 million active members of the African Methodist Episcopal Church — the country's oldest predominantly Black denomination.

Among the other plaintiffs are the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), with more than 3,000 congregations; the Church of the Brethren, with more than 780 congregations; the Convención Bautista Hispana de Texas, encompassing about 1,100 Hispanic Baptist churches; the Friends General Conference, an association of regional Quaker organisations; the Mennonite Church USA, with about 50,000 members; the Unitarian Universalist Association, with more than 1,000 congregations; the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, with more than 500 US congregations; and regional branches of the United Methodist Church and the United Church of Christ.

"The massive scale of the suit will be hard for them to ignore," said Kelsi Corkran, a lawyer with the Georgetown University Law Centre's Institute for Constitutional Advocacy and Protection who is lead counsel for the lawsuit. Prior to the recent Trump administration change, Corkran said immigration agents generally needed a judicial warrant or other special authorisation to conduct operations at houses of worship and

other "sensitive locations" such as schools and hospitals.

"Now it's go anywhere, any time," she told the AP. "Now they have broad authority to swoop in — they've made it very clear they'll get every undocumented person."

She cited a recent incident in which a Honduran man was arrested outside his family's Atlanta-area church while a service was being held inside. The lawsuit includes details from some of the plaintiffs as to how their operations might be affected. The Union for Reform Judaism and the Mennonites, among others, said many of their synagogues and churches host on-site foodbanks, meal programs, homeless shelters and other support services for undocumented people who might now be fearful of participating.

One of the plaintiffs is the Latino Christian National Network, which seeks to bring together Latino leaders with different traditions and values to collaborate on pressing social issues. The network's president is the Rev Carlos Malavé, a pastor of two churches in Virginia, who described to the AP what network members are observing.

"There is deep-seated fear and distrust of our government," he said. "People fear going to the store, they are avoiding going to church... The churches are increasingly doing online services because people fear for the well-being of their families and children."

The US Conference of

Catholic Bishops, which leads the nation's largest denomination, did not join the lawsuit, though it has criticised Trump's migration crackdown. On Tuesday, Pope Francis issued a major rebuke to the deportation plan, warning that the forceful removal of people purely because of their illegal status deprives them of their inherent dignity and "will end badly".

Many conservative faith leaders and legal experts across the US do not share concerns about the new arrest policy. "Places of worship are for worship and are not sanctuaries for illegal activity or for harboring people engaged in illegal activity," said Mat Staver, founder of the conservative Christian legal organization Liberty Counsel.

"Fugitives or criminals are not immune from the law merely because they enter a place of worship," he said via email. "This is not a matter of religious freedom. There is no right to openly violate the law and disobey law enforcement."

Professor Cathleen Kaveny, who teaches in the theology department and law school at Boston College, questioned whether the plaintiffs would prevail with the religious freedom argument, but suggested the Trump administration might be unwise to disregard a traditional view of houses of worship as places of sanctuary for vulnerable people.

"These buildings are different — almost like embassies," she said. "I think of churches as belonging to an eternal country."



Relatives of hostages, held by Hamas in the Gaza Strip, protest outside of Israel's Ministry of Defense in Tel Aviv, Israel, on Monday after the militant group announced it would delay hostage releases in the Gaza Strip after accusing Israel of violating a fragile ceasefire

Worried about ISIS-K's growing threat in Af, Pak: US tells UN

PTI ■ UNITED NATIONS

The United States said it remains concerned about terror group ISIS-Khorasan's (ISIS-K) capabilities to plot, conduct attacks and sustain recruitment campaigns, particularly in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

These remarks were made at the Security Council by Ambassador Dorothy Shea, Charge d'Affaires ad interim at the US Mission to the UN in her briefing on "Threats to International Peace and Security by Terrorist Acts".

Shea also said "Countering ISIS and other terrorist groups around the world is a top priority for the Trump administration... President Trump's message is clear: The United States always stands ready to find and eliminate terrorists who threaten the United States and our allies."

She noted that ISIS affiliates in Central Asia, most notably ISIS-Khorasan, also pose a significant global threat.

"We remain concerned about ISIS-K's capabilities to plot and conduct attacks, as well as sustain recruitment campaigns, particularly in Afghanistan and Pakistan," she said.

In his remarks to the briefing, Under-Secretary-General United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism Vladimir Voronkov said that ISIL-K continued to pose a significant threat in Afghanistan, the region and beyond.

He said that in addition to attacks in Afghanistan, ISIL-K supporters plotted attacks in Europe and were actively seeking to recruit individuals from Central Asian States.

"There were also reports of

small numbers of foreign terrorist fighters continuing to travel to Afghanistan," Voronkov said.

Voronkov recalled Secretary-General Antonio Guterres' "appeal to all member states to unite to prevent Afghanistan from again becoming a hotbed of terrorist activities."

In her remarks, Executive Director at the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED), Assistant Secretary-General Natalia Gherman said that beyond the Middle East, "Daesh remains agile, taking advantage of ongoing conflicts and regions experiencing growing instability."

Significantly, in her remarks Gherman also referred to the 'Delhi Declaration' that was adopted during India's 2021-22 tenure in the Security Council on countering the use of new and emerging technologies for terrorist purposes.

"As mandated by the Delhi Declaration, the Counter-Terrorism Committee just last month adopted the non-binding guiding principles on 'preventing, detecting and disrupting the use of new and emerging financial technologies for terrorist purposes', also known as the 'Algeria Guiding Principles'," she said.

The guiding principles have been prepared with the support of the CTED, highlight the importance of a comprehensive and risk-based approach, and provide practical guidance to Member States, Gherman added.

In October 2022, the Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee (CTC), chaired by India that year, organised a Special Meeting in New Delhi

and Mumbai on the overarching theme of 'Countering the use of new and emerging technologies for terrorist purposes'. As an outcome of the special meeting, the Committee adopted the 'Delhi Declaration' on countering the use of new and emerging technologies for terrorist purposes.

India, during its 2021-22 tenure as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, had assumed the chair of the CTC in 2022. The meeting of UNSC CTC took place on October 28 in Hotel Taj Mahal Palace in Mumbai, the site of the horrific 26/11 Mumbai attacks and in Delhi on October 29, where the Delhi Declaration was agreed upon.

Shea added that ISIS has expanded the frequency and lethality of its attacks in the Sahel, making this region the global epicentre for fatalities from terrorist attacks. As such, ISIS-Somalia, ISIS-Sahel, and ISIS-West Africa collectively pose a significant threat to stability and prosperity in Africa.

She asserted that accountability for terrorist attacks and other terrorist activity is key to the fight against terrorism and to deterring such acts from taking place in the future. "In that vein, we urge the members of this Council to take action and agree to list more ISIL and al-Qaeda affiliates in the 1267 Sanctions Committee, so that they will be subject to a worldwide asset freeze, travel ban, and arms embargo."

The US also called on Member States to play an active and timely role in updating and implementing UN 1267 sanctions to counter ISIS and al-Qaeda.

Hamas insists all parties must be committed to ceasefire

PTI ■ GAZA CITY/TEL AVIV

Hamas has brushed off President Donald Trump's threat that "all hell" will break out if it does not release the remaining Israeli hostages held in the Gaza Strip by Saturday.

Hamas spokesman Sami Abu Zuhri said Tuesday that the dozens of hostages would only be returned if all parties remain committed to a ceasefire deal reached last month.

"Trump must remember there is an agreement that must be respected by both parties," he said, adding that threatening language only complicates matters. Hamas has threatened to delay the next release of three Israeli hostages, due Saturday, accusing Israel of violating the ceasefire agreement, including by not allowing a surge of tents and shelters into the devastated territory.

While Trump said the ceasefire should be cancelled if Hamas doesn't release all the remaining hostages Saturday, he also said such a decision would be up to Israel. During the first phase of the ceasefire, Hamas has com-



Displaced Palestinians, travelling in vehicles, wait in line to pass through a security checkpoint at the Netzarim corridor as they make their way from central Gaza to their homes in the northern Gaza Strip, on Monday

mitted to freeing a total of 33 hostages captured in its Oct 7, 2023, attack in exchange for Israel releasing nearly 2,000 Palestinian prisoners. The sides have carried out five swaps since Jan 19, freeing 21

hostages and over 730 Palestinian prisoners so far. The war could resume in early March if no agreement is reached on the more complicated second phase of the ceasefire, which calls for the return of all

remaining hostages and an indefinite extension of the truce. Meanwhile, an Israeli man who was thought to be alive and in Hamas captivity was killed during the 2023 attack and his body taken to Gaza, the military said on Tuesday.

Shlomo Mantzur was thought to be the oldest hostage held by the militant group in Gaza and because of his age became a symbol in Israel of the brutality of Hamas' hostage-taking tactic. He was 85 at the time of the attack on southern Israel on Oct 7, 2023. The military said the determination of Mantzur's death was based on intelligence gathered in recent months.

News of Mantzur's death comes as Israelis have been outraged over the poor condition of hostages who are being freed under the ceasefire with Hamas. On Tuesday, protesters briefly blocked a main highway calling for more hostages to be freed. That anger is putting heavy pressure on Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to extend the ceasefire, what would allow for more hostages to be freed.

Five killed in suicide bombing near bank in northern Af

Islamabad (PTI): A suicide bomber blew himself up near a bank in northern Afghanistan on Tuesday, killing at least five people and wounding seven others, police said. The attack happened near a branch of the Kabul Bank in Kunduz province, said Jumauddin Khaksar, a police spokesman. The dead included a guard at the bank. No one has claimed responsibility for the attack and Khaksar said police were working to track down those who orchestrated the attack. Khaksar provided no further details.

Militants from the Afghan chapters of the Islamic State group have carried out bombings across Afghanistan, though suicide attacks have become rare since the Taliban seized power in August 2021, as US and NATO forces withdrew after 20 years of war. The IS affiliate has also targeted minority Shiite Muslims, especially in Kabul. The latest attack came two months after a suicide bombing in Kabul killed Khalil Haqqani, the Taliban refugee minister and two others. It was the most brazen attack on a member of the Taliban inner circle since they returned to power.

US President says he will host Jordan's King Abdullah II

... as he escalates pressure on his plan for Gaza resettlement

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

President Donald Trump will host Jordan's King Abdullah II at the White House on Tuesday as he escalates pressure on the Arab nation to take in refugees from Gaza — perhaps permanently — as part of his audacious plan to remake the Middle East.

The visit is happening at a perilous moment for the ongoing ceasefire in Gaza as Hamas, accusing Israel of violating the truce, has said it is pausing future releases of hostages and as Trump has called for Israel to resume fighting if all those remaining in captivity are not freed by this weekend.

Trump has proposed the US take control of Gaza and turn it into "the Riviera of the Middle East," with Palestinians in the war-torn territory pushed into neighbouring nations with no right of return. He suggested on Monday that, if necessary, he would with-

hold US funding from Jordan and Egypt, longtime US allies and among the top recipients of its foreign aid, as a means of persuading them to accept additional Palestinians from Gaza. "Yeah, maybe. Sure, why not?" Trump told reporters. "If they don't, I would conceivably withhold aid, yes."

Jordan is home to more than 2 million Palestinians and, along with other Arab states, has flatly rejected Trump's plan to relocate civilians from Gaza. Jordan's foreign minister, Ayman Safadi, said last week that his country's opposition to Trump's idea was "firm and unwavering."

In addition to concerns about jeopardizing the long-held goals of a two-state solution to the Israel-Palestinian conflict, Egypt and Jordan have privately raised security concerns about welcoming large numbers of additional refugees into their countries even temporarily. When asked how he'd persuade Abdullah to take in Palestinians, Trump told reporters, "I do think he'll take, and I think other countries will take also. They have good hearts."

The king is also meeting with top Trump administration officials during his visit, including Secretary of State

Marco Rubio, national security adviser Mike Waltz, Middle East envoy Steve Witkoff and Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth. He is the third foreign leader to hold an in-person meeting with Trump since his Jan. 20 inauguration.

Trump announced his ideas for resettling Palestinians from Gaza and taking ownership of the territory for the US during a press conference last week with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Trump initially didn't rule out deploying US troops to help secure Gaza but at the same time insisted no US funds would go to pay for the reconstruction of the territory, raising fundamental questions about the nature of his plan.

After Trump's initial comments, Rubio and White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt insisted that Trump only wanted Palestinians relocated from Gaza "temporarily" and sought an "interim" period to allow for debris removal, the disposal of unexploded ordnance and reconstruction. But asked in an interview with Fox News' Bret Baier that aired Monday if Palestinians in Gaza would have a right to return to the territory under his plan, he replied, "No, they wouldn't."

1 killed as private jets collide at Scottsdale Airport in Arizona

PTI ■ SCOTTSDALE (US)

One person was killed and others were injured when a private jet owned by Motley Crue singer Vince Neil collided with another jet Monday afternoon at the Scottsdale Airport in Arizona, authorities said. Neil's jet was landing at the airport when it veered off the runway and collided with another parked plane, Neil's representative Worrick Robinson, IV, said in a statement. There were two pilots and two passengers on Neil's plane, but he was not among them.

"Mr. Neil's thoughts and prayers go out to everyone involved, and he is grateful for the critical aid of all first responders assisting today," Robinson said.

The arriving jet veered off the runway and collided with the Gulfstream 200 jet that was parked on private property, according to Kelli Kuester, aviation planning and outreach coordinator at the Scottsdale Airport. It appeared that the left main landing gear of the arriving jet failed, resulting in the collision, she said.

Kuester said four people were on the arriving jet, which had come from Austin, Texas, and one person was in the parked plane. Two people injured in the collision were taken to trauma centers and one was in stable condi-



tion at a hospital, Scottsdale Fire Department Capt Dave Folio said. He said they were working to recover the body of the person killed in the collision.

"Our thoughts and prayers go out to everybody involved in this," Folio said.

The runway has been closed and will remain closed "for the foreseeable future," Kuester said. Scottsdale Mayor Lisa Borowsky said in a statement that she is closely monitoring the situation and is in touch with the airport, police and federal agencies.

"On behalf of the city of Scottsdale, we offer our deepest condolences to those involved in the accident and for those who have been taken to our trauma center for treatment," she said. "We will keep all affected by this tragedy in our prayers."

The airport is a popular hub for jets coming in and out of the Phoenix area, especially during big sports weekends like the Waste Management Phoenix Open golf tournament, which attracts huge crowds just a few miles away.

The Scottsdale collision comes after three major US aviation disasters in the past two weeks. A commercial jetliner and an Army helicopter collided near the nation's capital on Jan. 29, killing 67 people. A medical transport plane crashed in Philadelphia on Jan 31, killing the six people on board and another person on the ground. And last week a small commuter plane crashed in western Alaska on its way to the hub community of Nome, killing all 10 people on board.

EU chief vows tough countermeasures to United States tariffs

Brussels (PTI): European Union chief Ursula von der Leyen vowed on Tuesday that US tariffs on steel and aluminum "will not go unanswered", adding that they will trigger tough countermeasures from the 27-nation bloc.

"The EU will act to safeguard its economic interests," von der Leyen said in a statement in reaction to US President Donald Trump's imposition of tariffs on steel and aluminum the previous day.

"Tariffs are taxes — bad for business, worse for consumers," von der Leyen said. "Unjustified tariffs on the EU will not go unanswered — they will trigger firm and proportionate countermeasures."

In Germany, home to the EU's largest economy, Chancellor Olaf Scholz told parliament that "if the US leaves us no other choice, then the European Union will react united," adding that "ultimately, trade was always cost both sides prosperity".

Trump is hitting foreign steel and aluminum with a 25% tax in the hope that they will give local producers relief from intense global competition, allowing them to charge high-

er prices. He imposed similar tariffs during his first presidency but the move damaged relations with key US allies and drove up costs for "downstream" manufacturers that buy steel and aluminum.

It is not clear what countermeasures would seek to apply, but officials and observers have said they would target Republican states and traditionally strong US exports.

After Trump imposed steel tariffs in 2018, the EU imposed counter-tariffs on US-made motorcycles, bourbon, peanut butter and jeans, among other items. EU Commission vice-president Maroš Šefcovic said Tuesday that the tariffs are "economically counterproductive, especially given the deeply integrated production chains established through our extensive transatlantic trade and investment ties."

"We will protect our workers, businesses and consumers," Šefcovic said, but added that "it is not our preferred scenario. We remain committed to constructive dialogue. We stand ready for negotiations and to find mutually beneficial solutions where possible."

PM invites investments in energy sector

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Tuesday invited global investments in India's energy sector, saying the country offers immense possibilities in its pursuit of ambitious renewable energy transition goals in the next five years.

Referring to the target of having 500 GW of renewable energy, five Million Tonnes of green hydrogen per annum output by 2030 as well as the launch of fresh bidding rounds for oil and gas assets, the prime minister said, "There are possibilities of new investments and I hope that you explore all possibilities in India."

"There are many possibilities of investment in these sectors," Modi said addressing the India Energy Week 2025 (IEW'25) virtually.

"You are not just a part of India energy week, you are an

important part of India's energy ambitions," Modi told investors.

He further said, "All experts are saying that 21st century is India's century. Bharat is not only driving it is own growth but driving global growth." India's energy ambitions, he said, are based on five pillars. "We have resources, which we are harnessing. We are encouraging our brilliant minds to innovate. Thirdly, we have economic strength and political stability," he said.

Also, he said, India has strategic geography, which makes energy trade easier and more attractive.

Besides, India is committed towards global sustainability and this is aiding new possibilities in the country's energy sector, the prime minister said.

For Viksit Bharat, the next two decades are very crucial, he said, adding that in the next five years we will cross many



Prime Minister Narendra Modi delivers his remarks via video conferencing during inauguration of India Energy Week PTI

milestones.

"Our energy goals are aligned with the deadline of 2030," he said. By 2030, we want to add 500 GW of RE capacity, Indian Railways will be net zero by 2030 and we aim to achieve five MT annual output of

green hydrogen, he said and stressed "whatever India has achieved in last ten years shows that these targets will be achieved."

In last 10 years, India has become fifth largest economy from 10th largest.

In last 10 years, solar generation capacity increased 32 times, he noted. Today, India is the third largest solar power generating nation and its non-fossil fuel capacity increased three times, he said. India is the first country

among G20 nations to meet its carbon emission reduction target set by the Paris global climate conference, he said.

About ethanol blending with petrol, he said today India is blending 19 per cent ethanol and exuded confidence that India will achieve the target of 20 per cent ethanol blending ahead of the October 2025 deadline.

He boasted India's feedstock of 500 Million Tonnes and said the Global Biofuels Alliance formed during the G20 Summit in New Delhi has 28 member countries and 12 international organisations.

Addressing the gathering at the International Energy Week, the prime minister said that India is bringing out reforms to exploit the full potential of exploration and production of hydrocarbons in the country.

India is the fourth largest refining hub and it will expand its capacity by 20 per cent,

Modi said and pointed towards new hydrocarbon discoveries in the country that are yet to be explored, and the government has brought out Open Licensing Acreage Policy (OLAP).

He also stated that the government has supported the energy sector by setting up exclusive economic zones and single-window clearance system. After amendments in the Oilfields Regulation and Development Act, stakeholders will get policy stability, extended leases and improved financial terms.

He also noted that the natural gas supply is increasing due the ramp up in pipeline infrastructure and discoveries.

"There are a lot of upcoming possibilities of investments in these sectors," he said.

India's major focus is on 'Make in India' and local supply chains, Modi said while highlighting the country's potential of manufacturing

various types of hardware, including PV modules.

The PM noted that India is supporting local manufacturing, with the solar PV module manufacturing capacity expanding from two gigawatts to approximately 70 gigawatts in the past 10 years.

About the opportunities for innovation and manufacturing in the battery and storage capacity sector, the prime minister said that India is rapidly advancing towards electric mobility and emphasised the need for swift action to meet the demands of such a large country in this sector. Modi said that the current year's budget includes numerous announcements supporting green energy.

He remarked that the National Critical Minerals Mission will play a crucial role in building a robust supply chain in India. He also highlighted the promotion of the non-lithium battery ecosystem.

Considering tariff exemptions on Australian steel, aluminium: Trump

PTI ■ MELBOURNE

United States (US) President Donald Trump said he agreed to consider a tariff exemption on Australian steel and aluminium imports after a telephone call on Tuesday with Australia's Prime Minister Anthony Albanese.

Prime Minister Albanese argued for an exemption during the call, which was scheduled before Trump announced tariffs on steel and aluminium imports on Monday.

Trump said the US trade surplus with Australia was one of the reasons he was considering an exemption from the tariffs.

"We actually have a surplus," Trump told reporters in the Oval Office about trade with Australia. "It is one of the only countries which we do. And I told (Albanese) that that's something that we will give great consideration to."

Trump spoke after he removed exceptions and exemptions from his 2018 tariffs on steel, meaning that all steel imports will be taxed at a minimum of 25 per cent. Trump also hiked



his 2018 aluminium tariffs to 25 per cent from 10 per cent.

Albanese had told reporters earlier in Canberra he made Australia's case for an exemption, and that both leaders agreed on wording to say publicly, "which is that the US President agreed that an exemption was under consideration in the interests of both of our countries."

"They are the words that are agreed. They're the words that I will stick to. And I can

say, though, that it was a very positive and constructive discussion," Albanese added.

Australia had an exemption from such tariffs during Trump's first administration.

Australia's arguments include that the country has run a trade deficit with the US since the mid-20th century and Australian steelmaker BlueScope employs thousands of workers in the US. Australia has only a minor share of

the US markets.

Albanese on Tuesday also raised the AUKUS agreement with the US and Britain, struck with former President Joe Biden's administration, in which Australia will acquire a fleet of submarines powered by US nuclear technology.

"Our steel and aluminium are both key inputs for the US-Australia defense industries in both of our countries," Albanese said.

Australia announced over the weekend it had made the first of six \$500 Million payments to the US under AUKUS to boost US submarine building capacity.

Trump intends to reset US taxes on all imports to match the same levels charged by other countries, all of which comes on top of the 10 per cent tariffs he has already put on China, China's retaliatory tariffs that started Monday and the US Tariffs planned for Canada and Mexico that have been suspended until March 1.

Tuesday's conversation was Albanese's second with Trump since the president was elected.

ONGC inks deal with BP to boost Mumbai high output

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Oil and Natural Gas Corporation Ltd (ONGC) has signed a contract with global oil major BP for raising output from its flagship Mumbai High (MH) oil and gas field by up to 60 per cent over the next decade.

BP will be Technical Services Provider (TSP) for the Mumbai High field, India's largest and most prolific offshore oil field, the two firms said in a statement.

"ONGC will retain ownership and operational control of the field," it said. "Under the terms of the contract, BP will receive a fixed fee for a period of two years for its deployed personnel, followed by a service fee linked to incremental oil and gas production." BP will work in close collaboration with ONGC to stabilise the field's current production decline and restore it to a robust growth trajectory.

Last month ONGC had said the BP deal will yield \$10.3 Billion revenue boost from increased oil and gas production.

BP Exploration (Alpha) Ltd, a wholly-owned step-down subsidiary of BP Plc, as the Technical Service Provider (TSP) "has indicated a substantial potential increase of approximately 44 per cent in crude oil (from baseline production of 45.47 Million Tonnes to 65.41 Million Tonnes) and approximately 89 per cent increase in gas production (from 24.94 Billion Cubic Metres to 47.22 Billion Cubic Metres) for the 10-year contract period," it had said.

In terms of oil and oil equivalent gas, the increase works out to 60 per cent (from 70.40 Million Tonnes of oil equivalent to 112.63 Million Tonnes of oil equivalent). The increase is expected to be visible from FY26 (April 2025 to March 2026 financial year) with full-scale visibility expected from FY28 (April 2027 to March 2028 fiscal).

ONGC said TSP will receive a fixed fee for the first two years, followed by a service fee based on a percentage share of the revenue from net incremental hydrocarbon production, after recovering incremental costs. MH, a prolific multi-layered field located in the Mumbai offshore area, was discovered by ONGC in 1974 and started production in 1976.

The field, which lies some 160 kilometres in the Arabian Sea off the Mumbai coast, hit a peak of 4,76,000 barrels of oil per day and 28 Billion Cubic Metres of gas in 1989 and has since seen a gradual decline in output.

The field currently produces around 1,32,265 barrels of oil per day and around 13 Billion Cubic Metres of gas (less than 10 million standard cubic metres per day or mmscmd). This output was projected to decline to about 75,000 bpd of oil and less than 4.5 mmscmd of gas by 2037-38.

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MoS Defence Sanjay Seth holds series of bilateral meetings

PTI ■ BENGALURU

Minister of State for Defence Sanjay Seth held a series of bilateral meetings on the sidelines of Aero India 2025 in Bengaluru.

These meetings took place on Monday, the inaugural day of the biennial Aero India, officials said.

In his meeting with Under Secretary of State for Defence, Italy Matteo Perego Di Cremona, both Ministers reviewed the various facets of bilateral defence cooperation. They discussed about India's growing capabilities in manufacturing equipment and development of indigenous systems.

They reaffirmed their commitment to strengthen the ties in all spheres, an official statement said.

He also met Minister for the House of Lords, UK, Lord Vernon Coaker. Both the Ministers reviewed the bilateral defence cooperation and pledged to strengthen the relations.

They also reaffirmed their commitment to work bilaterally and with other partners for peace, prosperity and rules-based world order, specifically in the Indo-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region wherein cooperation would ensure freedom of navigation and rule of law in the maritime and other domains, the statement said.

Trump pauses enforcement of foreign bribery law

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

United States (US) President Donald Trump signed an executive order directing the Department of Justice to pause enforcing a nearly half-century-old law that was used to launch a bribery investigation against the Adani Group.

Trump signed an order to pause enforcing of the 1977 Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA) that prohibits American companies and foreign firms from bribing officials of foreign governments to obtain or retain business.

The President directed US Attorney General Pam Bondi to pause enforcement of FCPA, which was at the heart of some of the US Department of Justice's most high-profile cases, including an indictment against Indian billionaire and Adani Group head Gautam Adani and his

nephew Sagar.

Last year DoJ under President Joe Biden charged Adani for allegedly being part of a scheme to pay over \$250 Million (about ₹2,100 Crore) bribe to Indian officials in exchange of favourable terms for solar power contracts.

This was concealed from the US banks and investors from whom the Adani group raised billions of dollars for the project, the prosecutors had alleged last year citing FCPA that allows pursuing foreign corruption allegations if they involve certain links to American investors or markets.

The pause and the review is being seen as a relief to the Adani Group but it remains to be seen what stand the DoJ takes after the six month review period.

The order that Trump signed asked "the Attorney General to review guidelines and policies governing

investigations and enforcement actions under the FCPA" in 180 days.

"During the review period, the Attorney General shall cease initiation of any new FCPA investigations or enforcement actions, unless the Attorney General determines that an individual exception should be made," it said.

Also it sought "review in detail all existing FCPA investigations or enforcement actions and take appropriate action with respect to such matters to restore proper bounds on FCPA enforcement and preserve Presidential foreign policy prerogatives."

FCPA investigations and enforcement actions initiated or continued after the revised guidelines or policies are issued "shall be governed by such guidelines or policies; and must be specifically authorised by the Attorney General".

India opens biggest oil, gas block bid round

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India on Tuesday opened its largest oil and gas bid round, offering 25 blocks covering 1.91 Lakh square kilometers (sqkm), mostly in offshore area, as the government looks to boost domestic production to cut imports and help energy security.

Petroleum Minister Hardeep Singh Puri launched the 10th bid round under the Open Acreage Licensing Policy (OALP) at the India Energy Week (IEW) here.

OALP-X round will feature 25 blocks spread over 1,91,986 sqkm in 13 sedimentary basins. 13 of the blocks are in the offshore area.

In the previous nine rounds, 3.78 Lakh sqkm area was offered. The last bid round, OALP-IX, was the largest before the current bid round.

The OALP-IX bid round featured 28 blocks or areas spread over 1.36 Lakh sqkm were offered for finding and producing oil and gas.

OALP-IX in September attracted four bidders that included state-owned Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) and Oil India Ltd and private sector Vedanta Ltd, with most blocks getting just two bids, according to the Directorate General of Hydrocarbons (DGH). It also for the first time saw Reliance Industries Ltd-BP Plc combine bidding together with ONGC for one block in Gujarat offshore. Reliance and its supermajor partner BP had bid in just two of the past eight oil

and gas bid rounds since 2017.

Reliance-BP combine had bid and won the two blocks they had bid for in the previous rounds and in OALP-IX they teamed up with ONGC for the first time to bid for a shallow water block in the Gujarat-Saurashtra basin.

The government is yet to award OALP-IX blocks to winners.

In OALP-IX, ONGC bid for 14 blocks alone and with partners such as state-owned Oil India Ltd (OIL) and Indian Oil Corporation (IOC) for four other blocks. After considering its bid with Reliance-BP, ONGC in all bids for 19 out of the 28 blocks on offer.

Mining billionaire Anil Agarwal-owned Vedanta Ltd bid for all the 28 blocks on offer while Sun Petrochemicals Ltd bid for seven areas.

Of the 28 blocks on offer, four blocks got three bids each while the rest had two bidders, one being Vedanta Ltd.

Blocks are awarded to firms offering the highest share of revenues generated from oil and gas produced from the blocks and the work programme they commit to.

The 28 blocks offered in OALP-IX, including nine onshore blocks, eight shallow-water blocks and 11 ultra-deepwater blocks across eight sedimentary basins, covered an area of 136,596.45 sqkm. In the previous eight OALP rounds, 144 exploration and production blocks comprising a total area of 242,055 sqkm have been awarded.

In the last round (OALP-VIII) where 10 blocks were offered,

state-owned ONGC won seven blocks while a private sector consortium of Reliance Industries and BP, Oil India and private sector Sun Petrochemicals received one block each. The government introduced the OALP in 2017 to attract oil and gas firms to develop India's upstream sector.

The OALP guarantees marketing and pricing freedom with a revenue-sharing model, apart from offering reduced royalty rates.

Reliance and BP have more than a decade-old partnership and are partners in KG deepsea block KG-DWN-98/3 or KG-D6 from where they produce about 30 Million standard cubic metres per day of gas. The government has been hoping that opening up more acreage for exploration will help boost India's oil and gas production, helping cut down the \$222 Billion oil import bill.

In 2016, it brought in an open acreage policy which moved away from the previous practice of government identifying and bidding out blocks to the one under which explorers were allowed the freedom to identify any area outside of the ones that are already with some company or other, for prospecting of oil and gas. The areas identified are to be clubbed twice a year and offered for bidding.

The firm identifying the area gets a five-point advantage.

Mining mogul Anil Agarwal's Vedanta Ltd walked away with 41 blocks out of the 55 blocks on offer in the very first round and got another 10 areas in two subsequent rounds.

Easebuzz gets RBI approval as online payment aggregator

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Payment solutions provider Easebuzz has received final authorisation from the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) to operate as an online Payment Aggregator (PA), according to a release.

The nod allows the company to continue operating as an authorised payments platform and help process online payments for Indian businesses across sectors, including e-commerce, travel and tourism, education and real estate.

"With this license, Easebuzz now joins a select group of approved payment aggregators in India, who are authorised to facilitate digital transactions for merchants under the regulatory framework set by the RBI," the release said.

Easebuzz Payments platform is currently processing an annualised Gross Transaction Value (GTV) of \$30 Billion, and is serving more than 2,00,000 businesses, including SMEs (small and medium enterprises) and startups.

Rohit Prasad, MD and CEO of Easebuzz, said the final authorisation from RBI to operate as an online PA stands as a testament to the company's adherence to building safe, secure and compliant digital payment solutions.

Centre enhancing focus on inter-agency coordination to eliminate smuggling

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Directorate of Revenue Intelligence has taken the lead to establish an anti-smuggling coordination platform so that all agencies come forward and share relevant information and work towards eliminating smuggling activities and catching the real culprits.

"There are various challenges that law enforcement agencies face in tackling smuggling including going after the criminal syndicates or the key persons who are financing such illegal operations; it is not enough to just catch the carrier. To put a big dent into the smuggling network, we need to



Mohan Kumar Singh, member (compliance management), Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs on FICCI CASCADE's 'Anti-Smuggling Day'

have enough data, skill sets and tools to analyse the data and intelligence coordination," said Mohan Kumar Singh, member (compliance management),

Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs on the occasion of FICCI CASCADE's 'Anti-Smuggling Day' on Tuesday. Talking about the importance

of inter-agency cooperation, Singh said it is important to focus on operational readiness and coordination among agencies to tackle cross border smuggling.

"Also, recognition by the United Nations of this anti-smuggling day will create more international awareness on the issue, thereby contributing to the efforts in stemming this malaise," said Singh.

Highlighting the colossal nature of the problem of smuggling in the context of a rising Bharat, Anil Rajput, Chairman, FICCI CASCADE, said, "Along with the government and enforcement agencies it is critical that the consumers increasingly come forward and play their part in the battle against smuggling and illicit trade.

It is critical that the dissemination of information and exposure to facts related to smuggling is extended to the children and the youth. Additionally, I cannot overemphasise the importance of using advanced technology to counter smuggling and its offshoots. I am confident that the coming together of all these elements will lead to an effective and sustained response against this formidable adversary."

Pankaj Kumar Singh, Former Deputy National Security Advisor, Government of India said there are now new models of smuggling that involves technology such as the usage of drones that enables the creation of huge margins for these illegal activities.

IN BRIEF

GLOBAL LIBRARY SUMMIT 2025 IN NEW DELHI: A LANDMARK EVENT FOR LIBRARY DIPLOMACY

NEW DELHI: The Global Library Summit (GLS) 2025, themed "Library Diplomacy: Uniting Nations Through Library Cooperation," was held successfully between February 5-7 at the India International Centre, and SAU Campus.

OLA ELECTRIC REDEFINES THE MOTORCYCLING SEGMENT WITH ITS ROADSTER X SERIES

BENGALURU: Ola Electric, India's largest pure-play EV company, today announced its entry into the EV motorcycle segment with the launch of its Roadster X series to redefine motorcycling with impressive performance and a thrilling riding experience.

US Open revamps mixed doubles format, adds \$1 Million prize

PTI ■ NEW YORK
The U.S. Open is moving its mixed doubles championship to the week before the tournament begins, hoping a revamped format and \$1 million prize will persuade top singles players to chase a Grand Slam doubles title. This year's event will feature 16 teams competing over two days in shorter matches. Tournament organizers believe that can attract the sport's biggest stars, many of whom have long passed on doubles to keep themselves fresh for singles. "What I would say is the reason behind this is to appeal to more fans and grow the fan base around the world," said Lew Sherr, executive director and CEO of the U.S. Tennis Association. "But the way to do that is to have the biggest names in the sport participating in doubles, and to showcase them teaming up and playing in a different format, we think is exciting. In fact, we know it's exciting." The plan announced Tuesday

calls for mixed doubles to be contested on Aug. 19 and 20, during the week when the qualifying rounds for men's and women's singles are being held. Main draw play in singles begins on Aug. 24. The early round matches will be best-of-three sets played to just four games, with a deciding point played at deuce. Tiebreakers would be at 4-all — rather than 6-6 in a regular match — and a 10-point match tiebreaker would be played if the teams split sets, rather than a third set. Only the final will closely resemble a Grand Slam match, a best-of-three sets played to six games with no-ad scoring, tiebreakers at 6-all and a 10-point match tiebreaker. Sherr said the USTA had discussed a format change in previous years but the idea truly picked up steam after last year, when a "Mixed Madness" event during the qualifying week drew singles superstars such as Coco Gauff, Naomi Osaka, Nick Kyrgios and Ben Shelton, and was won by Stefanos Tsitsipas and Paula Badosa.



"We've known and we've had conversations over the years, like, why don't they participate and we understand the scheduling challenges," Sherr said. "I think last year's task with that mixed madness event really informed our thinking, that if could unlock that week and free up the top singles players to participate, because it didn't compromise their fitness or their health going into the singles, there was a huge opportunity to attract them and that's what we saw." There was a \$500,000 prize for that event, which had just four teams. By doubling the prize money and expanding the field, Sherr believes it will create a competition worthy of a Grand Slam title, rather

than keeping it as an exhibition. "The athletes played hard," Sherr said. "It was not an exhibition, it was not a hit-and-giggle, no kids got brought onto the court. It was a competition and that to me was the test. Would the athletes compete, and the answer to that was yes. Now we have an opportunity for a legitimate world championship, a Grand Slam championship, and we think the stakes only go up by making it the actual event." Eight teams will earn direct entry by their combined singles rankings, with eight other teams given wild cards into the field. Sherr declined to name any players who had committed, but said enough have expressed interest that some teams may be announced in the coming weeks, long before the field is set in the summer. The tournament will be played in Arthur Ashe and Louis Armstrong, the two biggest stadiums, and be televised by ESPN in primetime, exposure that is rarely given to doubles. But it will squeeze out doubles specialists who count on Grand Slam paychecks and now lose access to one of them. To compensate for that, Sherr said the prize money that was allocated to the 32-team mixed doubles tournament at last year's U.S. Open would be redirected toward men's and women's doubles. "Yes, there's some that will be disappointed that they won't have the opportunity to compete in this event," Sherr said. "On the other side, we know that there's a huge opportunity to create more interest globally in doubles and there may be a cascading effect here, that the mixed creates a bigger spotlight on the men's and women's doubles when we get into that portion of the tournament. "We'll have to see how that plays out, but we do know that our mixed competition historically has been competing with the men's and women's singles, and so the fields have suffered and the attention has suffered."



Hopefully Shafali will carry her form in WPL: Lanning

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Delhi Capitals' skipper Meg Lanning on Tuesday hoped explosive India opener Shafali Verma will carry her recent rich vein of form in domestic cricket into the third season of the Women's Premier League starting on Friday. Shafali, who was dropped from the Indian team for the away tour to Australia in November 2024, made excellent outings for Haryana in domestic matches recently to signal her return to run-making ways. "She looks like she's in really good touch and enjoying herself and having fun too, which I think is really important. For me, just watching her play with freedom, express herself, (and) when she does that, that plays a really important role for our team," Lanning said during the pre-tournament press meet of the Capitals. Shafali was the top run-getter in the Senior Women's One Day Trophy, scoring 527 runs at an average of 75.29 while in the Senior Women's One Day Challenger Trophy the right-hander made 414 runs at an average of 82.80. On both the occasions, she made runs at a strike-rate close to 150. "She did a very similar thing a few days ago in our practice

game. She often puts on a very entertaining show and I've got the best seat in the house. I always enjoy batting with her. We get on really well and hopefully this season can continue on from where we have been the first two," Lanning added. Like her opening partner, Lanning also coming to the WPL 2025 without any substantial match-time experience having retired from international cricket last year. So, how has she managed to keep in touch with the game? "I've been playing some games for Victoria in the WNCL (Women's National Cricket League). I think playing matches is important. There's nothing quite like being out in the middle and being in a good rhythm with that. "So, I feel like those games are great for me in that respect. I feel like I'm in a good spot with my game." Lanning said her past experiences of playing in India will help her in the WPL. "I always enjoy playing and batting over here in India. I've had some success in the past. And yeah, so far with the couple of days I've been here, it's been nice to just get used to the conditions and just be really clear on what my plan is and how I want to go about it."

Pankaj Advani wins Indian Snooker Championship

PTI ■ INDORE
India's most accomplished player Pankaj Advani secured his 36th overall national title and 10th men's snooker crown at the Yashwant Club, in a commanding display of skill and determination. The ONGC employee overcame an early setback to defeat Brijesh Damani in a final where Damani managed to take the opening frame, the only one he would claim throughout the match. The tournament serves as the only selection event for the Asian and World Championships. Advani's performance was marked by consistency and precision. After falling behind by a frame, he maintained his composure and controlled the table, leaving little room for error. In the final frame, Advani delivered an impressive 84



break, sealing the frame, match and championship. "Since this is the only event that determines the representatives of the country for international tournaments, the stakes were high," Advani said. The high pressure tournament proved to be a full-circle moment for Advani. In the group stage, he had suffered his only loss

of the competition at the hands of Damani, where he managed to win only one frame. The rivalry took an ironic turn in the final when the tables were turned and Advani emerged victorious, dropping just one frame in the match. A critical turning point in this 91st edition of the National Championships came during the round of 48. Despite being 4-2 down - a situation that nearly saw him exit the event - the multiple-time world champion mounted an unforgettable comeback by winning the match 5-4. This resilient display not only saved his tournament bid but also set the stage for the success that followed. "There was a good feeling about this gold when the round of 48 match saw me bounce back from almost being out of the competition. Then I knew this pivotal moment had to mean something big awaits. Happy to have earned the chance to again represent India in both billiards and snooker," Advani said. With the Asian Snooker Championship scheduled to commence from February 15, both Advani and Damani now face the opportunity to play for the tricolour on the international stage.



Mumbai City look to prevail over FC Goa

PTI ■ MUMBAI
Unbeaten in 13 matches against FC Goa in the Indian Super League (ISL), Mumbai City FC would look to prevail over their west coast rivals and move up to top-four in the points table in a crucial game here on Wednesday. The Islanders will aim to extend their stranglehold against the Gaurs as their impressive unbeaten record in previous 13 ISL encounters includes eight wins and five draws. A triumph on Wednesday will have Mumbai City cap off the league double over FC Goa for the fourth time, having done so earlier in 2017-18, 2021-22, and 2022-23. FC Goa are placed second in the points table with 36 points from 19 matches, winning 10 games and drawing six. However, they faced their first away loss of the season when Jamshedpur FC beat the side 3-1 earlier this month. As the ISL nears its business end, both these sides have different objectives coming into this match. FC Goa are 10 points behind the top-placed Mohun Bagan Super Giant (46), but their key objective right now is to safeguard their standing in the second spot. A second place finish will mean that they qualify straight for the semi-finals and would not have to play the single-legged eliminator in the playoffs. For that, they would have to fend off the competition from the third-placed Jamshedpur FC (34),

with both sides having played the same number of games (19). Mumbai City, fifth in the standings, have 31 points from 19 matches and they will move up to top four if they win on Wednesday. Their nearest challengers, NorthEast United FC have accumulated 29 points from 20 games. The home side will want to avoid any late slip-ups to secure a place in the top six. Furthermore, the contest on Wednesday can have a huge impact on the eventual title race. If FC Goa lose against Mumbai City, and Mohun Bagan Super Giant beat Kerala Blasters away on February 15, the Mariners will become the ISL 2024-25 League winners. The two teams have played 27 matches against each other in the ISL, with Mumbai City winning 12 times and FC Goa emerging victorious in seven games. Eight games have produced draws. Mumbai City FC head coach Petr Kratky laid out the way he wants his team to approach the match against FC Goa. "We want to keep the ball, be creative, and be dynamic and we need to continue working hard for that," he said. FC Goa head coach Manolo Marquez refused to look too far ahead in the league stages at the moment. "The most important thing for us right now is the next game, and not the ones that follow. It doesn't matter what happened in the past. We need to consider the circumstances around this match," he said.

R Vaishali sets sights on consistency and candidates qualification

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Unbothered by the drama over a handshake, focussed on being more consistent and determined to secure a spot in the Candidates -- R Vaishali has her priorities sorted for 2025 and the Indian Grandmaster says she would not let anything distract her from those goals. The past year has already proven to be a remarkable chapter in the 23-year-old's career, with a series of career-defining milestones. These include becoming only the third woman from India to earn the Grandmaster title, playing a vital role in the country's gold medal-winning performance at the Chess Olympiad, and clinching a bronze medal at the World Blitz Championship. "My main goal is to show consistent performance and play some good games," the 23-year-old told PTI.

A slight blip came recently when she finished ninth in the Tata Steel Chess Tournament's challengers' section. More than the performance, she hit the headlines for a declined handshake with Uzbek Grandmaster Nodirbek Yakubboev. Following a wave of criticism, Yakubboev apologised to her with chocolate and flowers for refusing to shake hands due to his religious beliefs before a match between the two. "I didn't know it was a big thing back in India. I was focused on the games and didn't know what was going on in the social media," she said of the episode. "Later I got to know, and okay, we all know what happened. It didn't affect me in any way," she added. What did affect her was her inability to latch on to chances at the tournament. "Tata Steel is a strong tournament, and I think my performance was

decent," she said. "Surely I could have scored a few points more, like I had some good positions, I failed to convert them, which I'll work on and try to improve. Going forward, I want to focus on showing more consistent performance." Next big goal is Candidates The Women's Candidates Tournament determines the challenger for the World Chess Championship. The next edition is to be held in 2026 with the qualification process set for this year in which rankings will be of significance. "Of course, by the end of the year, I aim to qualify for the Candidates Tournament. I had the opportunity to play in the Candidates last year, and I hope to qualify for it again," she said. Reflecting on her bronze at the Blitz World Championship last year, Vaishali said the result was important for her confidence,



following some disappointing results. "It was an important result for my confidence especially, because I had a few bad tournaments in a row and it was nice to end finally with a good result last year," she said in a rather a modest

assessment of her performance. Vaishali endured her fair share of lows that cost her valuable rating points but she views these challenges as valuable learning experiences. "I would say it was a mixed year. I achieved some good results, but I also lost some rating points. It was a very interesting experience," she reflected. "I had the chance to compete in strong round-robin tournaments and participate in prestigious events like the Candidates back-to-back challenges. Overall, last year was a great learning experience for me." For now, Vaishali is excited to return to the Norway Chess Women tournament scheduled to be held from May 26 to June 6. "Last year was a great experience. They're bringing in this women's tournament, new format along with the Norway main event. And personally, I really enjoyed playing

in Norway because like I've also got the chance to see the top players playing alongside," she said. "The format is also very different. They have the Armageddon format if you make a draw in the classical game, we go on to the Armageddon game, which I've never played until the last Norway event." Vaishali also feels that her younger R Praggnanandhaa's presence on tour has also been beneficial and she often seeks his counsel. "He's a strong player. So for me, it's a great benefit to have him. He's also very passionate about the game. So, whenever I have some questions, I always go to him. And he's very happy to discuss about the game," she said of the recently-crowned Tata Steel Masters champion. "He's a great support for me. Even in preparing some openings, I'll discuss with him."

Team India eye ODI clean-sweep over England

PTI ■ AHMEDABAD
A big knock from Virat Kohli's currently silent bat along with a series clean-sweep over England will be on Team India's wish-list when the two teams square off in the third and final ODI here on Wednesday, marking the end of their Champions Trophy (CT) build-up. While India hold an unassailable 2-0 lead with identical four-wicket wins in each of the first two ODIs, Rohit Sharma's men will be extra motivated to get a win here at the Narendra Modi Stadium where they had suffered a crushing ODI World Cup final loss in 2023. Needless to say, having their batting mainstay Kohli among runs and a win would be perfect culmination to the home side's Champions Trophy preparations. The eight-team competition gets underway from February 19 in Karachi with India starting against Bangladesh the next day in Dubai as per a hybrid model of hosting. The team has already got a shot in the arm by Rohit's return to form. His 90-ball 119 in the second ODI was a source of relief to both the side and to him after a prolonged

run of poor scores. Kohli hasn't looked completely out of touch but hasn't stayed at the crease for long enough to give himself a chance for a big knock either. If he manages to click, Kohli is in with a chance create another record. He is 89 runs short of becoming only the third batter in history to score 14,000 runs in the format which arguably has been the run-machine's favourite. India don't seem to have put a foot wrong in this series as they continue to make the most of their rich reservoir of talent. The addition of Varun Chakravarthy has given additional ammunition to their lethal spin attack which will be vital for the Champions Trophy and Mohammed Shami's return after lengthy injury layoff has been seamless too. Shami's successful comeback has certainly been assuring given that the Indian team management will spend an anxious day on Tuesday awaiting news on their premier fast bowler Jasprit Bumrah, whose availability for the Champions Trophy is still under doubt. As per the original time-line, Bumrah was slated for a comeback in the Ahmedabad ODI, but the



ace pacer is currently toiling at the National Cricket Academy in Bengaluru under the watchful eyes of specialists aiming to make the final squad that is set to be unveiled on Wednesday. Bumrah's guile on varied pitches and conditions is something that no team across the world possesses and India would be desperate to have their trump card back in the mix as they chase another ICC trophy. Both India and England will enjoy an off day on Tuesday as they have skipped training and other pre-match routines to rest and recuperate. Having ended his troubled run with the bat with a characteristic hundred in Cuttack, Rohit's

confidence will certainly rub off on the rest of the side. While Yashasvi Jaiswal could continue to warm the bench, India will expect better application and results from wicketkeeper-batter KL Rahul, who is going through a lean patch himself. But it would not be a surprise if India give the flamboyant Rishabh Pant a crack to get some game time and have another left-handed batter in the mix to try out additional combinations. India will need Shreyas Iyer's presence in the middle-order which has been bolstered by robust batting performances from Axar Patel. The 31-year-old all-rounder has shown immense maturity at No.5 in pressure situations of both the ODIs so far with knocks of 52 and 41 not out. Patel's exploits with the bat have taken some pressure off Ravindra Jadeja, who has chipped away at England with six wickets so far, exploiting the spin-friendly conditions perfectly to warm-up for similar set-ups in the Champions Trophy. But for Jos Buttler's England, this tour has raised more questions than they would have expected. England have suffered repeated implosions in their core batting

line-up across the T20Is and ODIs which has undone the impressive work that the opening pair of Phil Salt and Ben Duckett has been putting up. Buttler maintains his team remains a work in progress but exit of the talented Jacob Bethell due to injury hampers them further. Harry Brook has blown hot and cold in ideal conditions for batting and Joe Root's impressive returns haven't got the adequate support from others. Among bowlers, Adil Rashid has exploited the conditions perfectly but the onus will be on England batters to produce a unified show. Teams (from): India: Rohit Sharma (c), Shubman Gill (vc), Yashasvi Jaiswal, Virat Kohli, Shreyas Iyer, KL Rahul (wk), Rishabh Pant (wk), Hardik Pandya, Ravindra Jadeja, Washington Sundar, Axar Patel, Kuldeep Yadav, Harshit Rana, Mohd. Shami, Arshdeep Singh and Varun Chakravarthy. England: Jos Buttler (c&wk), Harry Brook, Ben Duckett, Joe Root, Philip Salt, Jamie Smith (wk), Tom Banton, Brydon Carse, Liam Livingstone, Jamie Overton, Jofra Archer, Gus Atkinson, Saqib Mahmood, Adil Rashid and Mark Wood.



Virat Kohli is world's best player regardless of form: Chris Gayle

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Virat Kohli may have been going through a poor run of form but the senior Indian batter remains the "best player in the world," feels former West Indian swashbuckler Chris Gayle. The 36-year-old Kohli endured yet another poor outing as he was dismissed for just five runs in the second ODI against England in Cuttack on Sunday. But Gayle, who has played alongside Kohli at the Royal Challengers Bengaluru in IPL, remains unperturbed by the Indian's lean stretch. "He is still the best player in the world regardless of the form, Virat Kohli is still the best player, the stats prove that, how many centuries across formats he has scored as well," Gayle said on the sidelines of an event here on Tuesday. "It's just one of those things that we cricketers go through in patches. I know it is coming at the back end of his career as well, but these things do happen, so he just needs to pick himself up and come back again." Kohli has been struggling for runs in international

cricket of late, but he was expected to find form in the ODIs, which he has dominated like no other for the longest time. Kohli's return to the format, however, was not a great one as he was caught behind off Adil Rashid in the second match after missing the opening game due to a sore knee. Asked if Kohli can break Gayle's record for most number of runs scored in the Champions Trophy, he said, "It is easy for him just to get 200 runs (more to surpass Gayle)". "I don't know how many games they will be playing but I am sure he can get over 200 runs, and I am sure he will get a century for sure, so it's just a matter of time before he goes on to break that record." Known for his flamboyance besides his big-hitting capabilities, Gayle called Indian captain Rohit Sharma the "new king in town" after the Mumbaier broke the Jamaican's record for most number of sixes in the ODI format. "Congratulations to Rohit, sports always need a new entertainer and Rohit has been entertaining all these

years as well I have done it alongside him. So he is the new king in town now. So congrats to him, and hopefully, he goes on to hit more sixes." Asked about youngster Abhishek Sharma's blistering hundred against England in the fifth T20I, Gayle said, "I heard about his innings, it was a cracking innings and for a youngster to do such a thing on an international platform, is huge and fantastic." Gayle also expressed his disappointment at West Indies' absence in the Champions Trophy. "I am disappointed, no West Indies in the Champions Trophy but it is good to have the Champions Trophy back, so I am looking forward to it. "Hopefully, it will be an entertaining one. I know it is actually taking place in Pakistan and Dubai, so hopefully, we will have some entertaining cricket." Asked to pick his semifinalists for the event starting February 19, Gayle said, "I'm going to be going off just my mind — India, England, Australia, and probably New Zealand."

ecosystem, so that by the time we host the 2027 WC, we are the favourites." South Africa finished as runners-up at both the men's and women's T20 World Cups in 2024. Earlier this year, they were also defeated by India in the ICC Women's Under-19 World Cup final. However, the Proteas have a chance to lift spirits in the country as they prepare to face Australia in the WTC final this June. This will be their first appearance in the summit clash, having secured their spot after a crucial win over Pakistan in the Boxing Day Test in Centurion. Many believe South Africa had an easier run to the finals, having beaten teams such as India, West Indies, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan. However, Smith, who boasts 9,265 runs in 117 Tests and 6,986 runs in 197 ODIs, dismissed the claims. "There is no smooth journey in cricket today. You have got

to do what you got to do. Right in the beginning, everyone knew who they were playing and who they were not playing. "South Africa has won 7 test matches in a row to qualify. Everyone should look into the Test ecosystem, how it works as you play what you have been told to play in that cycle." On the ongoing "country vs club" debate, Smith acknowledged the rise of T20 cricket but stressed the importance of creating a sustainable model where all member boards collaborate. "I want to see Test cricket stay stronger and if we can keep it strong with at least 6 or 7 nations, that way Test cricket will stay strong," Smith, who led South Africa to a record 54 Test victories, said. "I often say that T20 cricket has to grow. We have seen it moving into America and also in lots of new regions. We will see it in the Olympics now. What amazes me is that how many cricket

fans it has pulled. "I think franchise cricket will probably end up having 3 or 4 outstanding leagues in the world, with maybe a tier-two system. But in the future, it's more about all the member boards working together to keep each other strong." Smith also highlighted the role of scheduling in ensuring financial stability. "Scheduling also helps the revenue model. India is amazing as they tour frequently, providing revenue that keeps nations afloat. But if England and Australia continue playing only each other and not engaging with African or other nations, it gets harder because Test cricket is commercially under pressure," he said. "If you look at how the money flows and the expenses, it puts Test cricket under strain. It's about working together and creating a model that can keep the game sustainable," he added.

South Africa could end ICC trophy drought this year: Graeme Smith

PTI ■ JOHANNESBURG
Former captain Graeme Smith is optimistic that South Africa will end its prolonged wait for an ICC trophy this year, long before they host the ICC Men's Cricket World Cup in 2027. With the eight-team Champions Trophy beginning on February 19 and World Test Championship (WTC) final scheduled for June this year, Smith believes South Africa is on the brink of breaking their ICC trophy drought. "Hopefully, we will end that wait much before the 2027 World Cup, with the Champions Trophy and WTC final coming up but if South Africa could win a WC trophy in front of a home crowd, it would be amazing," Smith, who serves as SA20 commissioner, told PTI Bhabha. "Over the next three years, we want to just keep pushing to improve our stadiums, pitches and our cricket

ecosystem, so that by the time we host the 2027 WC, we are the favourites." South Africa finished as runners-up at both the men's and women's T20 World Cups in 2024. Earlier this year, they were also defeated by India in the ICC Women's Under-19 World Cup final. However, the Proteas have a chance to lift spirits in the country as they prepare to face Australia in the WTC final this June. This will be their first appearance in the summit clash, having secured their spot after a crucial win over Pakistan in the Boxing Day Test in Centurion. Many believe South Africa had an easier run to the finals, having beaten teams such as India, West Indies, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan. However, Smith, who boasts 9,265 runs in 117 Tests and 6,986 runs in 197 ODIs, dismissed the claims. "There is no smooth journey in cricket today. You have got



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Sheldon Jackson retires from first-class cricket

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Prolific Saurashtra batter Sheldon Jackson on Tuesday retired from professional cricket after a career spanning 15 years, his last outing ending in a defeat to Gujarat in the Ranji Trophy quarterfinal here. Jackson, 38, retires with more than 7200 runs in 105 first-class matches with a highest score of 186, 21 hundreds and 39 half-centuries. That he ended his career with an average of over 45 speaks volumes about his consistency in first-class cricket. Jackson has been a multidimensional cricketer and besides being a reliable batsman and an excellent fielder. He also kept wickets for Saurashtra in the limited-over competitions. In the longer format,



however, he was not required to do the duty thanks to Sagar Jogiyani's presence. He scored 14 and 27 in his final two outings as Gujarat won by an innings and 98 runs. Jackson, who was once part of the Kolkata Knight Riders

set-up after being spotted by former Bengal player Joydeep Mukherjee, made his debut for Saurashtra in December 2011. After being on the fringes of selection for his state team Saurashtra for three years, he made his debut in December 2011. He made four fifties and three hundreds in the 2012-13 Ranji season, including back-to-back centuries in the quarter-final and semi-final against Karnataka and Punjab respectively, to help Saurashtra qualify for the final for the first time. Owing to his excellent run with the bat that year, he broke into the India A team for the series against West Indies A at home. He was also a prominent member in Saurashtra's second charge towards a Ranji Trophy title in the 2015-16 season. Last month, Jackson had called time on his limited-overs career after scoring 2792 runs in 84 innings, with his highest being an unbeaten 133 during the Vijay Hazare Trophy in 2022. In the limited-overs game, he struck nine centuries and 14 half-centuries in all.

Gujarat crush Saurashtra by innings and 98 runs

PTI ■ RAJKOT
Pacers Priyajit Jadeja and Arzan Nagwaswalla shared seven wickets among them as Gujarat pummelled Saurashtra by an innings and 98 runs to enter the Ranji Trophy semifinals here on Tuesday. The Saurashtra batting malfunctioned again in the match as they were bundled out for 197 in their second innings, far away from the mark of 295 required to make Gujarat bat again. Left-arm pacer Nagwaswalla (3/54) and his right-arm colleague Priyajit (4/32) were unstoppable once Saurashtra resumed the day from 33 for no loss.

Rahane's century, Dias's effort put Mumbai in Ranji Trophy semifinal

PTI ■ KOLKATA
Skipper Ajinkya Rahane conjured a typically gritty hundred and pacer Royston Dias supported his effort with a five-wicket haul as defending champions Mumbai completed a fine escape act, scripting a commanding 152-run over Haryana to enter the Ranji Trophy semifinals here on Tuesday. Rahane, resuming on 88, wasted no time in the morning to notch 108 (180 balls; 13x4) -- his 41st first-class century, that guided Mumbai to 339 in the second innings for an overall lead of 353 runs. Chasing 354, Haryana

crumbled against left-arm pacer Dias (5/39) and Shardul Thakur (3/26), as the veteran quick completed a creditable nine-wicket haul for the match. They were bowled out for 201 as the joyous Mumbai dressing room might have forgotten that worrisome period when they were 65/5 in the first innings. Rahane made a bright beginning in the first session, as two exquisite boundaries off Sumit Kumar and Anshul Kamboj took him to 99, before a nudged single towards midwicket carried him past the milestone off 160 balls. The Mumbai stalwart took his helmet off, looked

skyward and seemed emotionally relieved as it was his first hundred of the season. However, Mumbai, resuming from 278/4, crumbled after his dismissal. Shivam Dube (44 overnight) fell two runs short of a fifty, and Mumbai lost their remaining five wickets for just 25 runs in under 10 overs. Anuj Thakral (4/70) led Haryana's charge, while Kamboj, Sumit and Jayant Yadav chipped in with two wickets each. But Haryana failed to replicate that spirit in their chase. Barring a Lakshay Dalal and Sumit Kumar sixth-wicket



partnership worth 90 runs, Haryana's chase never gathered momentum, as they folded in 57.3 overs on a day when the play was agreed

upon to be extended because of good light and also because of Haryana losing nine wickets. Haryana's last five wickets

tumbled in the final hour, with Dias producing a career-best 5/39 in 10.3 overs -- his maiden five-wicket haul. Shardul, who had taken six wickets in the first innings, was the first to strike. Steaming in from the High Court end, he extracted lateral movement on a docile pitch, bowling a relentless 10-over spell across two sessions that read 10-3-26-3. From the Pavilion end, Dias provided perfect support, returning 6-2-12-2 in his first spell. Lakshay, Sumit frustrate Mumbai. Just as it seemed Mumbai would wrap things up early, Haryana's Lakshay (64 off

130; 9x4) and Sumit (62 off 96; 10x4) dug in, stitching a doughty stand against the run of play. On an eased-out fourth-day pitch, Sumit counterattacked, stepping out to Shams Mulani to negate the turn. Rahane turned to Dube's military medium pace, but Mumbai remained frustrated as misfields crept in, offering easy singles, though the steep target remained their advantage. Sumit soon reached his seventh first-class fifty in 72 balls, Rahane's sharp captaincy changed the game. The breakthrough came via off-spinner Tanush Kotian, who struck in his very first over. Lakshay, attempting to drag a ball from outside, gloved it faintly to the keeper. The umpire wasn't convinced, but Rahane immediately called for DRS and the UltraEdge showed a clear deflection. Dias then delivered another blow, as Rahane's astute bowling change ended Sumit's counterattacking knock. Brief Scores: Mumbai 315 and 339 in 85.3 overs (Ajinkya Rahane 108, Suryakumar Yadav 70, Shivam Dube 48). Haryana 201; 57.3 overs (Lakshay Dalal 64, Sumit Kumar 62; Royston Dias 5/39, Shardul Thakur 3/26). Mumbai won by 152 runs.