



the pioneer

Established 1865

INSIDE

MONEY 10
INDIA INC EXPECTED TO
ACHIEVE SEVEN-EIGHT PER
CENT GROWTH IN Q4: ICRA

NEW DELHI, TUESDAY FEBRUARY 25, 2025; PAGES 12 ₹4

www.dailypioneer.com

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



Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Bihar Governor Arif Mohammed Khan, Union Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan and Chief Minister Nitish Kumar during the release of the 19th installment of the PM Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-KISAN) scheme and launch of various development projects in Bhagalpur

Poll bugle sounds in Bihar by Modi

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ PATNA/NEW DELHI

Blowing the poll trumpet in Bihar for year-end assembly elections, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Monday attacked the Lalu Yadav-led "jungle raj" regime in Bihar. Modi said "same" people were now making "vulgar" remarks about the ongoing Maha Kumbh at Prayagraj. Addressing a function in Bihar's Bhagalpur district, Modi, without naming the party or the former chief minister, also alleged that "the jungle raj wallahs hate our heritage and our faith". "The Maha Kumbh at Prayagraj is the greatest celebration of Bharat's unity. The number of people who have taken a holy dip exceeds the population of Europe. Many people from Bihar have

also undertaken the pilgrimage," the PM said. "But these jungle raj wallahs are speaking ill about Maha Kumbh and making vulgar remarks. These people were opposed to the Ram temple at Ayodhya, too. I know Bihar will not forgive them," said Modi. While demanding the resignation of Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnav over the stampede at New Delhi railway station recently, Prasad questioned the heavy rush, saying "what does Kumbh signify? It is nonsense." The PM, who disbursed close to Rs 23,000 crore to nearly 100 million beneficiaries across the country, began his 40 minute speech with a reference to Kumbh and its connection with Bihar.

Continued on page 2
Related stories on page 5

Pay present property tax to MCD, clear all past dues

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

In a big relief to the people of Delhi, the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) has announced a house-tax waiver scheme, allowing residents to clear their house tax dues of 2024-25 and have all previous pending taxes written off. Additionally, in the next financial year, 100 percent of house tax on 100-yard homes and residential-area shops will be scrapped, while properties between 100-500 yards will get a 50 percent waiver. For the first time, 1,300 housing societies - previously ineligible - will receive a 25 percent rebate. This transformative proposal is set to be passed in the MCD House on February 25. After losing the turf to BJP in governing the national Capital, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP)-led MCD on Monday introduced a major house tax waiver for property owners which can be witnessed as a direct confrontation between the two different regime in Delhi. The announcement, made ahead of the mayoral polls in April, was delivered at a press conference by AAP leader, MCD Mayor Mahesh Khinchi, Deputy Mayor Ravinder Bhardwaj, and Leader of the House Mukesh Goyal. Announcing the initiative, Rajya Sabha MP Sanjay Singh said those who settle their 2024-25 house tax dues will have all previous outstanding amounts waived. The move aims at easing financial



Senior AAP leaders Sanjay Singh and Durgesh Pathak, Mayor Mahesh Khinchi and Leader of the House Mukesh Goyal held a joint press conference at the party headquarters in New Delhi

burdens on citizens and curbs corruption in tax collection, is set to be passed in the MCD House. Singh highlighted that the decision is that those who pay their house tax for 2024-25 will have all their previous outstanding house tax dues, which have been a burden on them, completely waived. "This is a major announcement: upon paying the house tax for 2024-25, all previous outstanding dues, which were a financial burden, will be written off. Secondly, the house tax for buildings ranging from 100 square yards to 500 square yards will be reduced by half. That is, houses within the 100-500 square yard range will now have their house tax cut by 50%," he said. He further noted that for buildings below 100 square yards, the house tax will be entirely waived. He said, "So, properties between 100 and 500 square yards will have their tax reduced by half, and those below 100 square yards will have their tax fully waived." Under the scheme, properties measuring up to 100 square yards, including residential shops, will be completely exempt from house tax from the next financial year. Houses measuring between 100 and 500 square yards will receive a 50 per cent waiver, while 1,300 housing societies that previously did not qualify for any exemption will now get a 25 per cent rebate. Singh further added that additionally, residential properties where commercial activities such as shops are running, and properties designated for commercial purposes, will also have their house tax waived. Singh said, "There are over 1,300 apartments in Delhi that do not currently receive any tax exemptions or benefits. A crucial decision has been made regarding them as well: 1,300 housing apartments in Delhi will receive a 25% house tax waiver."

Continued on page 2

Powered BJP face fired AAP in Delhi Assembly

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The first day of the Delhi Assembly under the newly-formed BJP government witnessed a heated exchange between the treasury benches and opposition Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) members, leading to a brief adjournment of the House on Monday following Vijender Gupta's election as speaker amid sloganeering from both the treasury and the Opposition benches, with AAP members accusing the BJP being "anti-Dalit and anti-Sikh". The Leader of Opposition Atishi accused new Government for removing BR Ambedkar and Bhagat Singh's portraits from Delhi Chief Minister Rekha Gupta's office, a charge denied by the ruling BJP. Tensions escalated when the Leader of Opposition Atishi, while congratulating Gupta, alleged that photos of BR Ambedkar and Shaheed Bhagat Singh had been removed from the Chief Minister's Office. Her remarks, made without permission, led to loud protests from BJP MLAs prompting Speaker Vijender Gupta to censure her for speaking out of turn. As disruptions continued, the newly elected assembly speaker Vijendra Gupta accused the AAP of disrupting the house with pre-planned intentions and adjourned the house for 15 minutes. The Speaker said it was a courtesy address and You (Opposition) should not have made it a political platform." The Opposition does not want the

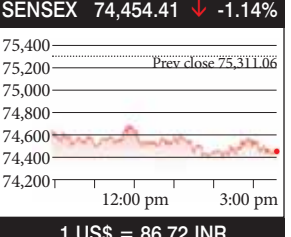


Delhi Chief Minister Rekha Gupta greets newly-elected Delhi Assembly Speaker Vijender Gupta at his chamber during the first day of the Assembly session in New Delhi

House to run smoothly. AAP has come with the intention of disrupting the House. Maintain the dignity of the House," said Gupta. Ruckus witnessed both inside and outside when Leader of Opposition (LoP) in Delhi Assembly Atishi alleged that the BJP removed the portraits from the Chief Minister's Office in the Assembly - portraits that had been put up under the AAP government. As the Assembly session began, AAP MLAs, led by the LoP, in a mark of protest inside the House, raised slogans and demanded the immediate reinstatement of the portraits. The BJP accused the opposition party of trying to divert people's attention from the CAG reports that will be tabled in the Assembly to expose "corruption" by AAP when it was in power. The Delhi BJP shared photos of the chief minister's office on social media and said, "The portraits of Mahatma Gandhi, Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar, Bhagat Singh the President and the prime minister are displayed in the offices of Chief Minister Rekha Gupta and other ministers." Delhi BJP president Virendra Sachdeva also clarified that that the portraits of the revered Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Bhagat Singh, the President of India, and the Prime Minister of India continue to be displayed in the offices of the Chief Minister and all ministers of Delhi - something that anyone can easily verify. Earlier from Sanskrit to English and Maithili to Punjabi, the first session of the newly constituted eighth Delhi Legislative Assembly began on Monday with MLAs of the ruling BJP and opposition AAP demonstrating the linguistic diversity of the legislature by taking their oaths in six languages including - Hindi, English, Sanskrit, Urdu, Maithili and Punjabi.

Continued on page 2

MARKETS



WEATHER

AQI	186
MAX	26.7°C(+1.2)
MIN	10.7°C(-1.0)

One dead, 10 injured in clash at Bangladesh air force base

PTI ■ DHAKA

A man was killed and several others injured in a clash on Monday between a group of local people and air force personnel at an airbase in Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar, officials said. The Inter Service Public Relations (ISPR) - the media wing of the military - in a statement said the "miscreants" attacked the Bangladesh Air Force Base near Cox's Bazar's Samitipara. "Bangladesh Air Force is taking necessary actions in this regard," it said. The ISPR said that "some local miscreants" of the Samitipara area adjacent to the beach resort town "launched a sudden attack" on the airbase after a biker was stopped at a checkpoint as he was crossing the base area without any papers for the vehicle. It said the biker was taken inside the base for interrogation when over 200 people marched towards the base. The security personnel tried to stop them, sparking a clash that left four Air Force personnel injured. Deputy Commissioner of the district, Mohammad Salahuddin, said: one person was killed, and several others were injured in the incident". The official said a thorough investigation would be conducted into the cause of the attack.

Gym owner's murder: Delhi court sends gangster's wife to custody

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi court on Monday sent alleged gangster Hashim Baba's wife Zoya Khan to three-day police custody in a case related to the reported killing of a 35-year-old gym owner by two bike-borne assailants in a posh neighbourhood in south Delhi's Greater Kailash area last September. Chief judicial magistrate Anuj Kumar Singh sent Zoya Khan to police custody after the investigating officer said her custody was required to unearth the larger conspiracy (behind the killing) and to establish her role in the case. Besides Baba, the police also suspect the involvement of jailed gangster Lawrence Bishnoi's associates in the murder. The police told the court that it wanted to recover the weapons used in the crime, claiming that all the accused were in touch with each other through App-based encrypted calls. The victim, Nadir Shah, who had previous criminal cases against his name, including



on charges of robbery and attempt to murder, co-owned a gym in Greater Kailash Part I. During the proceedings, Zoya told the court, "My only crime is that I am Hashim Baba's wife. I am not involved in any case against him." Her lawyer told the court that Zoya's name was not disclosed in any of the arrested accused's discloser and that she had joined the probe on two occasions when asked by the investigating agency. Shah also owned a business in Dubai. His father hailed from Afghanistan and had shifted to Delhi several years ago.

Survival of trapped men bleak in tunnel collapse: Govt

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ HYDERABAD

Even as multiple agencies are at war footing in Telangana reminding their efforts in 17 days Silkyara Bend rescue operation in Uttarakhand, chances of survival of the eight persons who remain trapped in the SLBC tunnel seems to be "very remote". The latest to join are a team of rat miners, who had rescued the construction workers trapped in the Silkyara Bend-Barkot tunnel in Uttarakhand in 2023, to extricate the men. Indian Army, Navy, NDRF, SDRF and other agencies are also involved in rescue operations in close coordination with each other. Despite relentless efforts by the Indian Army, NDRF and other agencies, no breakthrough has been achieved so far in the rescue operations to extricate the eight persons who have remained trapped for over 48 hours inside the tunnel after a section of it collapsed in the Srisailem Left Bank Canal (SLBC) project in Telangana's Nagarkurnool district on Saturday. The persons who have been trapped in the collapsed tunnel for the past over 48 hours have been identified as Manoj Kumar and Sri Niwas from Uttar Pradesh, Sunny Singh (Jammu and Kashmir), Gurpreet Singh (Punjab) and Sandeep Sahu, Jegta



A rescue operation underway after a portion of the Srisailem Left Bank Canal (SLBC) tunnel collapsed in Nagarkurnool district

Xess, Santosh Sahu and Anuj Sahu all (of the mishap site). When we took photographs, the end (of the tunnel) was visible. And out of the 9 meter diameter (of the tunnel) -- almost 30 feet, out of that 30 feet, mud has piled up to 25 feet," he said. "When we shouted their names also, there was no response...So, there is no chance at all," he said. Krishna Rao said the process of clearing the debris is underway with several machinery in place. According to officials the Tunnel Boring Machine (TBM) which

weighs a few hundred tons, got almost flushed away by about 200 meters after the collapse and due to the gushing water. "Even, even assuming they (the trapped persons) are in the lower part of the TBM machine, assuming even if it is intact on the top, where is the air (oxygen)? Underneath, how the oxygen will go," he asked though pumping of oxygen and dewatering have been continuously done. "For removing all the debris and all that, in spite of all types of efforts, all types of organisations (working), it takes, I think it takes not less than 3-4 days (to extricate the people)," Rao, who had overseen the rescue operations along with Irrigation Minister Uttam Kumar Reddy, said. Rao said the conveyor belt was being restored at the tunnel to clear the debris. Meanwhile, a social media post from Telangana Chief Minister's Office (CMO) said CM Revanth Reddy has been continuously reviewing the situation regarding the SLBC tunnel accident and was in constant touch with the ministers and senior officials involved in the rescue operations. Dewatering is going on while oxygen was being continuously pumped into the tunnel. The officials also informed that they are exploring alternative routes to reach the site of the accident by clearing the debris of soil mounds in the tunnel, the post said.

Simultaneous polls cater to federal structure

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Centre is learnt to have told the joint committee of Parliament examining the bills on 'one nation, one election' that holding simultaneous polls to the Lok Sabha and state assemblies is not undemocratic and does not hurt the federal structure. Responding to a set of queries posed by the members of the joint panel, the legislative department in the Union law ministry is learnt to have asserted that simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies were held in the past before the cycle was broken due to various reasons, including imposition of President's rule in some states. Sources said while the ministry answered some of the questions, some others were sent to the Election Commission for a calibrated response. The joint committee is holding its next meeting on Tuesday. Following the adoption of the Constitution, elections to the Lok Sabha and all state assemblies were conducted simultaneously from 1951 to 1967, it noted. The first general elections to the Lok Sabha and state assemblies were held



together in 1951-52, a practice that continued for three subsequent general elections in 1957, 1962, and 1967. However, this cycle of synchronised elections was disrupted in 1968 and 1969 due to the premature dissolution of some state legislative assemblies. The fourth Lok Sabha was also dissolved prematurely in 1970, with fresh elections held in 1971. Unlike the first, second, and third Lok Sabha, which completed their full five-year terms, the fifth Lok Sabha's

term was extended until 1977 under Article 352 because of the declaration of Emergency. Since then, only a few Lok Sabha terms have lasted the full five years, such as the eighth, 10th, 14th and 15th. Others, including the sixth, seventh, ninth, 11th, 12th and 13th were dissolved early, a government explainer on 'one nation, one election' had earlier said. State assemblies have faced similar disruptions over the years. Premature dissolutions and term extensions have become a "recurring challenge", the government had said. "These developments have firmly disrupted the cycle of simultaneous elections, leading to the current pattern of staggered electoral schedules across the country," it observed. "Due to the ongoing cycle of polls in various parts of the country, political parties, their leaders, legislators, and both state and central governments focusses on preparing for upcoming polls rather than prioritising governance," it said, citing the 'rationale' for holding simultaneous polls as recommended by the panel headed by former president Ram Nath Kovind.

Kedarnath earnings more than double since 2020-21

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ DEHRADUN

The Kedarnath temple's earnings from offerings, donations and different services offered to devotees have more than doubled since March 2021, an RTI query has revealed. From Rs 22.04 crore in 2020-21, it rose to Rs 52.9 crore in 2023-24, the Sri Badrinath-Kedarnath Mandir Samiti said in response to the query filed under the Right to Information Act by Noida-based RTI activist Amit Gupta. Giving a yearly break-up, the committee said the income of the famous Himalayan temple in Uttarakhand was Rs 22.04 crore in 2020-21, it dropped to Rs 16.52 crore in 2021-22 in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic but rose again to Rs 29.67 crore in 2022-23 and to Rs 52.9 crore in 2023-24. The rise in the temple's income during the period was 2.3 times. A delayed opening of the temple for devotees in 2021, coupled with restrictions such as mandatory negative RT-PCR test reports, a daily cap on the number of devotees visiting the shrine, besides compliance with mask-wearing and social-distancing norms had severely affected the inflow of pilgrims during



the pandemic. However, as the number of Covid cases declined and the yatra norms were relaxed, the number of pilgrims surged the following year, increasing the temple's earnings once again. The trend continued in 2023-24, the temple committee said. The income of the temple comes from the offerings and donations made by devotees as well as the priority darshan facilities offered to those coming by helicopter services for which an additional fee is charged by the committee.

AISF stages protest, seeks withdrawal of UGC draft regulations

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The All India Students' Federation (AISF) on Monday staged a protest march to the University Grants Commission (UGC) Bhawan, demanding immediate withdrawal of the draft UGC regulations 2024 and 2025.

Led by AISF national president Viraj Devang and general secretary Dinesh Seerangaraj, the student body opposed the proposed regulations, calling them a violation of constitutional principles and an attack on university autonomy, an official statement issued by

the outfit said. The draft regulations released in January seek to replace the 2018 UGC guidelines on minimum qualifications for faculty appointments and academic standards.

According to the Union Ministry of Education, the new guidelines aim to provide universities with greater flexibility in hiring and promotions.

However, the move has sparked a political controversy, particularly in the non-BJP-ruled states, which argue that the proposals infringe upon state government rights and centralise control over higher education institutions.

A major point of contention is the enhanced role of centrally-appointed governors in the selection and appointment of vice-chancellors in the universities.

Those opposed to the move argue that it undermines the autonomy of state-run institutions and curtails democratic decision-making in higher education governance. AISF leaders claimed that these changes will diminish the role of academic bodies, faculty, and students in shaping university policies.

During the protest, a delegation of AISF leaders, accompanied by

representatives from the All India Youth Federation (AIYF), submitted a memorandum to UGC joint secretary N Gopukumar, urging the commission to withdraw the proposed regulations, the statement said.

Raising serious concerns over the draft regulations, the AISF said the UGC's role as an advisory body is being expanded beyond its mandate, allowing it to withhold grants and impose penalties on universities.

According to the statement, the student organisation also pointed out that education is a concurrent subject, and any unilateral decision-making

by the UGC will weaken the authority of the state governments in regulating their institutions.

They also argued that the draft regulations violate democratic norms by sidelining faculty, student bodies, and academic councils, replacing participatory governance with bureaucratic control.

The AISF has categorically rejected the draft regulations and called for a nationwide resistance against the proposed changes.

Warning that the protests would intensify if the regulations are not withdrawn, the AISF urged students, faculty members

and academic institutions to unite in opposition to what it described as "anti-democratic measures" that threaten the autonomy of higher education in India.

"The fight is not just about policy; it's about preserving the fundamental values of higher education in India," the statement said.

"We urge all students, faculty members and institutions to stand against these undemocratic measures," it said.

With growing opposition from student bodies and state governments, the debate over the draft UGC regulations is expected to escalate in the coming weeks.

Dancer killed in car crash after chased by goons

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

Notwithstanding five death sentences in as many months, regardless of the nationwide uproar post RG Kar Medical College and Hospital rape and murder case crimes against women continued to hit headlines in Bengal with the latest being a 27-year-old woman professional getting killed in a car mishap in a bid to escape from five miscreants who were chasing her vehicle in another car for several miles.

The victim, S Chattoadhyay was an event management professional, and a resident of Chandannagar in Hooghly district some 35 km from Kolkata.

The incident took place at Panagarh on the Durgapur Expressway connecting Kolkata and New Delhi in the night intervening Sunday and Monday, sources said.

The victim and her two colleagues were going to Gaya in Bihar to attend some function.

According to the police the vehicle of the victim had refueled at a petrol pump near Panagarh. While they were at the petrol pump a white car with five passengers stopped by them and then began to follow them.

"As soon as they approached the highway, the men in the other car started

making lewd remarks towards the victim and began driving recklessly," he said adding the white grazed the victim's vehicle several times making them to take the service road and enter a narrower road in great speed.

In the process the car collided with a public toilet and overturned, sources said adding the chasing vehicle then sped away. The white vehicle had been detained but their occupants were yet to be arrested police said.

The incident took place hours before CM Mamata Banerjee told in a meeting in Kolkata to see that the "brothers help the sisters." She said "I entrust my brothers with the responsibility of protecting our sisters and preventing" such incidents in the future.

She also said how there was "no gender disparity, which is a very positive development. The government will certainly do its part, but I believe you (brothers) can take a proactive role in this matter."

She also said how her "Government brought the Aparajita bill against to help curb incidents of rape." Expressing concern at the rising incident of attacks on women Opposition BJP said how "the criminals had been brought to size in UP whereas in Bengal they were flourishing in the Trinamool Congress raj."



RBI organises Financial Literacy Week

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

As a part of nationwide campaign, Reserve Bank of India (RBI), Delhi is observing Financial Literacy Week (FLW) from February 24-28, 2025 to propagate financial education messages on the theme of "Financial Literacy: Women's Prosperity".

The inaugural event was organised on February 24, 2025 at Reserve Bank of India, 6, Sansad Marg, New Delhi. The program was presided by Rohit P Das, Regional Director, RBI New Delhi. Das stated that intent of this year's financial literacy week is to prioritise financial literacy for women considering

multifaceted role in society. The campaign will cover topics such as risk diversification, responsible borrowing, maintaining a good credit score and household budgeting and will have special focus on homemakers, working women and women entrepreneurs.

Suchitra Maurya, Chief General Manager and RBI Ombudsman-II, Reserve Bank of India, Rajeeva, Executive Director, Punjab and Sind Bank, R Viswesvaran, MD and CEO, India Post Payments Bank, Praveen Goyal, Chief General Manager, Punjab National Bank and Aditi Gupta, Deputy General Manager, Financial Inclusion and Development

Department, Senior Officers of RBI, Controlling Heads of Commercial Banks and Lead District Managers participated in the program.

During the program, posters and videos on the theme of the event were released by the dignitaries. During the course of the week the Reserve Bank, in collaboration with banks and other stakeholders will organise awareness programs and outreach activities across the country.

"These initiatives will also be sustained during the year to ensure a lasting impact. Through our joint efforts we hope to amplify the importance of financial literacy for women and reach out to them on the widest possible scale," added Das.

Mamata showers largesse on doctors

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

In what is being viewed as an "election year bid" to assuage the ruffled feelings of the agitating doctors demanding justice for the rape and murder victim of the RG Kar Medical College and Hospital Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on Monday affected an impressive salary hike of the senior and junior doctors.

Banerjee who was speaking at a meeting of doctors organized by the State Government announced a three-tier pay hike for of Rs 25,000 for senior doctors, Rs 15,000 for junior doctors and Rs 10,000 for the post-graduate trainees.

This apart, Banerjee also allowed some other concessions to the practicing Government doctors.

"Only request the doctors fraternity to be more sincere towards their duty... I do not mind private practice but I request the doctors to carry out private practice after eight hours of hospital duty... If there is a problem with dividing your time between your private patients and hospital duty you may bring your patients to the hospitals which have an excellent set up," Banerjee said expanding the area of private practice for the doctors from present 20 km to 30 km area from their place of work i.e. the hospitals.

She also said that during her

government the Health services had been improved. "During the Left regime the Health Department was given to a State minister... and as a result the health services were in shambles... whereas I kept it with me and did all I could do to improve the health infrastructure."

Reacting to her Monday's speech senior doctor Utpal Bandopadhyay said increasing a few thousand of rupees was not the doctors had been asking for. "We were not asking for a few thousand rupees... the main issue is whether the questions being raised by the doctors have been addressed or not... We say these have not been addressed... still there is vast shortage of doctors... still the junior doctors have no facility and still they are being attacked inside the hospitals," he said.

Senior Congress leader Adhir Chowdhury said that "the Chief Minister did not take the Health Minister in her own hands because she knew that it was a profitable place... today this ministry is a symbol of corruption and everyone knows where this money goes... she has only painted the State blue and white and nothing more." On the pay hike given to the doctors he said it was one way of bribing doctors' fraternity "as she had been doing by announcing dole schemes for the people to win votes."

The majority of Doctor's community in the State had

been up in arms against the State Government complaining against lack of manpower, facility, safety and security --- particularly for the women doctors. They had been protesting on the streets demanding fair treatment for the women doctors. They had been protesting on the streets demanding fair treatment for the women doctors. They had been protesting on the streets demanding fair treatment for the women doctors.

A postgraduate lady doctor working with the Chest Medicine Department of the Hospital was in the small hours of August 9 last year brutally raped and murdered while she was resting inside the seminar hall after a 48 hours' continuous duty.

This led to worldwide condemnation even as the doctors condemned the Government, particularly the police department for lackadaisical investigation. Though the High Court transferred the case to the Central Bureau of Investigation only one accused named Sanjoy Roy could be arrested for the crime while three others including former Principal of the College Sandip Ghosh a junior police officer and a house staff were arrested on charges of corruption and dereliction of duty.

While Roy was awarded life imprisonment by the district court which found wide lacunae in the investigation, the doctors and the parents of the victim continued to demand impartial investigation and accused the Government of hiding the real masterminds behind the case.

One dead, 10 injured in clash...

From page 1

The officer-in-charge of a police box at a local hospital where the wounded were being treated said the incident took place at around noon.

"Shihab Kabir, 30, a local trader, was shot during the clash," the officer said.

The incident sparked a social media uproar, with people claiming that the youth died in gunshots fired by the Air Force personnel.

Bangladesh's defence ministry came up with a statement, saying BAF men did not fire any live bullets during the violence.

The ISPR said the Air Force personnel fired "blank shots" to protect a key installation, but no shot was fired on the people. It termed the incident to an "evil motive" of some "vested quarters".

"Bangladesh Air Force expresses its deep shock at the death of the youth and conveys its sympathy to the members of his family," it said.

According to a local journalist, the government plans to expand the airport and relocate the people in the neighbourhood, a proposal opposed by some residents.

The attack occurred hours after Home Affairs Adviser, Lt Gen (ret.) M Jahangir Alam Chowdhury reiterated the government's commitment to maintaining law and order.

In a pre-dawn press conference at his residence, Chowdhury said that "cohorts" of the ousted Awami League regime of deposed prime minister Sheikh Hasina were out to destabilise the country, but "in no way they will be spared".

"We will ensure that terrorists cannot stand anywhere and prevent crimes at any cost," he said, adding that law enforcement agencies were asked to strengthen their patrolling across the country.

Bangladesh's security forces have arrested over 8,600 people in a two-week crackdown named "Operation Devil Hunt" that targeted gangs allegedly linked with the ousted Hasina government.

The arrests come amid growing concerns about rising crime levels, particularly in Dhaka, with police saying the number of robberies had doubled since January last year.

"Operation Devil Hunt will continue. We won't let the perpetrators sleep or rest. I have ordered the forces to intensify patrolling," Chowdhury told reporters.

Chowdhury's emergency briefing comes as students, who led the July-August 2024 uprising eventually toppling the Awami League regime, expressed concern over the deteriorating law and order situation, with many demanding his resignation.

In a related development, Bangladesh Army chief General Waker-Uz-Zaman said on Monday that the military must continue working to maintain law and order until Bangladesh gets an elected government.

"We initially thought the task would be completed quickly, allowing us to return to the cantonment. We have been working for a long period now. We must exercise patience and fulfil our professional responsibilities with dedication," he said at an event at suburban Savar Cantonment.

Zaman said it was imperative that while performing duties "we must avoid the use of force, which may be applied only when necessary".

Pay present property tax to MCD...

From page 1

Khichi said the AAP has always delivered on its promises and the latest decision is a major step towards easing financial burdens on homeowners. He said the MCD is also going ahead with plans to regularise 12,000 contractual employees, in addition to the 8,000 workers who have already been made permanent in the last two years. He

emphasised that the tax-waiver scheme would not only provide relief to homeowners but also bring transparency in tax collection, reducing avenues for corruption.

Singh said the AAP has consistently worked for the welfare of the common man and this decision is a step towards fulfilling that commitment. He also highlighted that for the first time, 1,300 housing apartments in Delhi, which

had never received any tax benefit, will get a 25 per cent rebate. Calling it a historic decision by the AAP-led MCD, he said the proposal would bring relief to thousands of families who have been burdened with high house taxes for years.

The AAP's MCD incharge, Durgesh Pathak, said the move would put an end to corruption in tax collection as many homeowners had been harassed by officials over unpaid dues. He

pointed out that under previous administrations; house tax was often used as a tool to extract bribes, leading to losses in the MCD's revenue. Pathak also noted that before his party took charge of the civic body, MCD employees had not received salaries on time for years, but with improved financial management under the previous AAP government in Delhi, timely salary payments were ensured.

ensured. He pointed out that under previous administrations; house tax was often used as a tool to extract bribes, leading to losses in the MCD's revenue. Pathak also noted that before his party took charge of the civic body, MCD employees had not received salaries on time for years, but with improved financial management under the previous AAP government in Delhi, timely salary payments were ensured.

Poll bugle sounds in Bihar by Modi

From page 1

"It is a matter of pride for me to be here, close to the Mandar mountain, at a time when the Maha Kumbh is underway at Prayagraj," Modi said.

Situated in the adjoining district of Banka, the "Mandar Parvat" is associated with the mythical churning of the ocean, which had produced the nectar stored in a pot (Kumbh), drops of which fell at Prayagraj, Nashik, Ujjain and Haridwar, places where the congregation is held every

12 years. Modi also hurled barbs at Prasad, who has been convicted in fodder scam cases, with the repeated remark "those who steal fodder (chara churane wale) can never ensure farmers' welfare."

Calling Bihar the "most important pillar of eastern India", Modi said the state will enjoy the same glory in Viksit Bharat as Pataliputra, the capital of ancient kingdom of Magadh.

"The NDA government works to simultaneously preserve

our grand ancient heritage and achieve a prosperous future.... But the jungle raj wallahs hate our heritage (virasat) and our faith (aastha)," he added.

The Prime Minister also accused the RJD and its ally Congress of having brought "ruin and disrepute to Bihar while sharing power in the state."

Modi spoke of schemes such as 'PM Phasal Bima Yojana', under which Rs 1.75 lakh crore has been paid towards crop insurance, and claimed this was a far cry from the

"the previous regimes, which left farmers in distress". He also said "a recent spurt in agriculture exports has led to farmers getting better prices for their produce. Now is the time for Bihar's makhana (foxnuts). It is a super food that I, too, take on most days during the year. This is the reason why we announced setting up of a Makhana Board in the Budget".

Incidentally, upon reaching the venue of the function, the PM was presented with a garland of "makhanas", which is believed to bring material

and spiritual benefits. Known for peppering his speeches with local flavour, the Prime Minister began his address in the Angika dialect and making a mention of Vikramshila, an ancient seat of learning close to Bhagalpur, and the Aigaibinath temple dedicated to Lord Shiva.

The function was attended by a host of dignitaries, including Bihar Governor Arif Mohammad Khan, Chief Minister Nitish Kumar and Union ministers Shivraj Singh Chouhan, Giriraj Singh and Chirag Paswan.

Powered BJP face fired AAP in Delhi Assembly

From page 1

Delhi Chief Minister Rekha Gupta, along with Cabinet ministers, and other Members of Legislative Assembly (MLAs), took oath in the House, in the presence of Delhi BJP president Virendra Sachdeva and protem Speaker Arvinder Singh Lovely, as the first session of the Assembly began here.

Gupta arrived at the Delhi Assembly with confidence, flashing a victory sign, was the first to take the oath, followed by her six Cabinet ministers. With her appointment, Rekha Gupta has become the fourth woman Chief Minister of Delhi, following Sheila

Dikshit, Sushma Swaraj, and Atishi. She is also the fourth BJP leader to assume the role, succeeding Madan Lal Khurana, Sahib Singh Verma, and Sushma Swaraj.

Minister Manjinder Singh Sirsa took his oath in Punjabi, while Law and Justice Minister Kapil Mishra opted for Sanskrit. The session also marked the BJP's return to power after 26 years and its shift to the right side of the Speaker's chair.

BJP MLA Arvinder Singh Lovely was sworn in as the pro-tem Speaker of the eighth Assembly and administered the oath by Lieutenant Governor Vinai Kumar Saxena at the Raj Niwas before the session began. As

the senior-most legislator, Lovely oversaw the swearing-in of all newly elected MLAs. Several other MLAs took oaths in different languages. Karnail Singh took oath in Punjabi, while Pradyumn Rajput and Neelam Pahalwan chose Sanskrit.

BJP's Tarvinder Marwah chanted religious slogans after reading the printed text, to which the Speaker objected, reminding him that it was not a Gurudwara. Amanatullah Khan (Urdu), Chandan Chaudhary (Maithili), Ajay Dutt (English), and Gajendra Yadav (Sanskrit) also took their oaths, with the Speaker consistently instructing members to follow the official oath format.

Other MLAs who took their oaths in Sanskrit included Sanjay Goel, Jitendra Mahajan, Ajay Mahawar, and BJP's Karnail Singh, while Chaudhary Zubair and Amanatullah Khan chose Urdu.

Soon after the election of Speaker Vijendra Gupta, AAP leader Atishi accused the ruling BJP of being "anti-Dalit and anti-Sikh." "It is unfortunate the Delhi Assembly is being led by a party that is anti-Dalit and anti-Sikh. The BJP has removed photographs of Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar and Shaheed Bhagat Singh from the chief minister's office, showing its anti-Dalit stance," she said.

Later, in a post in Hindi on X, she said, "The BJP has shown its true anti-Dalit and anti-Sikh face. Photographs of Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar and Shaheed-e-Azam Bhagat Singh have been removed from the chief minister's office in the Delhi Legislative Assembly." AAP supreme Arvind Kejriwal said the move hurt millions of followers of Ambedkar. "The new BJP government of Delhi removed Babasaheb's photograph and put up a photograph of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. This is not right. This has hurt millions of followers of Babasaheb," he said in a post on X. "I have a request to the BJP. You can put up the prime

minister's photograph but do not remove that of Babasaheb. Let it remain," he added.

Rejecting the charges, Cabinet Minister Manjinder Singh Sirsa said "This is being done deliberately by the AAP to divert attention from the CAG report that will be presented tomorrow." He said the CM's office still has pictures of Babasaheb Ambedkar and Bhagat Singh, along with those of the prime minister, president, and Mahatma Gandhi. "This move is a clear attempt to distract the public," Sirsa said. "When AAP was in power, it suppressed the CAG report for three years. Now, when it is about to be released, they

are creating unnecessary drama. No one respects Babasaheb Ambedkar more than we (BJP) do," the minister added. Another minister in the BJP government, Ravinder Indraj, showed the portraits of Bhagat Singh and Ambedkar in the chief minister's office in Assembly Vidhan Sabha and said the AAP leaders were "scared" because the CAG reports are going to be tabled in the House on Tuesday. "Most of their leaders were in jail on corruption charges and they fear that they might have to go again. Once the CAG report is out, they will have to face the consequences again. This is why they are acting

out of desperation," Indraj said. Cabinet minister Parvesh Verma slammed the AAP, claiming the opposition party's MLAs disrupted the House, and "intruded" into the chief minister's office in the Assembly, and it is unacceptable. "Over the past ten years, the Aam Aadmi Party has done nothing for the upliftment of Delhi. Today they have violated the dignity of the assembly," he said.

Lambasting the AAP, BJP MLA Shikha Rai said "AAP is expert in doing drama and creating ruckus. They do not have the habit to be opposition, therefore, they did this drama today in the House. It's sad".

BJP to present 14 CAG reports on AAP government in Delhi Assembly

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI
Marking the BJP's return to power after 26 years, the first session of the newly constituted 70-member Delhi Assembly commenced on Monday, is expected to be stormy on Tuesday as the BJP government is set to table long-pending 14 Comptroller and Auditor General's (CAG) reports, which examine the financial and administrative performance of the previous AAP government in the national capital. Notably, the datelines show most of these reports have been pending for considerable durations, ranging between 300 and 500 days, after they were submitted by CAG to the then Finance Minister of Delhi between 2023 and 2024. These reports may cause troubles to the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP). The CAG reports have been at the centre of a fierce battle between the BJP and the AAP, with the former accusing the previous administration of delaying their release to hide alleged corruption. The oldest pending CAG report is the State Finances

Audit Report of the year ended March 31, 2022. A key report under scrutiny pertains to the renovation of the chief minister's official residence at 6, Flag Staff Road, termed as 'Sheesh Mahal' by the BJP. The audit has reportedly uncovered large-scale irregularities in the project's planning, tendering and execution. Initially sanctioned at ₹7.61 Crore in 2020, the cost escalated to ₹33.66 Crore by April 2022 - an increase of 342 per cent. According to preliminary report of the CAG report on the scrapped excise policy pointed out irregularities which resulting in a loss of ₹2,027 Crore to the state exchequer. The evaluation covered the period from 2017-18 to 2020-21 and criticised the functioning of the excise department. The report also found irregularities in the new excise policy for 2021-22, which had been a point of focus in earlier investigations by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) and Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI). The other long-pending CAG



First day of Delhi Legislative Assembly session in New Delhi

Ranjan Dimri

audit reports pertain to key issues of Delhi - prevention and mitigation of vehicular air pollution in Delhi, the regulation and supply of liquor in Delhi between the period 2017-18 to 2021-22 when the liquor scam took place in Delhi, the Sheesh Mahal-CM house issue, the audit of public health infrastructure and health

services, and the working of the Delhi Transport Corporation (DTC). The CAG report on state finances audit report for year ended March 31, 2021 was sent to the Delhi Finance Minister on August 9, 2023, performance audit on prevention and mitigation of vehicular air pollution in

Delhi for Year ended March 31, 2021, was submitted on August 09, 2023. The audit of revenue, economic, social and general sectors and PSUs for year ended March 31, 2020 and March 31, 2021 and it was submitted on August 9, 2023. The CAG report on Finance Accounts of 2021-22 was submitted on August 9, 2023. The CAG report on Appropriation Accounts of 2021-22 was submitted on August 9, 2023. Performance Audit Report on Children in Need of Care and Protection for Years (2018-19 to 2020-21) was submitted on August 9, 2023. The state finances audit report for year ended March 31, 2022 was submitted on February 21, 2024. Appropriation Accounts 2022-23 was submitted on February 21, 2024, performance audit of regulation and supply of liquor in Delhi (2017-18 to 2021-22) was submitted on March 8, 2024, state finances audit report for year ended March 31, 2023 was submitted on July 11, 2024, audit of public health infrastructure and management of health services for year ended March 31, 2023 was submitted on September 24, 2024, performance audit report on functioning of Delhi transport corporation for year ended March 31, 2022 was submitted on December 10, 2024 and revenue, economic, social

and general sectors and PSUs and performance audit of the department of H and FW and compliance audit for year ended March 31, 2022 was submitted on December 10, 2024. Delhi Chief Minister Rekha Gupta had announced last Thursday that the reports would be made public in the first session under the new government. The pending CAG audits include reviews of state finances, public health infrastructure, vehicular air pollution, liquor regulation and the functioning of the Delhi Transport Corporation, among others. The BJP had repeatedly demanded the release of these reports during the AAP's tenure, even moving the court to direct the government to table them. The saffron party had accused the AAP government of deliberately stalling the audits to hide alleged corruption. The issue was a major point of contention during the assembly elections, with the BJP highlighting the delay as an attempt to suppress findings of financial mismanagement. The BJP and the Congress have

used these findings to target former Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal, alleging misuse of public funds. Delhi Lieutenant Governor Vinai Kumar Saxena had previously raised concerns over the non-disclosure of these reports and had urged the legislative assembly to convene a special session in December last year. However, the reports were not presented during the AAP's tenure, leading to growing demands for their release. BJP leader Vijender Gupta, who was a vocal critic of the AAP government's handling of the CAG reports as the Leader of Opposition in the last assembly and had been marshalled out of the Assembly in the past for demanding their tabling, now presides as the Speaker. With Gupta in charge, the reports are expected to be placed before the House without further delay. As the Delhi Assembly session progresses, the findings of these CAG reports are expected to trigger heated political exchanges between the ruling BJP and the AAP, potentially shaping the political discourse in the national capital in the coming months.



Delhi Chief Minister Rekha Gupta takes oath on the first day of the Assembly session



Delhi Deputy Chief Minister Parvesh Verma



BJP leader Mohan Singh Bisht



Delhi minister Kapil Mishra

Assembly begins with MLAs taking oath in six languages

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI
From Sanskrit to English and Maithili to Punjabi, the first session of the newly constituted eighth Delhi Legislative Assembly began on Monday with MLAs of the ruling BJP and opposition AAP demonstrating the linguistic diversity of the legislature by taking their oaths in six languages including — Hindi, English, Sanskrit, Urdu, Maithili and Punjabi. Delhi Chief Minister Rekha Gupta, along with Cabinet ministers, and other Members of Legislative Assembly (MLAs), took oath in the House, in the presence of Delhi BJP president Virendra Sachdeva and pro-tem Speaker Arvinder Singh Lovely, as the first session of the Assembly began on Monday. Gupta arrived at the Delhi Assembly with confidence, flashing a victory sign was the first to take the oath, followed by her six Cabinet ministers. With her appointment, Rekha Gupta has become the fourth woman Chief Minister of Delhi, following Sheila Dikshit, Sushma Swaraj, and Atishi. She is also the fourth BJP leader to assume the role, succeeding Madan Lal Khurana,

Sahib Singh Verma, and Sushma Swaraj. Delhi PWD Minister Parvesh Sahib Singh Verma and Home Minister Ashish Sood were the next in line. Environment Minister Manjinder Singh Sirsa took his oath in Punjabi, while Law and Justice Minister Kapil Mishra opted for Sanskrit. The session also marked the BJP's return to power after 26 years and its shift to the right side of the Speaker's chair. BJP MLA Arvinder Singh Lovely was sworn in as the pro-tem Speaker of the eighth Assembly and administered the oath by Lieutenant Governor Vinai Kumar Saxena at the Raj Niwas before the session began. As the senior-most legislator, Lovely oversaw the swearing-in of all newly elected MLAs. Several other MLAs took oaths in different languages. Karnail Singh took oath in Punjabi, while Pradyumn Rajput and Neelam Pahwalwan chose Sanskrit. BJP's Tarvinder Marwah chanted religious slogans after reading the printed text, to which the Speaker objected, reminding him that it was not a Gurudwara. Amanatullah Khan (Urdu), Chandan Chaudhary (Maithili), Ajay Dutt (English),

and Gajendra Yadav (Sanskrit) also took their oaths, with the Speaker consistently instructing members to follow the official oath format. Other MLAs who took their oaths in Sanskrit included Sanjay Goel, Jitendra Mahajan, Ajay Mahawar, and BJP's Karnail Singh, while Chaudhary Zubair and Amanatullah Khan chose Urdu. Leader of Opposition and MLA from the Kalkaji seat, Atishi also took oath. Gopal Rai, due to difficulty in walking, took the oath from his seat, assisted by Atishi. Mohan Singh Bisht was the last MLA to be sworn in. AAP MLA Anil Jha took his oath in Maithili. The proceedings began with legislators singing Vande Mataram. Delhi BJP president Virendra Sachdeva was present in the Speaker's gallery to witness the session. The election for the new Speaker is set to take place later in the day, with BJP MLA Vijender Gupta likely to assume the position. The BJP secured a decisive victory in the February 5 Assembly elections, winning 48 of the 70 seats and ending the decade-long rule of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), which won 22 seats.

AAP protests outside CM's office

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI
The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) MLAs led by Leader of Opposition (LoP) Atishi staged a protest outside the office of Delhi Chief Minister Rekha Gupta in the assembly's premises on Monday, demanding the fulfilment of the BJP's promise to provide ₹2,500 to women in the city after the first Cabinet meeting. During the protest, AAP MLAs raised slogans and waving posters that "When will women get ₹2500?". Atishi also met Chief Minister Rekha Gupta to discuss the issue but received no assurance from her. "We asked for time from the Delhi Chief Minister two days ago. But we were not given time, so we are here outside her office in the assembly. We want to meet her regarding the promise of PM Modi to provide ₹2,500 to women after the first Cabinet," Atishi said after meeting Chief Minister Rekha Gupta. Atishi stated that the BJP and Prime Minister Narendra Modi had guaranteed in their first cabinet meeting that a scheme providing ₹2500 per month to women would be passed. "However, despite the BJP gov-



AAP MLAs stages protest outside the office of Delhi Chief Minister Rekha Gupta on Monday

Kapil Mishra, Manjinder Singh take charge, directs action plan

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI
BJP Cabinet Ministers Kapil Mishra and Manjinder Singh Sirsa took charge of their offices on Monday, directing officials to prepare action plans for their respective departments. Mishra assumed office as the Law and Justice Minister, while Sirsa took charge as the Minister of Environment and Industries. Mishra said, "Today, I have directed officials to begin preparing an action plan for the promises made in the manifesto that fall under our department's jurisdiction and to ensure its timely execution." Speaking at the meeting of the Comptroller and Auditor General's (CAG) report, which is set to be tabled in the Assembly on Tuesday, he said, "No one can stop the truth. The people have already delivered justice in the elections, and now, justice must also be served legally." On the other side, Sirsa outlined his priorities, saying, "Our mission is to make Delhi a healthier city by ensuring clean air and water, and we are committed to turning this vision into reality. Major environmental projects

will be undertaken in the city." Emphasising waste management, he added, "The large garbage mountains in Delhi, which Arvind Kejriwal's administration could not remove in 10 years, will be cleared within a year under our governance." He further said, "If Dashrath Manjhi could carve a road through a mountain, we can certainly remove garbage piles. We draw inspiration from his determination." Sirsa also claimed, "Around 30 per cent of Delhi's air pollution is caused by dust, with key stakeholders being MCD and PWD." He urged accountability, saying, "Every department must take responsibility-MCD and PWD should work to reduce their contribution to pollution, while we will ensure the removal of garbage mountains." On February 20 after the first Cabinet meeting, Kapil Mishra was assigned five portfolios, including law and justice, labour and employment, and art, culture language and tourism, while Manjinder Singh Sirsa received three - industries, forest and environment and food and supply departments.

BJP's Vijendra Gupta takes oath as speaker



BJP leader Vijendra Gupta takes oath as an MLA on the first day of the Delhi Assembly session



The chambers of Rekha Gupta and all the Ministers, seen adorned with the pictures of Mahatma Gandhi, BR Ambedkar, Bhagat Singh, President and Prime Minister PTI

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI
Marshalled out multiple times, three time MLA BJP leader Vijendra Gupta on Monday was unanimously elected as the Speaker of the eighth Delhi Legislative Assembly on the first day of the first session of the House on Monday following the formation of a new government. Gupta's ascension to the speaker's chair marks a full circle-moment for the BJP veteran, who had been marshalled or dragged out of the assembly multiple times during AAP's 10 years in office. Thanking the members for

choosing him as speaker, Gupta said, "I express my heartfelt gratitude to all the honourable members of this great House for electing me to this position and entrusting me with the serious responsibility of running this House. This House is historic and this position is a symbol of democratic values and parliamentary traditions. The first elected speaker in the parliamentary history of India, Vithalbhai Patel, had adorned this seat exactly 100 years ago. I pay my respectful obeisance to him." He said, "Power keeps changing, but the dignity, values and traditions of the House remain

eternal. I assure you that I will perform my duties as Speaker with complete honesty." He further emphasised that members of both the ruling and opposition parties are equal in his eyes and that safeguarding the democratic values of the House would be his top priority. He urged all to work together for the development of Delhi and said that this should be a collective resolution. "The image of any legislature is formed by the conduct of the members. Members are governed not only by the expectations of the public but also by the rules of the House," Gupta said.

"We are all bound by these rules. Therefore, I request all the members to follow all the prescribed rules during the proceedings. "It is our privilege to sit in this auditorium, which has been graced by our freedom fighters and great personalities, including Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Vithalbhai Patel, Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya, Sundar Singh Majithia, Pandit Motilal Nehru and Lala Lajpat Rai. Even Mahatma Gandhi visited this place twice," he said. Gupta, a three-time legislator, was the opposition leader in the assembly between 2015 and 2020 and briefly again

from last August. In June 2015, he was dragged out of the House by marshals for insisting that the government present the Fourth Delhi Finance Commission report. In October 2016, he climbed onto a table to register his protest. In November 2024, he was against marshalled out with his fellow BJP MLAs following a heated debate on Delhi's law and order. Gupta, who had been forcibly removed for vehemently insisting that Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) reports be presented in the House, is now expected to ensure that these reports are placed before the assembly. A former president of the BJP's Delhi unit, Gupta has represented Rohini since 2015. He started his political career in 1997 as a councillor. He lost his first assembly election to Arvind Kejriwal from the New Delhi seat in 2013. His name for the speaker's post was proposed by Chief Minister Rekha Gupta and Cabinet minister Ravinder Indraj, who were seconded by ministers Manjinder Singh Sirsa and Parvesh Verma. The motions were passed by voice vote. Following the election, conducted by Protem Speaker Arvinder Singh

Lovely, the chief minister and the opposition leader escorted the new speaker to his chair. Congratulating the new speaker, Chief Minister Gupta said, "Your experience and knowledge will be valuable in the assembly. We will have the opportunity to speak and express our thoughts. You have struggled to reach this position but I hope such struggles do not happen in the future and you lead the House efficiently." Leader of Opposition Atishi also congratulated Gupta and said, "I want to congratulate Vijender Gupta on behalf of all AAP MLAs. He served as the leader of opposition in the past two assemblies. He always raised the issues of the people with full strength." Minutes after Gupta took charge, chaos erupted in the House with sloganeering from both the treasury and the opposition benches after Atishi accused the BJP of being "anti-Dalit and anti-Sikh." She claimed the BJP removed photographs of Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar and Shaheed Bhagat Singh from the chief minister's office. Amid the uproar, Gupta adjourned the House for 15 minutes.

Delhi police arrests Dheerpal of Morkheri-Lagarpuria gang

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI
Delhi Police's Special Cell has arrested gangster Dheerpal alias Deepak, a key member of Manoj Morkheri and Vikas Lagarpuria gang. Dheerpal, 37, was apprehended in Uttar Pradesh's Chandousi following a three-month-long operation, the official said, adding that he had been evading law jumping interim bail in October 2023 granted for his mother's medical treatment. "A proclaimed offender in five criminal cases, including those under the Maharashtra Control of Organised Crime (MCOC) Act, he was also found to be using a false identity to evade capture," said Deputy Commissioner of Police (DCP), Special Cell, Amit Kaushik, in a statement. According to the police, Dheerpal has a long history of involvement in violent crimes, with 25 criminal cases, including murder, dacoity and kidnapping, registered against him. He had been declared a proclaimed offender in kidnapping for ransom in Prashant Vihar, MCOC Act violation of Crime Branch, robbery and arms act in Bahadurgarh city and Pataudi and an attempt to murder in Jhajjar.

Dheerpal had been on the run, frequently changing locations and avoiding digital traces to evade arrest. The police teams conducted multiple raids in Rajasthan, Haryana and Outer Delhi but failed to locate him initially. He was traced in Uttar Pradesh's Chandousi, where his movements were tracked on February 15, said the DCP, adding that he was arrested. Dheerpal, who hails from Redhuwas village in Jhajjar, studied up to the 12th standard. He became involved in criminal activities at a young age and initially worked as a supervisor at a petrol pump owned by his maternal uncle in Najafgarh. There, he came into contact with gangsters like Manoj Morkheri, Dheerpal alias Kana and Jyoti Prakash alias Baba, leading to his involvement in organised crime. In 2011, he, along with accomplices, kidnapped a person for ransom in Delhi's Prashant Vihar area. In 2012, he was involved in the high-profile murders of Dinesh alias Gabchu and Tinku Hasanpuria, key members of the rival Manjeet Mahal gang. Over the years, he was arrested multiple times but managed to secure interim bail on medical grounds.

Want Jammu and Kashmir where no life is lost due to terrorism: Amit Shah

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

There is peace in Jammu and Kashmir and this peace has to be permanent, and the Narendra Modi government's aim is to make a Jammu and Kashmir where no life is lost due to terrorism, Union Home Minister Amit Shah said here on Monday. Interacting with youngsters from Jammu and Kashmir who have come to the national capital under the Watan Ko Jano youth exchange programme, Shah also said the people of Jammu and Kashmir had equal rights over the entire country, like the people of any other state, and the entirety of India looked at the people of the Union Territory with love and respect. When terrorism comes to an

end, there is no need for the deployment of police and that day is not far, he added. "When there is peace, no police will be required. This message has to be carried by you to your friends, family and villages... when you go home, tell your friends, neighbours that the entire country is living in peace and the people of Jammu and Kashmir should also live in peace," Shah said. There is peace in Jammu and Kashmir and this peace has to be permanent and "our aim is to make a Jammu and Kashmir where no life is lost due to terrorism", he added. "Violence brings nothing. Due to the decades of terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir, 36,000 people lost their lives," the home minister said. Shah said Prime Minister Narendra Modi had made the



Home Minister Amit Shah interacts with 250 children from weaker sections of Jammu and Kashmir under 'Watan Ko Jano' programme in New Delhi
PIB

country equal for all by abrogating Article 370 and now, the people of Jammu and Kashmir had equal rights anywhere in India, like the people of Delhi, Rajasthan, Gujarat or Rajasthan. "You have rights over Jammu and Kashmir. Is it not good that you also have equal rights over the other 29 states of the country? Like Jammu and Kashmir, the whole country is yours," he said. Peace is most important for everyone and, under the Modi government, peace and development have come to Jammu and Kashmir, hospitals, roads and bridges have come, infrastructure has been created, he added. "The entire country looks at the people of Jammu and Kashmir with love and respect. It is because peace is prevalent there.

It is because of peace, development is taking place in Jammu and Kashmir," the home minister said. There are 30 states in the country and Jammu and Kashmir is one of them. Together, all these 30 states become India, he said. "Our country is our home. If you don't step out of Jammu and Kashmir, you will not be able to know the country. So, don't you think that you should visit and know the country well? In your next school vacation, you must visit any of the states along with your parents. If required, have a fight at home but you must visit one of the states," he added. In the past 10 years, terrorism has come to an end in Jammu and Kashmir, incidents of blasts and stone pelting have come to an end, and schools are opening regularly, the home minister noted.

Shah said there was no theatre earlier and no one could go to watch a film. There was no 'tazia' procession but, now, all these are happening, he said. Elections were held for local bodies and 36,000 people elected as panch, sarpanch. All these have happened in the past 10 years, he added. "When the country will progress, you will progress too. As much as the country progresses, becomes modern, you will also become prosperous. This is what Prime Minister Modi is doing," he said. The world's tallest railway bridge is now located in Jammu and Kashmir, Asia's longest tunnel is located in the Union Territory. It is the only place with two AIIMS and two IIMS, Shah said.

Segregating waste at source important for environment: SC

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Monday said segregation of waste at source was of "vital importance" for the environment and asked the NCR states for the compliances made in adherence to the Solid Waste Management Rules, 2016. A bench of Justices Abhay S Oka and Ujjal Bhuyan said the non-compliance in adhering to the 2016 Rules had affected all cities in the country. "In one of the orders, we have observed that all smart city projects are in progress. How the cities can become smart without compliance with the Solid Waste Management Rules?" the bench asked. The National Capital Region (NCR) comprises Delhi and certain districts of Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan. If there was no proper segregation of waste, the court said, even waste-to-energy projects would create more pollution. Senior advocate Aparajita Singh, the amicus curiae in the pollution matter, referred to solid waste management in the NCR while flagging the low percentage of segregation of waste. She said sending unsegregated waste to waste-to-energy plants caused more pollution. "As rightly submitted by the amicus curiae, the segregation of waste at source is of vital importance for the environment. If there is no proper segregation, even waste-to-energy projects will create more pollution," the bench said. The NCR states were ordered to file affidavits dealing with

the compliances of all the urban local bodies with the provisions of the 2016 Rules so far. They have been asked to file the affidavits by end of March following which the matter would be taken up. The bench has also asked the states to set out a comprehensive plan for waste management along with timelines and implementing agencies and said, "Needless to add that the affidavits will state compliance in relation to all urban local bodies within the NCR." The authorities were asked to set out the "best practices" they proposed to follow for solid waste management. The bench in the meantime directed the Central Pollution Control Board to submit a report on the impact of waste-to-energy projects on the environment. While dealing with the issue of solid waste management in the national capital previously, the court said if there was no real solution to tackle the issue of untreated solid waste generated per day, it would consider passing drastic orders to stop certain construction activities. It had flagged the failure of the Delhi government and the municipal corporation to comply with the 2016 Rules. "We are facing a huge problem which arises due to the fact that approximately 3,000 tonnes of solid waste generated every day in Delhi remains untreated. With the passage of time, this figure is bound to increase," it said on January 27. The aspect of solid waste management in Delhi-NCR came about when the apex court was hearing the issue of pollution in the NCR.

Essential to induct more women in UN peacekeeping missions, President Murmu

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

It is essential to induct more women in UN peacekeeping missions as they are better equipped to address gender-based violence, build trust and promote dialogue, President Droupadi Murmu said on Monday. Addressing a group of women peacekeepers who had called on the president at Rashtrapati Bhavan, she said the presence of women in a peacekeeping mission made it more diverse and inclusive. "Women peacekeepers often have greater access to local communities and can serve as role models for women and children. They are better equipped to address gender-based violence, build trust and promote dialogue," Murmu said. The president said peacekeeping missions with a higher percentage of women personnel had been more effective in reducing violence and achiev-

ing long-lasting peace agreements. "It is, therefore, essential that we induct more women in UN peacekeeping missions," she said. The president recalled India's proud history of contribution to UN peacekeeping, with more than 2,90,000 (2.90 lakh) peacekeepers having served in more than 50 missions. "Today, there are over 5,000 Indian peacekeepers in nine active missions, deployed in often-hostile conditions, for the cause of international peace and security," Murmu said. She expressed her happiness, noting that Indian women peacekeepers had been at the forefront of the call of duty. "Today, there are over 154 Indian women peacekeepers deployed in six ongoing UN missions. Right from the 1960s in Congo, to policing in Liberia in 2007, our women peacekeepers have exhibited the highest traditions of professionalism and conduct," Murmu said.

Modi Government not 'neo-fascist': CPI(M)

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Changing its stand, the CPI(M) has issued a note to its State units on the draft political resolution for the upcoming Party Congress. The note says the party does not consider the Narendra Modi Government or the Indian State as "neo-fascist", even as there are manifestations of "neo-fascist characteristics". The note sent to the State units of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) also stresses that the position is different from that of other Left parties, such as the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation. The CPI has characterised the BJP-led Centre as a fascist government, while the CPI(M) has said an "Indian fascism" has been put in place. The CPI(M)'s note says the political resolution talks about the danger of the Hindutva-corporate authoritarianism going towards neo-fascism, if the BJP-RSS is



Leader Prakash Karat CPI (M) File photo

not fought back and halted, but stresses that the party is not calling the Modi Government 'neo-fascist'. The draft political resolution of the CPI(M), which will be discussed at the Party Congress in Tamil Nadu's Madurai in April, was adopted at a meeting of the party's Central Committee in Kolkata from January 17 to January 19. The draft resolution says there has been a growing conflict between the forces of the Hindutva-corporate regime, represented by the Modi Government, and sec-

ular-democratic forces that are opposed to it. It says "the push to impose a reactionary Hindutva agenda and the authoritarian drive to suppress the opposition and democracy display neo-fascist characteristics". In the note, the CPI(M) has clarified that talking about the political setup showing "neo-fascist characteristics" does not mean that the party is calling the Modi government fascist or neo-fascist. "We are not saying that the Modi Government is a fascist or neo-fascist Government. Nor are we characterising

the Indian State as a neo-fascist State," the note has said. "What we are pinpointing is that after 10 years of continuous rule by the BJP, which is the political wing of the RSS, there has been a consolidation of political power in the hands of the BJP-RSS and this is resulting in the manifestation of 'neo-fascist characteristics'," the major Left party has said. "The word 'characteristics' means features or trends, but they have not developed into a neo-fascist government and political setup. So the political resolution is talking about the danger of the Hindutva-corporate authoritarianism going towards neo-fascism, if the BJP-RSS is not fought back and halted," the note has said. The CPI(M) has said the term "neo-fascism" is being used to distinguish it from the classical fascism, which rose in the inter-war years in Europe, like in Italy under Benito Mussolini and in Germany under Adolf Hitler. "Neo-fascism is a product of the crisis of neo-liberalism and is a global phenomenon," the party said.

Priyanka writes to PM, seeks relief package for Wayanad people

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Congress MP Priyanka Gandhi Vadra on Monday wrote to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, apprising him about the hardships being faced by the people of Wayanad while trying to rebuild their lives after the devastating landslides last year and urging him to convert the government's relief package into a grant. In a letter to Modi, the Congress general secretary said she believes that the people of Wayanad

deserve every possible assistance and support to pull themselves out of the terrible misfortune that has befallen them. "As the MP for Wayanad Lok Sabha, I felt it my duty to apprise you of the plight of the people of Chooralmala and Mundakkai in my constituency. It is indeed heartbreaking that even six months after a horrific tragedy destroyed their lives and livelihoods, they are facing unimaginable hardships while trying to rebuild their lives," Priyanka Gandhi said. Noting that a devastating land-

slide took place on July 30, 2024, in and around these two habitations of Wayanad district, she said in the aftermath of this disaster, 298 people were found dead, 231 bodies were recovered along with 223 body parts and 32 persons were reported missing and declared dead. She said 17 families with members totalling 58 persons were completely wiped out and 1,685 buildings damaged. "These were houses, schools, village offices, dispensaries, anganwadis, shops, religious centres and government buildings," she

said. The Congress leader said educational institutions, namely, the government vocational Higher Secondary School Vellarmala and the government lower primary school Mundakkai were completely wrecked by the landslide. "Permanent rehabilitation of these two institutions at which 658 students were previously enrolled is still awaited," she said. The Congress leader pointed out that 110 acre of agricultural land was destroyed by the landslide. "Tea, coffee and cardamom were the main crops of

this area. Many people who earned their livelihood from these crops and from tourism activities in this region found themselves without any means to earn a living. Jeep and autorickshaw drivers, shop owners, home-stay owners and tourist guides were some of those deprived of a livelihood in the aftermath of the disaster," she said. In ward numbers 10, 11 and 12 of Meppadi gram panchayats there are many small scale industry owners who are now struggling to make ends meet, she said in her letter.

"Given the above circumstances, it is clear that Wayanad district desperately needs support. Its people are resilient and brave, yet it is impossible for them to overcome this catastrophe without decisive financial and infrastructural support from both, the state and central governments. Unfortunately, the rehabilitation process is progressing at a painful pace," she said. This has only increased their agony and compounded the psychological turmoil they are experiencing as their future remains uncertain, she added.

Hindi can serve as country's common language, DMK indulging in 'petty politics': VHP

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Tamil is one of India's "national languages" but only Hindi can serve as the common language of coordination in the country, the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) said on Monday and asked the DMK not to "separate" Tamil Nadu from the mainstream of the country's progress by rejecting it. The remarks by the VHP come against the backdrop of an

ongoing row over a three-language formula for school education, prescribed under the National Education Policy (NEP), with the Tamil Nadu's ruling DMK accusing the Centre of attempting to impose Hindi on the state by insisting on the policy's implementation. VHP joint general secretary Surendra Jain also slammed the DMK for regularly objecting to Sanskrit and said the party was "blinded by vote bank" but it could not cut off Tamil Nadu "from its roots by separating it

from Hindi and Sanskrit". Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan has dismissed the Tamil Nadu government's opposition to the NEP as "politics", saying the three-language formula did not impose Hindi on students and that the state government could pick any three Indian languages for school education. Asked for comment, Jain hit out at the Tamil Nadu government, alleging that the DMK wanted to separate the state from the "mainstream of the

country's progress" by rejecting Hindi. "That's why it is not implementing the NEP while all academics are of the view that it is a good initiative to ensure progress of the people, including the new generation, and to make them good citizens," he said. Tamil is also a "national language" but the country needs one common language which everyone can speak, he said. "Will they speak English?" he asked.

"If there can be a language of coordination in the entire country, it can only be Hindi. So please do not separate Tamil Nadu from the mainstream of national progress by rejecting it," he added. Amid the row, pro-Tamil activists on Sunday smeared black paint on Hindi words on the boards at two railway stations in the state. A video became widely circulated on social media that purported to show the activists painting over "Pollachi

Junction" written in Hindi with black paint. Officials later rectified it. DMK activists also painted over the Hindi name on the board of Palayankottai station in Tirunelveli district with black paint. Six party workers were booked by the Railway Protection Force under provisions of the Railways Act. Slamming the DMK for its "petty politics" over language, the VHP functionary said a large number of people from Tamil Nadu visit-

ed Prayagraj to take a holy dip at the Sangam during the ongoing Maha Kumbh. "They did not properly understand Hindi but were in harmony with other devotees, speaking broken Hindi because they understood the language of the heart. Kumbh has become a symbol of Hindu unity," Jain said. Temples in Tamil Nadu are the living form of Hindu culture, he added. "The wife of the chief minister (MK Stalin) also goes there. His family members'

names are also (in Hindi) Karunanidhi, Dayanidhi, Udayanidhi," he said. He asked if Stalin would stop his wife from visiting temples and change the names of his family members. The VHP functionary said DMK MP Dayanidhi Maran recently protested against the Lok Sabha Secretariat's move to provide simultaneous interpretation of House proceedings in Sanskrit despite Tamil Nadu being home to the "oldest" Sanskrit college in the country.

India to host 12th Regional 3R and Circular Economy Forum in Asia and Pacific in Jaipur

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Union Minister Manohar Lal on Monday said India will host the 12th Regional 3R and Circular Economy Forum in Asia and the Pacific at Jaipur on March 3 to 5. He also informed that over 500 international and domestic participants are expected to attend the three-day conference packed with plenary sessions, country-specific discussions, theme-based roundtables, as well as knowledge-sharing and networking opportunities. "A dedicated 'India Pavilion' will showcase India's remarkable initiatives and achievements in the 3R and circular economy domain. This Pavilion will feature exhibitions from key line ministries and national missions, reflecting India's whole-of-government approach to sus-

tainable development. It will also serve as a hub for interactive knowledge-sharing, with sessions such as the 'Ministers & Ambassadors Roundtable Dialogue', 'Mayors' Dialogue', 'Policy Dialogue' and the signing of agreements under the CITIIS 2.0 program. Multiple launches of knowledge products will take place at the Forum including a compendium of over 100 best practices put together by the National Institute of Urban Affairs (NIUA). The Forum will host an international 3R trade and technology exhibition, providing a platform for over 40 Indian and Japanese businesses and start-ups to showcase best practices, ideas and solutions that support circularity and 3R principles, while encouraging cross-learning. Union Minister Shri Manohar Lal informed that

'Waste-to-wealth initiatives by NGOs and Self-help Groups across India will also be showcased at the Forum promoting sustainability-driven entrepreneurship and community engagement,' said Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs in a statement. Minister said that the 12th Forum will conclude with the adoption of the 'Jaipur Declaration' for enabling transition to a resource-efficient, circular economy in Asia-Pacific countries and will be handed over to the next host country. The Jaipur Declaration (2025-34) builds upon the Hanoi Declaration (2013-23) and aims to provide participating countries with a framework for developing 3R and circular economy policies and programs, which enable a shift from a linear 'take-make-dispose' economy to a circular economy.

BSF mobilises more troops along Pakistan border in Punjab and Jammu

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

The Border Security force (BSF) has ordered mobilisation of additional manpower at posts along the India-Pakistan border in Punjab and Jammu as part of its measures to strengthen the anti-infiltration grid and check the intrusion of drones carrying ammunition or drugs, official sources said Monday. The sources said that the Western Command of the Border Security Force headquartered in Chandigarh has also directed for setting up of nine "tactical" headquarters along the front in these two regions with the maximum intelligence and operations paraphernalia being "shifted" here under the monitoring of

a newly created control room. A tactical or 'tac headquarter' is a forward base which is closer to the border, just near the border post, and ahead of the battalion base in the rear. The 'tac headquarter', as per the sources, will also have the presence of one senior commander from all verticals including the commanding officer (CO) of the battalion whose unit is deployed at these vulnerable border posts, the sources said. Directions have also been issued to mobilise "maximum" manpower of the force to border guarding units all across these two regions after shifting them from the battalion headquarters, they said. Sources in the security establishment said the measure had been taken late last week keeping in mind the "vulner-

ability and the constant threat" to these border areas from the point of view of cross-border infiltration and drone flights emanating from Pakistan. "The directions mandate these steps to be taken immediately," a senior officer based in Punjab said. However, officials said that asking the commanding officers to be present at their respective tac headquarters "all the time" will lead to command and administration issues. The CO of a battalion is responsible for multiple companies and units that are deployed wide across and such an officer has to be moving across their different units rather than stationed at one place 24X7, BSF field officials said.

Why hasn't Bihar granted special category status as promised: Congress

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

The Congress on Monday posed questions to Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Bihar, asking why hasn't the state been granted Special Category Status as promised and why are so many essential projects lying incomplete there. Ahead of Prime Minister Modi's visit to Bihar, Congress general secretary in-charge communications Jairam Ramesh posed four questions for him. "Where are the promised airports for Bhagalpur, Muzaffarpur, and Purnea," Ramesh asked in his post on X. "The PM promised an airport in Purnea on 18th August, 2015. Six years and three Nitish Kumar U-turns later, his government is yet to fulfil the

promise," Ramesh said. In a 2019 rally, Modi promised to open Patahi Airport in Muzaffarpur and in 2023, Home Minister Amit Shah also pledged to kickstart operations at the Patahi airport, while the BJP promised a fully operational airport by Diwali 2023, he said. "However, an AAI ground team from March 2024 found that the land plot has broken boundary walls, and buffaloes roam the runway. What has the government been doing for 10 years? Muzaffarpur joins Purnea and Bhagalpur as cities that need and deserve airports, but under the Bharatiya Janata Party, all they get is broken promises. Why has the PM repeatedly lied to the people of Bihar on this subject?" Ramesh said.

It is time to invest in MP: PM Modi

BJP set up factory of 'jumlas' in Assam says Congress

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
BHOPAL

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Monday said with a strong talent pool and thriving industries, Madhya Pradesh is becoming a preferred business destination and that this is the time, and right time, to invest in the state.

He was speaking after inaugurating the mega 'Invest Madhya Pradesh - Global Investors Summit-2025' at the Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya, located near the picturesque Upper Lake in Bhopal, to showcase the state's infinite possibilities for investors and industrialists.

Modi said the World Bank has expressed confidence that India will continue to be the world's fastest growing economy in the coming years.

The World Bank recently said in its Global Economic Prospects report that India will remain the fastest-growing major economy for next two years.

Modi also said the Deregulation Commission will help create investment-friendly regulatory



PM Narendra Modi with Madhya Pradesh CM Mohan attends the Global Investors Summit 2025 in Bhopal

PTI

ecosystem in the states. India is emerging as the top supply chain for global aerospace firms, he said, adding that textile, tourism and technology sectors will generate crores of jobs in the years to come.

The PM also unveiled 18 new policies of the Madhya Pradesh government, aimed at attracting major investment in the BJP-ruled state. "With a strong talent pool and thriving industries,

Madhya Pradesh is becoming a preferred business destination," Modi said. "This is the time, and right time, to invest in the state," the prime minister said. "The speed of development in Madhya Pradesh has doubled after the formation of the 'double engine' government in the state," he said.

Modi further said Madhya Pradesh is among the leading states in India's electric

vehicles revolution. There are several opportunities in the health and wellness sector in the country, he said, adding, "The world is liking the 'heal in India' mantra".

Modi said in the past two decades, MP has seen a lot of transformations. There were issues pertaining to electricity and water, and law and order was even worse. In such a scenario, industrial development was

difficult, he noted. But in the past 20 years, with the help of the people, the BJP state government focused on governance.

Two decades ago, people used to stay away from investing here (in MP), and now it is among the top states in the country for investment, Modi said.

He said that a few days ago, a UN organisation on climate change called India a "solar power superpower".

"This organisation also said that while many countries only talk, India shows results," Modi added.

On the occasion, Chief Minister Mohan Yadav said with the organisation of the Global Investors Summit here, Madhya Pradesh will make its identity as a major global investment destination.

Yadav said his government is committed to double the state's economy in the next five years, as part of the country's commitment to make India a developed nation by 2047.

Madhya Pradesh has decided to observe 2025 as a year of industries and employment, as part of its commitment towards making India a developed nation, he added.

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

The Congress on Monday demanded answers from Prime Minister Narendra Modi over alleged corruption under the Himanta Biswa Sarma dispensation in Assam and asserted that the "double dhokha (betrayal) government" will be held accountable for its "sins" in the assembly polls next year.

Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge said Modi has set up a "factory of jumlas" in Assam, whose mastermind is the most corrupt chief minister of the BJP.

"Recently, Congress leaders in Assam have been attacked both ways - politically and physically! The public will respond to these attacks by forming a Congress government after one year," Kharge said in a post on X.

The state of Assam is suffering the consequences of corruption, hatred and misgovernance by the "land mafia of the BJP", he alleged.

"The unemployment of the youth, the helplessness of the tea garden workers, the rebuke of the Hon'ble Supreme Court on the issue of

illegal foreigners and the hypocrisy of the BJP are well known.

"The state has lagged behind on every scale of development and economically. 3.5 Crore people of Assam are extremely angry, no slogan of Modi ji can cool their anger now. Change is certain in Assam and the North-East," he asserted.

Addressing a press conference ahead of Prime Minister Modi's visit to Assam, Congress general secretary in-charge of party affairs in the state, Jitendra Singh, said what magic lamp did Modi give to the Assam chief minister that he (Sarma) became a business tycoon.

"Himanta Biswa Sarma has built an entire empire in Assam. The Chief Minister of Assam owns many tea gardens, news portals, a big outlet of McDonald's, international schools and lots of lands. A lot of land has been purchased in tribal areas including Majuli, Kamrup, Guwahati, Nagaon, Golaghat, where land cannot be purchased," he said at the presser also addressed by Assam Congress chief Bhupen Borah, Gaurav

Gogoi, Pradyut Bordoloi, Pawan Khera, among others. Singh also alleged that rat-hole mining was happening under the nose of Assam CM. If all this is happening, then are Narendra Modi's agencies investigating, he asked.

State Congress chief Borah said Assam Tribal Students Organization has asked three questions to PM Modi today. During the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, Modi had promised that the daily wage of 11 Lakh tea workers of Assam would be increased to ₹351 but today this wage is between ₹250 and ₹220, Borah said.

"Narendra Modi had promised that six communities of Assam will be given ST status within 100 days. This promise has not been fulfilled till date. Rat-hole mining is illegal in Assam, but it still continues in many places.

"So the question is: under whose leadership is illegal rat-hole mining taking place in Assam? When will there be an investigation into illegal rat-hole mining, when will the CM take action?" he said.

Borah said he was attacked a few days ago, but no one has been arrested till date.

VIP darshan suspended at Kashi Vishwanath from February 25-27

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
VARANASI

Anticipating a heavy rush of devotees during Mahashivratri, authorities have decided to suspend the VIP 'darshan' facility at the Kashi Vishwanath temple here from February 25 to 27.

Kashi Vishwanath Temple's Chief Executive Officer, Vishw Bhushan Mishra said on Monday that the number of visitors to the temple has significantly increased due to the return flow of devotees from the ongoing Maha Kumbh in nearby Prayagraj.

With Mahashivratri falling on February 26 this year alongside the Kumbh Mela, pilgrims from across the country, along with saints from various akharas, including Naga sadhus, are expected to arrive in large numbers to offer prayers, he noted.

"On this occasion, the Naga akharas will also take out a grand procession, which will temporarily block general access through gate number four of the temple. This is likely to increase the waiting time for regular devotees.

Given the hot and humid weather conditions, prolonged waiting could pose health risks, especially for children, women, and elderly visitors.

Keeping this in mind, authorities have decided to completely suspend VIP darshan for the three-day period," he said. Mishra noted that last year, around 12 Lakh devotees visited Kashi Vishwanath Dham on Mahashivratri.

However, given that this is a Maha Kumbh year, the number is expected to be even higher.

Divisional Commissioner Kaushal Raj Sharma emphasised the significance of Mahashivratri for Kashi, saying currently, six to nine Lakh people are visiting the Kashi Vishwanath temple daily during the Maha Kumbh.

On Mahashivratri, the number is expected to reach 10 to 12

Lakh. To manage the massive crowd, the number of queues at all four temple gates has been increased, and specific timings have been allocated for akharas and Naga sadhus, while the remaining time slots are reserved for general devotees, Sharma said.

Additional arrangements have been made within the temple premises, including drinking water stations, ORS and glucose supplies, shaded waiting areas, medical facilities, and ambulances, he said.

Deputy Commissioner of Police (Kashi Zone) Gaurav Banswal said that for crowd management and security, police have identified 55 locations in the city where barricading will be enforced.

The Kashi Vishwanath temple premises have been divided into zones and sectors, with 13 sectors assigned to dedicated police forces.

The area from Godowlia to Maidagin intersection has been declared a no-vehicle zone, and barricading will be strengthened up to Dashashwamedh Ghat, he said.

To ensure smooth traffic flow, eight traffic inspectors, 24 traffic sub-inspectors, 164 head constables, and over 300 home guards will be deployed across the city, he added.

According to information available on the Kashi Vishwanath Temple's website, on Mahashivratri, the 'Mangala Aarti' would be performed at 2.15 am while the midday 'Bhog Aarti' will be held at 11.35 am.

However, there will be no Saptarishi Aarti (6.15 pm), Shringar-Bhog Aarti (8 pm) and Shayan Aarti (10.30 pm) on February 26, it showed.

"The temple doors will not be closed on the day of Mahashivratri and four-hour aarti will be performed from 11 pm to 6.30 am the next day. Mangala aarti will not be performed the next day of Mahashivratri," stated the message on the website attributed to the temple's trust.

Fadnavis approves 109 names as OSDs, PS to ministers

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
MUMBAI

Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis on Monday said he cleared 109 out of 125 names referred by cabinet ministers for their appointment as personal secretaries or OSDs but didn't approve others because they are either facing inquiries or known as "fixers".

"I have received some 125 names of officials whom my cabinet colleagues wanted to appoint as either personal secretaries (PS) or as officers on special duty. Out of it, I have cleared the names of 109.

"The reasons behind not clearing the names of the remaining (16) is either there is some inquiry going on against those officials or they are known as fixers in the administrative circles," Fadnavis told reporters.

He also said the rest (16) are facing various types of allegations. "Even if it would hurt someone, I will not clear such names".

Fadnavis also snubbed Agriculture Minister Manikrao Kokate, who belongs to the Nationalist Congress Party, over his remarks that even PS and OSDs are appointed by the chief minister, "leaving nothing in our hands".

Kokate had said that Fadnavis issued a stern warning to all his cabinet colleagues to maintain strict discipline within their respective departments.

"He (Fadnavis) stated that any minister who attempts to deviate from the government's plan risks losing their position. There is nothing left in our hands, as even the PS and OSDs are appointed by the chief minister. We will have to

perform now," Kokate said.

When asked about the agriculture minister's remarks, Fadnavis said Kokate probably didn't know approving the appointments of PS and OSDs is the CM's prerogative.

"A minister can propose candidates, but the final decision rests with my office," the CM added.

Fadnavis also expressed concerns regarding the issue of illegal constructions near Mumbai, which have led to court interventions.

"Some builders are playing a dirty game, by first engaging in illegal constructions and then manipulating individuals to file cases in court against illegal structures.

Deputy Chief Minister Eknath Shinde has brought this issue to my attention. We will intervene in the courts to end such practices," he said.

Irtiga Mufti's seeks support to ban liquor in J and K

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
SRINAGAR

Irtiga Mufti, the eldest daughter of Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) chief Mehbooba Mufti, has taken a political stand against alcohol consumption in Jammu and Kashmir, and sought support from the public for the party's campaign to ban liquor in the Union Territory.

In a video message on X seeking support for the PDP's campaign to ban alcohol, Irtiga Mufti said, "Please be a part of our fight against alcohol and addiction.

Sign our digital signature campaign which I will be linking in my bio soon. And remember, the ban is just the beginning."

Electricity employees to go for nationwide strike against privatisation

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NAGPUR

The CITU backed Electricity Employees Federation of India has urged central government and state government to stop further privatisation of power and energy sector and decided to protest against the implementation of Labour Codes. The national convention of electricity employees and engineers held in Nagpur on Sunday decided to go for strike on June 26 and blamed Central and State Government for "forcefully privatised its highly profitable, efficient and low tariff power utility in an irregular manner".

"The National Federations of electricity employees and engineers under the banner of National Coordination Committee discussed very gravely about the multi-prong attacks on the public electricity sector and the energy security of our country.

The convention took a serious note over the attacks on the democratic rights of the electricity employees and consumers, especially in UP. The Strike proposal was supported by the Samyukta Kishan Morcha and Central Trade Union leaders present in the Convention. The Strike is the response to all the attacks unleashed by the Central and several State Governments upon the public Power industry.

"After being elected for the third time, the NDA government has become desperate to privatise all the public electricity utilities.

Under the diktat of the Central government, the Chandigarh UT Administration forcefully privatised its highly profitable, efficient and low tariff Power Utility in an irregular manner. Desperate attacks of Privatisation have been unleashed on Purvanchal Vidyut Vitaran Nigam Ltd. (PVVNL) and Dakshinanchal Vidyut Vitaran Nigam Ltd. (DVVNL) of Uttar Pradesh.

It will put the service of 27,000 employees and engineers and 50,000 contract workers at stake. Electricity employees and engineers of UP are fighting for last 87 days defying the instigation and attacks of the UP administration," said Electricity Employees Federation in a statement.

The Federation also blamed Rajasthan Government for starting bidding process to privatise the Generation and Battery Storage Projects. Battle is going on for last several months in Telangana, where the Government has planned to handover the electricity distribution service of South Hyderabad Circle to Adani group, said the Federation.

"Actually, the Central Government is in real haste to privatise the state DISCOMs. A unique regional meeting on Power sector with States and UTs of Delhi, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Ladakh, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh has been held on 20th February, New Delhi.

As per the Press Release of the Ministry of Power, "the States have urged Centre for support in privatisation of distribution" and "Listing of Utilities will be taken up by States to bring investment."

Undoubtedly, all these State governments will try to move very fast in their privatisation agenda," said Prasanta N Chowdhury, General Secretary of Electricity Employees Federation.

"Further to facilitate the privatisation project, a Group of Ministers have been formed by the Government of India and the convener of the group is the UP Energy Minister, who is infamous for his privatisation drives. And again the Central government is coming with a new draft of the Electricity Amendment Bill.

The struggle is bound to be sharpened in coming days," added the Federation.

Yogi slams SP over remarks on Kumbh arrangements

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
LUCKNOW

Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath slammed the opposition Samajwadi Party on Monday, saying that during its rule in the state, the chief minister did not have the time to review Kumbh arrangements and "a non-Sanatani was made its in charge".

He was referring to the Kumbh organised in 2013 when Akhilesh Yadav was the Uttar Pradesh chief minister and Mohammad Azam Khan was made the in charge of the religious congregation in Prayagraj.

In his address in the state assembly, Adityanath said, "We have not played with faith like you. In your time, the chief minister did not have time to see and review the event and therefore he appointed a non-Sanatani as the in-charge of Kumbh."

"But here I myself was



UP CM Yogi Adityanath speaks as Finance Minister Suresh Kumar Khanna looks on during the Budget session of the UP Assembly in Lucknow

PTI

reviewing Kumbh and am still doing it. This is the reason that whoever went to the Kumbh in 2013 saw chaos, corruption, and pollution.

There was no water fit for bathing in the Triveni of Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati. The prime minister of Mauritius is an example of this who refused

to take a bath," he said.

Adityanath said that this time people are visiting the Maha Kumbh continuously.

"The President, the prime minister and the vice president visited there. The King of Bhutan came, and heads of all other countries of the world — that is 74 nations — visited the place. All of them

participated in the event and made it successful. For the first time... everyone became a part of this event and made it successful," he added.

Adityanath alleged that in the past one-and-a-half months, leftists and socialists made poisonous statements on social media about Maha Kumbh.

"Apart from dirt, disorder and trouble of tourists, they found nothing else there. But apart from all this, their ideology has no effect on the ground.

There is silence on hundreds of deaths due to conditions during Haj. The leftists and seculars of India who have been seen speaking on the Maha Kumbh maintain silence on that," he said.

Attacking the opposition over their criticism of Kumbh arrangements, he said whoever searched for something in Kumbh, got it.

Gurugram police arrests 27 cyber criminals for defrauding ₹157.90 Crore

STAFF REPORTER ■ GURUGRAM

The cyber crimes teams of the Gurugram police have arrested 27 including a minor cyber criminals who defrauded people in 14,633 complaints worth ₹157.90 Crore, police said on Monday.

According to the police, After reviewing the data of the 17 mobile phones and 03 SIM cards recovered from the accused by the police from the Indian Cyber Crime Coordinate Center (I4C), it was found that the accused were involved in fraud of about ₹157.90 Crore and around 14,633 complaints were registered against them across India. In connection to this out of 14,633 complaints 611 were converted into cases which were registered across India.

Out of 611 cases, 28 cases were registered against them in Haryana including 4 in Gurugram.

The accused revealed before the salutes that they used to commit fraud by creating fake IDs on Instagram and cheating people, committing fraud in the name of investment, digital arrest, KYC related fraud and task based fraud.

The investigation teams have recovered 7 mobile phones, 03 SIM cards and 02 debit cards from the possession of the accused. "The accused used to defraud people in the name of investing in the stock market, online loans and offers lucrative offers to the victims and duped them," Priyanshu Diwan, ACP (south) said. He said that the Gurugram police is closely working with other agencies

and organisations to counter these frauds. "We appealed to the public to steer clear of such dubious callers and advised caution in sharing personal details to strangers stalking them online," he added.

"The cyber fraudsters commit fraud by luring people with good profits, investing in the stock market, reducing electricity bills, in the name of buying/selling cheap goods online, sextorting through video calls on WhatsApp, morphing, sending links through various means, posing as a customs officer/police officer in the name of implicating false case, in the name of issuing a No-Objection Certificate, digitally arresting people by showing the fear of implicating them in a criminal case, etc," he said.

32 AAP MLAs, ministers in touch with me: Punjab Congress leader Bajwa

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
CHANDIGARH

Punjab Congress leader Partap Singh Bajwa Monday claimed that 32 AAP MLAs were in touch with him to switch sides. Hitting back, the ruling AAP's state unit president Aman Arora claimed that it was Bajwa who has made an "advance booking" to join the BJP.

Speaking to reporters outside the Punjab Assembly, Bajwa also claimed that Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann was in touch with the BJP. "When (Arvind) Kejriwal decides to remove him, he (Mann) will pack his bags and join them (BJP)," he claimed.

The leader of the opposition in the state assembly asserted that in his 45 years of political experience, he has never made any wrong statement. "We had

earlier said the Congress does not have any intention to topple this (AAP) government," he said.

"I am saying this again 32 MLAs are in touch with me. Not only MLAs, but even ministers are in touch with me. Aman Arora is also aware of this matter," claimed Bajwa.

"They (AAP MLAs) all know that this is their last term. They are looking for new parties to get tickets. I am in touch with them (32 MLAs). We will see who is to be brought in, who is likely to win the polls and who is not. It will happen at an appropriate time."

Lashing out at Mann, the Qadian MLA claimed that the chief minister remained "absent" from the House on the first day of the two-day session of the Punjab Assembly, which began here on Monday.

HC dismisses plea against Mahashivratri celebrations at Isha Foundation, Coimbatore

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
CHENNAI

The Madras High Court on Monday dismissed a petition seeking direction to authorities concerned from granting permission to conduct Mahashivratri celebrations at Isha Foundation in Coimbatore.

Petitioner S T Sivagnanan had sought a direction to the authorities to initiate appropriate action against Isha Foundation for allegedly operating its facilities without adequate sewage treatment facilities, discharging untreated sewage, for causing severe noise pollution and desist from issuing any permission for conducting the Mahashivratri function on February 26 and 27 in light

of alleged violations committed last year. The Court had last week directed the Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board (TNPCB) to verify as to whether the rules and regulations are being followed by the foundation during Mahashivratri celebrations.

TNPCB on Monday informed HC that Isha Foundation has adequate treatment facility to handle the sewage generated.

R Kannan, member secretary, TNPCB stated this in his court affidavit filed in response to the petition filed by Sivagnanan.

Kannan submitted that Isha Foundation has provided adequate treatment facilities and the standard of the

Ambient Noise Level was within the standards prescribed by the Board. In the premises of the Isha Foundation, seating capacity was only 60,000. He said no complaint petition has been received from the public regarding air, water and noise pollution.

This yoga center has necessary infrastructure facilities to handle solid, liquid and noise pollution during Mahashivratri function.

The Isha Foundation has also followed Noise Rules, he added.

Following this, a division bench comprising Justices S M Subramaniam and K Rajasekar dismissed the petition filed by Sivagnanan.



www.dailypioneer.com

facebook.com/dailypioneer | @TheDailyPioneer | instagram.com/dailypioneer/

PAPER WITH PASSION

German election Tik Toked

As Germany votes to elect its new chancellor, far right may make substantial gains thanks to its Tik Tok campaign

Germany votes in a snap federal election, a political shake-up triggered by the collapse of the three-party coalition government at the end of last year. With 59.2 million eligible voters, this election is set to reshape the country's political landscape, potentially heralding a shift towards conservatism and a stronger far-right presence. At the forefront of the race is Friedrich Merz, the 69-year-old leader of the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU). Merz has emerged as the frontrunner to become Germany's next chancellor, advocating for economic stability, stricter immigration policies, and a reassertion of Germany's leadership in Europe. The far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) is poised to make historic gains, emerging as the second-largest political force. This comes at the expense of Chancellor Olaf Scholz's Social Democratic Party (SPD), which has suffered due to economic stagnation and dissatisfaction with the previous coalition government. The Green Party and the Free Democrats (FDP), both



part of the fallen coalition, have also struggled to maintain voter confidence. Meanwhile, the Left Party is fighting to remain relevant amid internal divisions and the broader shift in political sentiment.

This election is taking place at a critical juncture for Germany, with pressing domestic and international challenges shaping the national narrative. Germany, the EU's largest economy, is grappling with slow growth, rising inflation, and concerns about industrial competitiveness. Many voters are looking for a leader who can restore economic stability and drive innovation. Besides, the country has faced growing debates over migration policies, with many Germans expressing concerns about integration and border security. The AfD has capitalised on this sentiment, calling for stricter immigration controls. With growing geopolitical tensions, including relations with China, Russia, and the United States, Germany's next leader will need to navigate foreign policy challenges carefully. But the biggest factor that is being analysed is why the AfD is gaining ground? Indeed, the rise of the AfD can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, economic dissatisfaction has pushed voters towards populist rhetoric, with the AfD portraying itself as the party of change. Secondly, frustration with the previous coalition's handling of immigration and energy policy has bolstered nationalist sentiments. An interesting aspect of this election has been the role played by social media, particularly TikTok. The AfD has effectively leveraged TikTok to reach younger audiences, spreading populist messages through short, engaging videos, often laced with negative content. Meanwhile, mainstream parties have struggled to counteract misinformation and viral narratives that favor the far-right. This election underscores the growing influence of digital platforms in modern politics, raising questions about regulation and the impact of algorithm-driven content on democratic processes. Whatever the outcome, it will have far-reaching implications for Germany, the EU and beyond.

cerns about integration and border security. The AfD has capitalised on this sentiment, calling for stricter immigration controls. With growing geopolitical tensions, including relations with China, Russia, and the United States, Germany's next leader will need to navigate foreign policy challenges carefully. But the biggest factor that is being analysed is why the AfD is gaining ground? Indeed, the rise of the AfD can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, economic dissatisfaction has pushed voters towards populist rhetoric, with the AfD portraying itself as the party of change. Secondly, frustration with the previous coalition's handling of immigration and energy policy has bolstered nationalist sentiments. An interesting aspect of this election has been the role played by social media, particularly TikTok. The AfD has effectively leveraged TikTok to reach younger audiences, spreading populist messages through short, engaging videos, often laced with negative content. Meanwhile, mainstream parties have struggled to counteract misinformation and viral narratives that favor the far-right. This election underscores the growing influence of digital platforms in modern politics, raising questions about regulation and the impact of algorithm-driven content on democratic processes. Whatever the outcome, it will have far-reaching implications for Germany, the EU and beyond.

PICTALK



A parrot perches on a 'Palas' flower, in Bastar

PTI

Navigating differences: Lessons in collaboration from a life in leadership

My experiences have taught me that to find common ground one must show patience, open to dialogue and accommodate perspectives different from your own

I have been trying to set up a small library within my condominium complex. A lady was apprehensive about the criticism from a select few for the expenditure on this noble venture. Her sharp rejoinder that she could never stoop so low to my simple solution of inviting the critics to inaugurate the library left me seething.

In another instance, a lady unequivocally told me that she would not work with another lady in the Art and Literature Festival I am organizing within my society. I found their response irrational. I had worked in the government sector for more than 30 years out of the 35 years of an active professional life.

The initial 17 years were spent in handling big teams of literate or semi-literate staff. My success depended upon their performance. I could not achieve much without the support of subordinates, peers, and superiors. I did not have the luxury of going back to my seniors to shift a person if he did not perform. I also could not go back asking for a transfer if I felt overwhelmed by the people who



had strong unions, and who would not hesitate to run me down even at the slightest hint of weakness. I was taking stock of the previous day's performance with my senior supervisor in my very first posting in a maintenance shed that had more than 1,000 staff.

A group of staff and their leaders barged into the room to air their grievances. An unruly element from the crowd threw an earthen tea cup to landed right in front of me on the table. I had to gulp down the insult to present a brave face as I thundered in the most authoritative voice I could muster that the meeting was over and I would not discuss any further. It turned out that they were testing me and the leaders

tried their best to be on my right side. A senior visited my shop floor during lunch hours in another posting in a production unit a few years later.

A place where a lot of grease was used was usually quite gloomy with layers of the sticky substance accumulating over years. The shop floor would also not be the cleanest of the places at lunchtime. Railways was an extremely hierarchical organisation with the seniors considering themselves masters at insulting the subordinates, particularly the officers, who would not retaliate in front of the staff out of a sense of propriety. This senior gentleman shouted at me that if the cleaning staff was not available, then I should have cleaned myself.



SANJAY CHANDRA

My supervisor and the staff showed more compassion as they rushed around. There were many such incidents when I felt degraded and insulted. I did not have the same options that the two young ladies wanted to exercise. To give credit to both, they are well educated, one of them having studied psychology in college, the other is a medical professional. I find a similar unwillingness in other younger professionals. They are rigid in their approach to daily problems and would rather not talk to a person with contrary opinions than sit down to resolve them. The attitude often spills into the personal lives also. There would always be some difficult times. There is a need to discuss and find a middle ground.

I would like to bring their attention to the famous words of Abraham Lincoln, "I do not like that man. I must get to know him better." It will take a lot of time and effort. But in the end, it will be worth it. (The author is an electrical engineer with the Indian Railways and conducts classes in creative writing; views are personal)

A G Rajmohan | Anantapur

Susant Pal | Bhubaneswar

Madam — After the suicide of a Nepali student at Odisha's KIIT University following an unhealthy relationship, some sections of the media are targeting the university

Madam — US President Donald Trump's economic and geopolitical decisions have

raised global concerns. His imposition of tariffs on Mexico, Canada, Brazil, and China has strained trade relations. His remarks about annexing Canada and Panama are alarming, while his characterization of India as the highest tariff-imposing nation risks diplomatic tensions. On foreign policy, Trump's abandonment of Ukraine, despite US Democrats pushing it into conflict with Russia, has left the nation vulnerable.

His call for Palestinians to vacate Gaza and seek refuge in Egypt and Jordan adds to Middle East instability. If America alienates nations through unilateral policies, it risks losing global leadership. A hostile US stance could push China and Russia closer. No country, not even the US, can remain strong forever without allies. For America to truly remain great, Trump must adopt a more cooperative and balanced approach to international relations.

Gopalaswamy J | Chennai

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

New VC appointment rules undermine State autonomy



K S TOMAR

The UGC's draft guidelines, while ostensibly aimed at ensuring uniformity in VC appointments, have opened a Pandora's box of political and constitutional concerns

The University Grants Commission's (UGC) draft guidelines proposing a shift in the appointment of Vice-Chancellors (VCs) have ignited a political storm. By granting Chancellors—predominantly Governors—the authority to constitute search-cum-selection committees for appointing VCs, the UGC has stirred concerns about federalism, state autonomy, and academic independence.

Adding to the controversy, non-compliance with these guidelines could disqualify state universities from UGC funding schemes, creating a direct clash between the Centre and opposition-ruled states such as Tamil Nadu, Kerala, West Bengal, Punjab, and Himachal Pradesh. This move, seen as a veiled attempt to centralise power over state universities, places the spotlight on India's federal structure and the simmering tension between state governments and Governors, especially in opposition-led states. At the core of the debate is the growing role of Governors, often viewed as proxies of the Centre, in state governance.

Historically, state governments have played a central role in appointing VCs by constituting independent search committees. However, the UGC's draft proposes a shift, granting Governors—functioning as Chancellors of state universities—control over these committees. Governors, constitutionally expected to act as neutral figures, have increasingly been accused of serving partisan interests, particularly in states like Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and West Bengal. By formalizing the Governor's role in academic appointments, the UGC guidelines risk politicising the process, potentially undermining academic independence and turning universities into ideological battlegrounds. The fears of state governments are not unfounded.

In Tamil Nadu, for example, the DMK has accused the Governor of deliberately delaying VC appointments to push candidates aligned with the ruling party at the Centre. Similarly, Kerala has witnessed repeated stand-offs between the Governor and the state government over academic



appointments. The new guidelines only add fuel to these already volatile relationships. The UGC's draft guidelines also raise significant constitutional questions. Education, as a subject under the Concurrent List, allows both the Centre and states to legislate on it. However, the Constitution also upholds federal principles, granting states substantial control over their universities.

The new guidelines, by empowering Governors to dominate the VC appointment process, are being viewed as an encroachment on states' jurisdiction. Several states may challenge these guidelines in court, arguing that they violate the federal structure enshrined in the Constitution. States like Tamil Nadu have already passed laws to curtail the Governor's powers in academic governance, reflecting a broader pushback against what they see as an overreach by the Centre.

For opposition-ruled states, where educational institutions are often viewed as bastions of intellectual and political autonomy, the UGC's guidelines have deepened fears of central overreach. The ruling dispensations in states like Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and West Bengal have expressed strong apprehensions about Governors using this newfound authority as an extension of the Centre's political influence. In West Bengal, Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's government has long accused the Governor of interfering in the state's affairs, particularly in



THE FEAR IS THAT SUCH INTERFERENCE COULD STIFLE INTELLECTUAL DIVERSITY, WITH UNIVERSITIES BECOMING VEHICLES FOR PROPAGATING THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT'S POLITICAL AGENDA

the educational domain. The UGC guidelines could exacerbate this friction, allowing the Governor to influence appointments to academic institutions. Such moves, critics argue, undermine the intellectual independence that universities in the state have historically enjoyed.

In Kerala, where the Left Democratic Front (LDF) government has vociferously defended educational autonomy, the guidelines are being seen as an outright encroachment on the state's constitutional rights. The state government fears that politicised appointments could compromise the ideological neutrality and academic standards of its universities.

The DMK-led Tamil Nadu government has also repeatedly opposed the Governor's increasing interference in educational appointments. The state has even passed legislation to reduce the Governor's control over the VC selection process, only to have it stalled by the Governor. For Tamil Nadu, these new guidelines are a direct challenge to the state's efforts to safeguard its educational institutions from external political influence.

Universities, as centres of higher learning, thrive on autonomy and academic freedom. The UGC's intervention threatens to compromise these principles by potentially turning VCs into political appointees. Critics argue that such appointments could erode academic independence, with VCs prioritising political allegiance over edu-

cational excellence. In opposition-led states, this concern is particularly acute.

The fear is that such interference could stifle intellectual diversity, with universities becoming vehicles for propagating the central government's political agenda. This interference also undermines the confidence of academicians and researchers.

Scholars worry that political considerations will outweigh merit in appointments, leading to a decline in the quality of higher education. The resulting chilling effect could discourage free thought and innovation in academic institutions.

The controversy over VC appointments is emblematic of a larger tussle between the Centre and states over federalism. For states like Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and West Bengal, the guidelines represent an erosion of their autonomy in managing critical domains such as education. This growing centralisation also poses questions about the role of Governors in a federal structure.

A balanced approach, one that respects state autonomy while ensuring accountability in academic governance, is the need of the hour. Without such a resolution, the guidelines risk becoming another flashpoint in the Centre-state relationship, with significant implications for India's federal structure and the future of its education system.

(The writer is a senior political analyst and strategic affairs columnist)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

FARMERS DESERVE FAIR PRICES

Madam — The Union Agriculture Minister talking about the government working out schemes (February 23) to prevent distress sale of farm produce is welcome. India continues to be predominantly an agrarian country. Its contribution to the country's GDP was around 51 per cent at the time the country got freedom. Still, we had to depend on aids like PL480 to feed the poor. Thanks to the green revolution taken up with all by the government as well as the farming community with all sincerity the country is upgraded to food surplus status. But due to the shifting of focus from agriculture to industry, agriculture is suffering the worst, facing all sorts of odds at every level.

Though every commodity's price is fixed by the producer, it doesn't hold good for the farm produce. The government doesn't volunteer to take the ground reality into account and fix the cost, leaving it to the market dynamics. This policy has allowed the middlemen to play havoc. This reality, coupled with the apathetic moves of the government, has resulted in millions of farmers resorting to committing suicide. Many small farmers are deserting their farming activities and migrating to cities seeking daily wage jobs for their livelihood. The government is still not sensitised to address the issues but comes out with plans to monopolise farming by a few private corporations. It is good that the minister has now talked about the woes of the farmers who fail to get reasonable returns and the consumers who fail to get the benefit of the plenty. It would be a meaningful act of the government to discuss with the farmers and address their woes without attaching any political strings. Farmers are the real wealth creators and providers of food security.

A G Rajmohan | Anantapur

MEDIA TARGETS KIIT UNIVERSITY

Madam — After the suicide of a Nepali student at Odisha's KIIT University following an unhealthy relationship, some sections of the media are targeting the university

Virat shines as India beats Pakistan



India has beaten its archrival Pakistan by six wickets in their group A match of the ICC Champions Trophy 2025 at the Dubai International Cricket stadium. Virat Kohli has once again proved his supremacy against Pakistan in the ICC tournaments, delivering a scintillating unbeaten century with a memorable knock off 111 balls. The win propelled India to the top of Group A with 4 points,

virtually securing a semifinal berth, while Pakistan faced the threat of an early exit, suffering their second consecutive defeat. Kohli's knock featuring seven exquisite boundaries dismantled Pakistan's hopes as their premier pacers Shaheen Shah Afridi and Haris Rauf struggled to make an impact after Afridi dismissed Rohit Sharma (20 off 15) early with a fiery yorker. It is Kohli's 51st ODI tonne by becoming the fastest batter to reach 14000 ODI runs during his innings. With 51 centuries in ODIs and 30 in Tests, with 7 double centuries in international cricket, Kohli is regarded as one of the greatest batsmen of all time. Kohli is often referred to as the King Kohli by his fans and supporters due to his achievements and contributions to the game.

P Victor Selvaraj | Tirunelveli

to satisfy their agenda. Now, the context of justice for the deceased girl has been diverted to their own vendetta. As a result, the last couple of days have been very dramatic for the student fraternity.

Other students in KIIT who have come for higher studies from outside and their parents have been in a distributing mind state. They should not suffer from the media trial. Considering the incident, the state government formed a high-level committee to probe into it. Now it's become a political farce; every day different political outfits are staging protests in the evening in front of the main gate like a daily routine, which is ruining the academic environment on the campus. Amid all of this, we should not forget the contributions of this university to the sports and education systems of the state. Let's make a healthy environment for the other students of KIIT and have faith in the law.

Susant Pal | Bhubaneswar

TRUMP DISRUPTING WORLD ORDER

Madam — US President Donald Trump's economic and geopolitical decisions have



FIRST COLUMN

THE HANDWRITING BLUES: A STORY OF DECLINE

Some see handwriting as a reflection of character, but it shifts, evolves and often declines beyond recognition



APS MALHOTRA

Some conjecture that a person's handwriting can give a glimpse into that person's character. But I am a sceptic in this regard, because, in my opinion, the handwriting of an individual is not a constant, but keeps on morphing as time goes by. A case in point is your humble friend, who has seen his handwriting deteriorate over the past few decades, till now, in my fifth decade, it is nothing more than a painstaking, almost illegible scrawl- although, with the advent of the now ubiquitous personal computer and other sundry devices, the negative impact of this deterioration has been minimised, especially in official work. Because today, when I write a note on any file with my hand, others find it rather difficult to 'decrypt'. Even filling simple financial documents like a cheque is a nightmare now, a stiff challenge, that is increasingly being left to my better half to handle, as bank people, on a few occasions, have raised doubts about the authenticity of my signature. But before the readers start commiserating about the sad and agonising state of my handwriting, I will share with them that this was not always the case. In the early years of school, I was the darling of my teachers because of my neat and clean handwriting, which made me the cynosure of my peers. Writing on four-line copies, I would get full marks in English handwriting.

The slide commenced from middle school onwards, when I shifted from writing with a pencil to writing with a ball pen, and the copy changed from one with four lines to that with two lines. But the hand was still steady, and teachers did not have any problem reading my answer sheets, as was evident from the good grades I continued to get in my exams. But I am sure, that as I entered college and the university in the mid-eighties, the good professors would have become



increasingly impatient in poring over my messy answer sheets, with scribbles galore. Throughout, my father, a diligent and thorough gentleman, with very precise and beautiful handwriting, kept counselling me to stem the rot, even as I secured a job in the public sector in 1991. He gently warned that it would adversely impact my prospects of growth in the corporate world, especially when this was the period when all office work was conducted on well-defined sheets of paper- which, in my case, were to be yellow pages.

Before leaving for Bombay (as Mumbai was then called), I scoffed at Dad's gentle, but consistent reprimands. It was only when I took my first, tentative steps in the company did I realise that what Dad had been emphasising over the years was not an iota away from the truth. I faced a mild, personal nudge from some bosses on this account, but others were not so kind, and their reaction bordered on outright contempt, reprimand and disapproval. But Dad was an eternal optimist. He still harboured a strong wish to get my handwriting back on track, even at this stage, for which he purchased a book- 'Techniques to improve your handwriting'. I was back in kindergarten.

So, whenever I came home to Delhi for a break, he would insist that I sit with him, at least for some time, and practice on ways to improve my, by now abominable handwriting. But by this point, my mind, like that of all young men, was engrossed in finer things of life than improving my writing ability, which, I realised, was destined to be an exercise in futility. This cat-and-mouse game continued even after I got married in 1993. It was only after I became a father in 1995 did Dad finally buried his desire to improve my handwriting to a decent level.

(The author is a freelance writer; views are personal)

RBI should go for an 'accommodative' stance



UTTAM GUPTA

While inflation has been steadily declining, the RBI opted to retain its 'neutral' stance, signaling a measured approach rather than give push to boost liquidity and demand



On February 7, 2025, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) Governor Sanjay Malhotra announced the decisions taken by the six-member Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) in its sixth bi-monthly meeting of the current financial year (FY). It has reduced the policy rate or the repo rate (the interest rate at which the RBI lends to banks) by 25 basis points to 6.25 per cent. This marks the first repo rate cut in nearly five years. Moreover, it has continued with a neutral stance which it shifted in its fourth bi-monthly review/announcement on October 10, 2024, from its earlier stance of "withdrawal of accommodation". In 2016, the Union Government put in place an institutionalized framework to enable the MPC to formulate monetary policy and determine the key interest rates including the policy rate for inflation targeting. It mandated the RBI to fix the policy rate in such a manner as to maintain the Consumer Price Index or CPI (it corresponds to a basket that includes food, fuel, manufactured goods, and select services) within the target range of 4 per cent (+/- 2 per cent).

The RBI decides the policy rates once in two months during each FY. The mandate initially given for five years ending March 31, 2021, has since been extended for a further period of five years. The current mandate will continue till March 31, 2026. The other crucial policy instrument the RBI uses for targeting inflation is Liquidity - jargon for the quantum of credit available in the banking system. Pumping more liquidity along with a reduction in the policy rate represents a scenario which in jargon is described as an 'accommodative' policy stance. The terminology was coined by the outgoing governor Shaktikanta Das in June 2019 when he started going for aggressive cuts in the policy rate and an increase in credit availability.

Since June 2022 the RBI changed its stance to "withdrawal of accommodation" and had stuck to it till October 9, 2024, when in the fourth bi-monthly review, the MPC decided to go for a "neutral" stance. A



THE PROBLEM IS RBI'S OBSESSION WITH INFLATION. MALHOTRA RECOGNISES THAT INFLATION IS ON A DOWNWARD TRAJECTORY. YET, HE DOESN'T WANT TO RELINQUISH HIS NEUTRAL STANCE CITING GLOBAL ECONOMIC CHALLENGES "PROGRESS IN GLOBAL DISINFLATION IS STALLING"

"neutral" stance connotes that the RBI has vowed to keep its options flexible meaning it will neither squeeze liquidity by restricting credit availability and keeping policy rates high nor go for unrestrained lending at low interest rates.

While inflation targeting is important, it is equally necessary to dovetail the monetary policy to sustain the momentum of high growth. During the second quarter of the current FY, growth in GDP plummeted to a low of 5.4 per cent down from a high of 8.1 per cent during the second Qr of FY 2023-24. For the current FY 2024-25, it is estimated at 6.4 per cent as against 8.2 per cent recorded during FY 2023-24. Seen in this backdrop and an overarching need to achieve a growth of 8 per cent on a sustained basis in line to make India a 'developed economy' by 2047, the RBI could have given the desired push. It could have gone for an 'accommodative' policy stance by opting for a significant cut in the policy rate and pumping sufficient cash into the banking system. However, it has stuck to a "neutral" stance while reducing the repo rate by a small 0.25 per cent. RBI's reluctance has to do with a mindset that was reflected in ex-Governor Das's observation while announcing the first bi-monthly policy of the current FY. He had said "The elephant has now gone out for a walk and appears to be returning to the forest."

We would like the elephant to return to the forest and remain there on a durable basis." Put simply, he meant there was no need to start reducing interest rates until inflation reached the target of 4 per cent and stayed at that level. The incumbent Governor has continued with this mindset. In February 2023, the policy rate was at a peak of 6.5 per cent. During FY 2022-23, the CPI inflation was hovering around 8 percent.

In the following year, it started decreasing from 7.4 per cent in July 2023 to 5 per cent in September 2023, 4.8 per cent in October 2023 and 5.1 per cent during January/February 2024. For FY 2023-24, it was 5.4 percent. During the current FY also, it has kept low; 5.08 percent in June 2024 and 3.54 percent in July of 2024. After a brief spurt of 6.2 per cent in October 2024, in January 2025, it declined to 4.3 per cent. During FY 2024-25, the RBI has estimated it to be 4.2 per cent. Thus, there was a strong case for a significant reduction in the repo rate besides the injection of sufficient liquidity. This would have helped in stimulating demand thereby giving a boost to economic growth besides helping millions of borrowers reduce their EMIs and helping industries, especially MSMEs reduce the cost of servicing their loans. But, this was not to be.

The problem is RBI's obsession with inflation. Malhotra recognizes that inflation is on a downward trajectory. Yet, he doesn't want to relinquish his neutral stance citing global economic challenges "progress in global disinflation is stalling". Put simply, he fears imported inflation impacting CPI hence, a "neutral stance will provide MPC flexibility to respond to evolving macro-economic environment." A major factor contributing to wide variations in CPI inflation is food inflation which has a weight of around 40 per cent and is impacted predominantly by supply side/seasonal factors whereas monetary policy instruments work on the demand side. Invariably, food inflation main-

tains an upward trend even as a small disruption in supply caused by seasonal factors can lead to spiralling prices.

As long as food remains a part of the CPI basket, inflation targeting will always remain a problem. There is an urgent need to exclude it while setting benchmark interest rates, an idea that was mooted by the Chief Economic Advisor in the Economic Survey (ES) for 2023-24. The CEA argued that monetary policy has no bearing on the prices of food items, which are dictated by supply-side pressures.

For instance, during 2021-22, wheat output was affected by unusually high temperatures. During 2022-23, rains accompanied by hailstorms acted as a spoiler. During the first half of FY 2023-24, food inflation went up due to a spike in the prices of vegetables caused by seasonal factors. The spurt in food prices during October 2024 also had to do with supply-side pressures only. The RBI can achieve little to control them by keeping the policy rate high. The RBI should take the idea mooted in the ES - 2023-24 on board. Meanwhile, it should consider reducing the weight of food inflation in CPI to reflect the contemporary reality. The current 40 per cent weight is based on the Consumption Expenditure Survey (CES) of 2011-12 whereas Summary Statistics from the 2022-23 CES point towards a significant reduction.

While formulating its monetary policy, the RBI's prime responsibility is to ensure macro-economic stability its pivotal focus being on keeping inflation within reasonable bounds. However, it can't be oblivious of the dire need to support economic growth which could be adversely impacted if it doesn't relax the credit environment.

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

M23 rebellion and Rwanda's role: The escalating crisis in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo

At the heart of this conflict lies a web of ethnic tensions, political grievances, and economic exploitation, particularly vast mineral wealth of DRC

The recent escalation of violence in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is a stark reminder of the region's deep-rooted instability. The resurgence of the M23 rebellion, which led to the seizure of Goma and further advances into South Kivu, is not merely an internal Congolese crisis—it is a conflict with significant regional and international implications. Rwanda's involvement, whether direct or indirect, remains contentious, as accusations of its support for M23 persist. While Kigali denies these allegations, the sophistication of M23's operations raises serious questions about its backing. At the heart of this crisis lies a complex mix of ethnic tensions, political grievances, and



DEBASHISH JAINA

economic exploitation, particularly concerning the DRC's vast mineral wealth. For years, Rwanda has been accused of providing M23 with financial and military support, a claim reinforced by multiple UN reports and statements from Western governments. Kigali, however, insists that it is acting in self-defence, citing the threat posed by the Democratic Forces for the

Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), a Hutu militia operating in eastern DRC with historical ties to the perpetrators of the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Yet, Rwanda's actions go beyond border security. The conflict's economic dimension cannot be ignored, with Rwanda being accused of profiting from the illicit exploitation of Congolese minerals, particularly coltan, a key component in electronic devices.

The capture of Rubaya, a coltan-rich area, by M23 last year suggests that economic interests play a crucial role in shaping the rebellion's trajectory. M23 claims to be fighting for the rights of ethnic Tutsis in eastern DRC, arguing that the Congolese government has failed to protect them from persecution. While

there is historical evidence of ethnic violence against Tutsis in the region, M23's actions undermine its credibility. Rather than advocating for political rights through diplomatic means, the group has engaged in violence, forced displacement, and human rights violations. Its strategy of seizing key cities and resource-rich territories suggests an agenda extending far beyond self-defence.

The DRC, backed by the international community, has dismissed M23's claims, arguing that the group is acting as a proxy for Rwanda's regional ambitions. The latest attempt by regional leaders to broker peace, with the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the East African Community



(EAC) calling for an immediate ceasefire, reflects a growing recognition that the crisis cannot be resolved through military means alone. However, the reality on the ground tells a different story. M23 had briefly declared a ceasefire before resuming attacks, signalling that diplomatic efforts are struggling to keep up with battlefield developments. The DRC's call for UN sanctions against Rwanda, coupled with protests in Kinshasa

where demonstrators burned portraits of President Paul Kagame, indicates a deepening rift between the two countries. With diplomatic ties severed and hostilities intensifying, the prospects for a negotiated settlement remain bleak. A purely military solution is unlikely to yield lasting peace. The Congolese army has historically struggled to contain well-equipped rebel groups, and the presence of the UN peacekeeping mission, MONUSCO, has done little to prevent the latest wave of violence. Foreign military intervention, whether from regional actors or international forces, risks escalating the situation rather than resolving it. The most viable path forward is a combination of military containment and political

engagement. Strengthening the DRC's security forces to prevent further territorial losses is crucial, but diplomatic efforts must also address the root causes of the conflict, including ethnic grievances and economic exploitation. The global demand for coltan and other precious resources ensures that armed groups can sustain themselves through illegal mining operations. Without stronger international regulations and accountability measures, companies sourcing minerals from conflict zones will remain complicit in financing violence. Holding both state and non-state actors accountable for their role in resource exploitation is essential for breaking the cycle of conflict. The ongoing crisis in eastern

DRC is not just about M23 or Rwanda's alleged involvement—it is part of a larger geopolitical struggle that has plagued the region for decades. Unless regional actors commit to genuine peace efforts and the international community enforces stricter measures against illegal mineral trade, the conflict will persist. The path to stability requires addressing both security concerns and economic incentives that drive armed groups. Without meaningful action, eastern DRC will remain trapped in a cycle of violence, with its people bearing the brunt of a war that serves the interests of powerful actors far beyond its borders.

(The writer is a foreign policy researcher; views are personal)

Conservatives win German poll

Far-right party surges to second place

PTI ■ BERLIN

Provisional results confirmed that mainstream conservatives led by Friedrich Merz won Germany's national election, while a far-right party surged to become the nation's second-largest.

The campaign was dominated by worries about the years-long stagnation of Europe's biggest economy and pressure to curb migration, something that caused friction after Merz pushed hard in recent weeks for a tougher approach.

It took place against a background of growing uncertainty over the future of Ukraine and Europe's alliance with the United States.

The results released by the electoral authority showed Merz's Christian Democrats and the centre-left Social Democrats winning a combined majority of seats in the national legislature after small parties failed to make the electoral threshold.

That gives Merz the best chance of becoming the country's next chancellor. He said on election night that he hopes to form a government by Easter at the latest.

He has ruled out a coalition with the far-right Alternative

for Germany, or AfD, which is now the country's second-largest party after its best showing ever.

For the time being, outgoing Chancellor Olaf Scholz, whose Social Democratic party suffered a stinging defeat, will remain.

Mainstream parties hold majority as far-right surges Merz's conservatives won 208 seats in the 630-seat Bundestag, while the AfD won 152. The three parties in the former governing coalition lost seats, with the SPD falling to 120 seats and the Greens to 85.

The pro-business Free Democrats, which triggered early elections by pulling out of the coalition, failed to reach the 5 per cent of the vote required to win seats.

The left party got 64 seats, while the left-wing Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance came in just under the 5 per cent hurdle.

The AfD was jubilant on Sunday night, with leaders vowing to become the country's main party in the next election as its appeal expands. The anti-immigrant, far-right party has established itself as a significant political force in the 12 years since it was founded, but it hasn't yet been part of any state or



Friedrich Merz

national government. That's the result of what is often called a "firewall" against Alternative for Germany. Other parties say they won't work with the AfD, which is under observation by the domestic intelligence agency for suspected right-wing extremism, something that AfD objects to strongly. Its branches in three eastern states are designated "proven right-wing extremist" groups, which is particularly sensitive in view of Germany's Nazi past.

The election took place seven months earlier than originally planned after Scholz's unpopular coalition collapsed in November, three years into a

term that was increasingly marred by infighting. There was widespread discontent and not much enthusiasm for any of the candidates.

Merz says he's ready to face challenges from US and Russia Merz said Sunday night that his top priority is to unify Europe in the face of challenges coming from the US and Russia. Both US Vice President JD Vance and Trump ally Elon Musk openly supported the AfD.

"I have no illusions at all about what is happening from America," he told supporters. "Take a look at the recent interventions in the German election campaign by Mr. Elon

Musk." He added that "the interventions from Washington were no less dramatic and drastic and ultimately outrageous than the interventions we have seen from Moscow. So we are under such massive pressure from two sides that my absolute priority now is really to create unity in Europe".

Germany is the most populous country in the 27-nation European Union and a leading member of NATO. It has been Ukraine's second-biggest weapons supplier, after the US, and will be central to shaping the continent's response to the challenges of the coming years, including the Trump administration's confrontational foreign and trade policy.

The conservative leader said that "the most important thing is to reestablish a viable government in Germany as quickly as possible". "I am aware of the responsibility," Merz said. "I am also aware of the scale of the task that now lies ahead of us. I approach it with the utmost respect, and I know that it will not be easy."

"The world out there isn't waiting for us, and it isn't waiting for long-drawn-out coalition talks and negotiations," he told cheering supporters.

THIRD ANNIVERSARY OF WAR WITH RUSSIA

Foreign leaders visit Ukraine in show of solidarity

PTI ■ KYIV

A dozen leaders from Europe and Canada visited Ukraine's capital on Monday to mark the in a show of support for Kyiv by some of the nation at war's most important backers.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau were among the visitors greeted at the train station by Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha and the president's chief of staff Andrii Yermak.

In a post on X, von der Leyen wrote that Europe was in Kyiv "because Ukraine is in Europe". "In this fight for survival, it is not only the destiny of Ukraine that is at stake. It's Europe's destiny," she wrote.

The guests, also including European Council President Antonio Costa as well as the prime ministers of Northern European countries and Spain, were set to attend events dedicated to the anniversary and discuss supporting Ukraine with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy amid a recent US policy shift under President Donald Trump.

In the latest sign of Europe's efforts to rework its strategy on Ukraine to respond to Trump's actions, Costa on Sunday announced that he would con-

vene an emergency summit of the 27 EU leaders in Brussels on March 6, with Ukraine at the top of the agenda.

"We are living a defining moment for Ukraine and European security," Costa said in a post on social media.

The three-year mark of the war in Ukraine came at a sensitive moment for Kyiv as Zelenskyy navigates a rapidly changing international environment upended by Trump's changes to the US approach to the war.

The US leader has sought to follow through on his campaign promises to end the war quickly, though his methods for doing so have alarmed many in Ukraine and Europe who believe that his approach is too conciliatory toward Russia and its president, Vladimir Putin.

Russia's foreign ministry said Saturday that preparations for a face-to-face meeting between Trump and Putin were underway, and US officials have said that they had agreed with Moscow to reestablish diplomatic ties and restart economic cooperation.

And on Sunday, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov told the state TASS news agency that Moscow and Washington would continue bilateral talks at the end of next week, adding that "quite a lot" of contact was ongoing between

the Russian and American sides.

Leaders across the EU, fearing both that Trump's approach to Ukraine would lead to an unfavorable settlement for Kyiv and that they — among Ukraine's most important supporters — would be sidelined in negotiation for peace, have rushed to assert their own response to the rapidly shifting environment.

The EU's top diplomat, Kaja Kallas, insisted on Monday that the US cannot seal any peace deal to end the war without Ukraine or Europe being involved. She highlighted what she claimed were pro-Russian positions being taken up by the Trump administration.

"You can discuss whatever you want with Putin. But if it comes to Europe or Ukraine, then Ukraine and Europe also have to agree to this deal," Kallas told reporters in Brussels, where she is chairing a meeting of EU foreign ministers.

Kallas travels to Washington on Tuesday for talks with US Secretary of State Marco Rubio. Asked whether the US administration is acting in the interests of Russia or Ukraine's Western backers, she said: "If you look at the messages that come from the United States, then it's clear that the Russian narrative is there very strongly represented."

Pope facing kidney problems

PTI ■ ROME

Pope Francis woke up and was continuing his therapies on Monday after a quiet night, on the 10th day of his hospitalisation for a complex lung infection that has provoked the early stages of kidney insufficiency, the Vatican said.

"The night passed well, the pope slept and is resting," it said. A medical bulletin was expected later Monday.

He is continuing to feed himself and is not receiving artificial or liquid nutrition, the Vatican said.

Late Sunday, doctors reported that blood tests showed "early, slight kidney insufficiency" that was nevertheless under control. They said Francis, 88, remained in critical condition but that he hadn't experienced any further respiratory crises since Saturday. He was receiving high flows of supplemental oxygen and, on Sunday, was alert, responsive and attended Mass. They said his prognosis was guarded.



A candle glimmers alongside a painting of Pope Francis at San José de Flores basilica, Buenos Aires, Argentina, where he worshipped as a youth. AP / PTI

Doctors have said Francis' condition is touch-and-go, given his age, fragility and pre-existing lung disease. They have warned that the main threat

facing Francis is sepsis, a serious infection of the blood that can occur as a complication of pneumonia. To date there has been no ref-

erence to any onset of sepsis in the medical updates provided by the Vatican.

This hospitalisation now looks set to be Francis' longest as pope. He spent 10 days at Rome's Gemelli hospital in 2021 after he had 33 centimeters (13 inches) of his colon removed.

In New York on Sunday, Cardinal Timothy Dolan acknowledged what church leaders in Rome weren't saying publicly: that the Catholic faithful were united "at the bedside of a dying father".

"As our Holy Father Pope Francis is in very, very fragile health, and probably close to death," Dolan said in his homily from the pulpit of St. Patrick's Cathedral, though he later told reporters he hoped and prayed that Francis would "bounce back".

Francis' condition has revived speculation about what might happen if he becomes unconscious or otherwise incapacitated, and whether he might resign.

Human rights suffocated by autocrats and warmongers, says Guterres

PTI ■ GENEVA

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres says human rights are being "suffocated" around the world, lashing out at voices of division and anger who see them as a barrier to their quest for power and profit.

In a speech to the Human Rights Council, Guterres decried Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine that marked its third anniversary Monday, appealed for a permanent cease-fire between Palestinian militants and Israel, and urged respect for Congo's territorial integrity, among other things.

While reiterating many of his concerns about conflict and climate change, the UN chief said he would propose new ideas to the Security Council aimed to bring greater stability and security for the people of Haiti, where a multinational security support mission has been deployed.

Guterres depicted a world where human rights were "on the ropes and being pummeled hard" by warmongers, a "morally bankrupt global financial system" that favors profits over planet protections, those who might exploit artificial intelligence to harm people, and leaders who seek to demonize migrants or restrict women's rights.

Human rights, he said, "are being suffocated by autocrats, crushing opposition because they fear what the truly empowered people would do," and "by voices of division and anger who view human rights not as a boon to humanity, but as a barrier to the power, profit and control they seek."

Three weeks ago, US President Donald Trump announced a US pullout from the council, though the Biden administration had already decided the United States would not seek a seat on the 47-member-country body when its latest three-year term expired at the end of last year.



In this photo provided by the Ukrainian Presidential Press Office, European leaders attending the ceremony at the memorial to the fallen Ukrainian soldiers on Independence Square in Kyiv, Ukraine, on Monday. AP/PTI

China holds live-fire exercises in Gulf of Tonkin as Vietnam marks territorial claims

PTI ■ BANGKOK

Chinese authorities said they began live-fire exercises in the Gulf of Tonkin on Monday, only days after Vietnam announced a new line marking what it considers its territory in the body of water between the two countries.

China's Maritime Safety Administration said the exercises would be focused on the Beibu Gulf area, closer to the Chinese side of the Gulf of Tonkin, and would run through Thursday evening.

It gave no further details, but the drills follow an announcement last week by Vietnam establishing a baseline used to calculate the width of its territorial waters in the Gulf of Tonkin.

State-run Vietnam News reported that the baseline was in compliance with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and would provide "a robust legal basis for safeguarding and exercising

Vietnam's sovereignty, sovereign rights and jurisdiction". Vietnam has not publicly responded to the Chinese drills.

China and Vietnam have long had a maritime agreement governing the Gulf of Tonkin, but have been locked in competing claims in the nearby South China Sea over the Spratly and Paracel Islands and maritime areas.

China has been growing aggressive in pursuing those claims, and in October assaulted 10 Vietnamese fishermen near the Paracel Islands, three of whom suffered broken limbs. China claims almost the entire South China Sea as its own, though it has not publicly released exact coordinates of its claim other than a map with 10 dashed lines broadly demarcating what it calls its territory.

In addition to Vietnam, China's claims overlap with those of the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan, while Indonesia has also fig-

ured in violent confrontations with the Chinese coast guard and fishing fleets in the waters around the Natuna Islands.

Tensions have been particularly high with the Philippines, with regular confrontations between the two countries.

Most recently, a Chinese navy helicopter flew within 10 feet (3 metres) of a Philippine patrol plane last week over the South China Sea, near the hotly disputed Scarborough Shoal off the northwestern Philippines.

Leaders in Australia and New Zealand also said China should have given more warning before its navy conducted an unusual series of live-fire exercises in the seas between the two countries, forcing flights on Friday and Saturday to divert on short notice.

Political leaders from both countries emphasized that China didn't breach international law, but said they had only been given "a couple hours notice" rather than the usual 12 to 24 hours.

Greenpeace says pipeline company's lawsuit threatens organisation's future

PTI ■ MANDAN (US)

A Texas pipeline company's lawsuit accusing Greenpeace of defamation, disruptions and attacks during protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline goes to trial in North Dakota on Monday, in a case the environmental advocacy organisation says threatens free speech rights and its very future.

The lawsuit stems from the protests in 2016 and 2017 over the oil pipeline's planned Missouri River crossing, upstream from the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe's reservation. The tribe has long argued that the pipeline threatens its water supply. Of the thousands of people who protested the project, hundreds were arrested.

Energy Transfer and its subsidiary Dakota Access allege trespass, nuisance, defamation and other offenses by Netherlands-based Greenpeace International and its American branch, Greenpeace USA. The lawsuit also names the group's funding arm, Greenpeace Fund Inc.

The jury trial in state court in Mandan, North Dakota, is scheduled to last five weeks.

What are details of the case? Dallas-based Energy Transfer alleges Greenpeace tried to delay construction of the pipeline, defamed the companies behind it, and coordinated trespassing, vandalism and violence by pipeline protesters. The lawsuit seeks millions of dollars in damages.

The Dakota Access Pipeline

was completed and has been transporting oil since June 2017. Greenpeace International said it shouldn't be named in the lawsuit because it is distinct from the two US-based Greenpeace entities, operates outside the US, and its employees were never in North Dakota or involved with the protests.

Greenpeace USA said the plaintiffs have failed to back up their claims in the years since the protests. Earlier in February, a judge denied motions by Greenpeace to throw out or limit parts of the case.

What is Greenpeace's position? Representatives of the environmental organisation founded over 50 years ago said the company just wants to silence oil industry critics.

"This trial is a critical test of the

future of the First Amendment, both freedom of speech and peaceful protest, under the Trump administration and beyond," Greenpeace USA Interim Executive Director Sushma Raman told reporters.

"A bad ruling in this case could put our rights and freedoms in jeopardy for all of us, whether we are journalists, protesters or anyone who wants to engage in public debate," Greenpeace USA helped support "nonviolent, direct-action training" on safety and de-escalation at the protests, Senior Legal Adviser Deepa Padmanabha said.

Energy Transfer is arguing that "anyone engaged in a training at a protest should be held responsible for the actions of every person at that protest," Padmanabha said.

Federal workers confront mass confusion as Musk's deadline to list accomplishments looms

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

Confusion and chaos loom as hundreds of thousands of federal employees begin their workweek on Monday facing a deadline from President Donald Trump's cost-cutting chief, Elon Musk, to explain their recent accomplishments or risk losing their jobs.

Musk's unusual demand has faced resistance from several key US agencies led by the president's loyalists — including the FBI, State Department, Homeland Security and the Pentagon — which instructed their employees over the weekend not to comply. Lawmakers in both parties said that Musk's mandate may be illegal, while unions are threatening to sue.

Trump over the weekend called for Musk to be more aggressive in his cost-cutting crusade

through the so-called Department of Government Efficiency, or DOGE, and posted a meme on social media mocking federal employees who "cried about Trump and Elon".

Musk's team sent an email to hundreds of thousands of federal employees on Saturday giving them roughly 48 hours to report five specific things they had accomplished last week. In a separate message on X, Musk said any employee who failed to respond by the deadline — set in the email as 11:59 p.m. EST Monday — would lose their job.

Mass confusion followed on the eve of the deadline as some agencies resisted the order, others encouraged their workers to comply, and still others offered conflicting guidance. One message on Sunday morn-

ing from the Department of Health and Human Services, led by Robert F. Kennedy Jr., instructed its roughly 80,000 employees to comply. That was shortly after the acting general counsel, Sean Keveney, had instructed some not to. And by Sunday evening, agency leadership issued new instructions that employees should "pause activities" related to the request until noon on Monday.

"I'll be candid with you. Having put in over 70 hours of work last week advancing Administration's priorities, I was personally insulted to receive the below email," Keveney said in an email viewed by The Associated Press that acknowledged a broad sense of "uncertainty and stress" within the agency.

Keveney laid out security concerns and pointed out some of

the work done by the agency's employees may be protected by attorney-client privilege: "I have received no assurances that there are appropriate protections in place to safeguard responses to this email."

Democrats and even some Republicans, including Sen. John Curtis, R-Utah, were critical of Musk's ultimatum.

"If I could say one thing to Elon Musk, it's like, please put a dose of compassion in this," Curtis, whose state has 33,000 federal employees, said on CBS' "Face the Nation." "These are real people. These are mortgages. ... It's a false narrative to say we have to cut and you have to be cruel to do it as well."

Newly confirmed FBI Director Kash Patel, an outspoken Trump ally, instructed employees to ignore Musk's request, at

least for now.

"The FBI, through the Office of the Director, is in charge of all of our review processes, and will conduct reviews in accordance with FBI procedures," Patel wrote in an email confirmed by the AP. "When and if further information is required, we will coordinate the responses. For now, please pause any responses."

Ed Martin, interim US attorney for the District of Columbia, sent his staff a message Sunday that may have caused more confusion.

"Let me clarify: We will comply with this OPM request whether by replying or deciding not to reply," Martin wrote in the email obtained by the AP, referring to the Office of Personnel Management.

"Please make a good faith effort to reply and list your

activities (or not, as you prefer), and I will, as I mentioned, have your back regarding any confusion," Martin continued. "We can do this." Officials at the Departments of State, Defense and Homeland Security were more consistent.

Tibor Nagy, acting undersecretary of state for management, told employees in an email that department leadership would respond on behalf of workers.

"No employee is obligated to report their activities outside of their Department chain of command," Nagy wrote in an email. Pentagon leadership instructed employees to "pause" any response to Musk's team, according to an email from Jules Hurst, the deputy undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness.

The Homeland Security Department, meanwhile, told

employees that "no reporting action from you is needed at this time" and that agency managers would respond, according to an email from RD Alles, deputy undersecretary for management.

Thousands of government employees have already been forced out of the federal workforce — either by being fired or through a "deferred resignation" offer — during the first month of Trump's second term.

There is no official figure available for the total firings or layoffs so far, but the AP has tallied hundreds of thousands of workers who are being affected. Many work outside of Washington.

Musk on Sunday called his latest request "a very basic pulse check." "The reason this matters is that a significant number of people who are supposed

to be working for the government are doing so little work that they are not checking their email at all!" Musk wrote on X. "In some cases, we believe non-existent people or the identities of dead people are being used to collect paychecks. In other words, there is outright fraud."

He has provided no evidence of such fraud. Separately, Musk and Trump have falsely claimed in recent days that tens of millions of dead people over 100 years old are receiving Social Security payments.

Meanwhile, thousands of other employees are preparing to leave the federal workforce this coming week, including probationary civilian workers at the Pentagon and all but a fraction of US Agency for International Development staffers through cuts or leave.

India, UK resume talks for trade pact

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India and the UK on Monday announced the resumption of negotiations for the proposed free trade agreement (FTA), which is expected to double or even triple bilateral trade from the current \$20 Billion in the next 10 years. The announcement was made by Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal and UK Secretary of State for Business and Trade Jonathan Reynolds here.

"Today, the Republic of India and the United Kingdom (UK) have resumed negotiations towards a trade deal between our two countries," a joint statement issued after the meeting said.

Both sides have agreed to resume talks towards a balanced, mutually beneficial and a forward-looking deal that delivers mutual growth and builds on the strengths of the two complementary economies.

The strengthening of the trading relationship has the potential to unlock



Union Minister for Commerce and Industry Piyush Goyal meets UK Secretary of State for Business and Trade Jonathan Reynolds in New Delhi. Pioneer Photo

opportunities for business and consumers across both nations and build further on the already deep ties, it said.

Briefing media, Goyal said the pact will be "pathbreaking" and would provide huge opportunities to grow "our current \$20 Billion bilateral trade in merchandise to probably twice or thrice in the next 10 years".

On the deadline to conclude the negotiations, he said its never "too early" or "too late" to conclude a good agreement as

Asked whether the negotiations for the bilateral investment treaty (BIT) would be concluded along with the FTA, Goyal said the two countries are actively negotiating at three different fronts - FTA, BIT, and a Double Contribution Convention Agreement.

"And all three are in parallel and conjoint with each other," he said.

Goyal also said that immigration has never been a part of trade negotiations anywhere in the world and India has "never ever" discussed immigration in any FTA negotiations.

On this, Reynolds said that the UK welcomes "the huge and important relationship we have with people coming from India to UK whether to study, whether to be part of the businesses and obviously business mobility is a separate issue to immigration".

Goyal added that in several countries, including the US, UK, Canada, New Zealand and Australia, Indian students travel for education.

In almost all these countries, to incentivise education, business and attract more people, countries "do give a certain period of time for students to gain practical experience to work in their country but that is short-term business work visas. It has nothing to do with immigration as such," he added.

The India-UK FTA negotiations were launched on January 13, 2022. The agreement is aimed at boosting bilateral trade and investments.

In such pacts, two countries either eliminate or significantly reduce customs duties on maximum goods traded between them. They also ease norms for promoting trade in services and bilateral investments.

The bilateral trade between India and the UK increased to \$21.34 Billion in 2023-24 from \$20.36 Billion in 2022-23. The United Kingdom is the sixth largest investor in India. The country has received \$35.3 Billion FDI during April 2000 and September 2024.

India Inc expected to achieve seven-eight per cent growth in Q4: ICRA

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Domestic rating agency Investment Information and Credit Rating Agency (ICRA) on Monday said Indian companies are likely to clock seven-eight per cent revenue growth during the March quarter of the current fiscal year, led by revival in rural demand and uptick in government spending.

ICRA expects the private capital expenditure (capex) cycle to remain measured in view of the uncertainties around geopolitical developments and relatively subdued outlook on merchandise exports from India.

Nonetheless, certain sunrise sectors such as electronics, semiconductors and niche segments within the automotive space like electric vehicles (EVs) will continue to see a scale-up in investments, in line with various production-linked incentive programmes announced by the

Government of India, it said. In a statement, ICRA said the recovery in the operating profit margins (OPM) for India Inc witnessed over the past quarter is likely to be sustained at 18.2-18.4 per cent, supported by an increase in demand, led by improved consumer sentiments.

"Rural demand is expected to be upbeat in H1 CY2025 (January-March), aided by the robust output for most kharif crops and the favourable outlook for the ongoing Rabi season.

Beyond that, a normal and well distributed monsoon in 2025 is crucial to support the agricultural outcomes," said Kinjal Shah, senior vice president and co-group head, Corporate Ratings, ICRA.

Urban demand, which has been sluggish over the last few quarters, is expected to improve, aided by the sizeable income-tax relief in the Union Budget 2025, the monetary easing by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), and the expectations of a moderation

in food inflation, which would augment discretionary consumption, Shah added.

ICRA said the evolution of the global economic and political scenario, movement in foreign exchange rates, impact of the new US President's policies, pick up in government spending and a revival in the domestic urban demand would remain the key monitorables over the near-term.

ICRA's analysis of the Q3 FY2025 (October-December) performance of 602 listed companies (excluding financial sector entities) shows a 6.8 per cent year-on-year revenue growth, supported by improved demand across consumption-oriented sectors like consumer durables, FMCG, retail, hotels and airlines, while a few commodity-oriented sectors like iron and steel witnessed some decline, following lower realisations owing to weak global demand and influx of cheaper imports from China.

Delhi discoms achieve A+ rating in consumer service 2023-24

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

In a major achievement for Delhi's power sector, the city's discoms, including BSES Rajdhani Power Limited (BRPL) and BSES Yamuna Power Limited (BYPL), have been awarded the highest A+ rating in the fourth edition of the Consumer Service Ratings of Discoms for the year 2023-24.

Released by REC Limited under the Ministry of Power, this evaluation ranked 66 power distribution companies across India, covering over 33 Crore consumers. The rankings were based on four broad parameters: operational reliability (45 marks), connection and other services (10 marks), metering, billing and collection (35 marks), and fault rectification and grievance redressal (10 marks). These were further

divided into 23 sub-parameters, ensuring a comprehensive evaluation of service delivery.

Of the 66 discoms assessed, 56 were state-owned, while 10 were private. However, only six managed to achieve the coveted A+ rating, with BRPL and BYPL standing out for their exceptional service quality.

Over the last four years, five discoms, including BRPL, BYPL, and Tata Power Delhi Distribution Limited (TPDDL), have consistently maintained top grades (A+/A), highlighting their commitment to operational efficiency and consumer satisfaction.

Delhi discoms performed exceptionally across several critical aspects. They ensured 24-hour power supply, a significant achievement in a sector plagued by frequent outages in many parts of the country. BRPL recorded an impressive

distribution failure rate of only 0.1 per cent, while BYPL stood at 0.6 per cent - a stark contrast to the national average of 6.4 per cent. The report also recognised Delhi discoms for their efficiency in processing consumer applications, achieving a 100 per cent processing rate through their online portals compared to the national average of 87 per cent. Billing accuracy was another area of excellence, with 99 per cent of bills generated through actual meter readings, surpassing the national average of 91 per cent. In the adoption of advanced metering technologies, BYPL led the way with 100 per cent bills generated via non-manual meter readings, while BRPL and TPDDL followed closely at 99 per cent, significantly higher than the 37 per cent national average.

Consumer engagement was another stronghold for Delhi

discoms, with 99 per cent of BRPL and BYPL consumers receiving billing alerts compared to the national average of 82 per cent. The digital transformation of payment systems also placed them ahead of the curve, with 89 per cent of BRPL and BYPL consumers opting for digital payments, far exceeding the national average of 41 per cent.

The Consumer Service Ratings of Discoms, released by Union Power Minister Manohar Lal Khattar during the Review, Planning, and Monitoring (RPM) last week, aims to benchmark service delivery, promote healthy competition, and encourage continuous improvements among discoms.

With this recognition, Delhi's discoms reaffirm their commitment to excellence, setting a benchmark for the power distribution sector nationwide.

Indian tech sector revenues to grow 5.1 per cent in FY25

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Indian tech sector's revenues are set to grow 5.1 per cent to \$282.6 Billion in fiscal year 2025, and likely to climb up further to \$300 Billion in fiscal year 2026, lobby grouping Nasscom said on Monday.

The revenue growth is on the "right trajectory", the body's president Rajesh Nambiar told reporters here, pointing out to revenue growth of four per cent in fiscal year 2024, 5.1 per cent in fiscal year 2025 and the over 6.1 per cent needed to cross its expectation of crossing \$300 Billion in fiscal year 2026.

"It has been a good outcome broadly given everything happening around us," Nambiar said pointing to aspects like geopolitics, and tariffs which are dominating the worries at present.

Nasscom said the sector, which includes IT services companies, business process management companies, global capability centres and e-commerce companies, added 1.26 Lakh new jobs in fiscal year 2025 to take the overall employment to 58 Lakh.

Nambiar hinted that the industry will continue to add employees in the same pace that it did last year.

The Indian IT sector's fiscal year 2025 growth is likely to be faster than the 4.7 per cent growth in global tech services spending in the calendar year 2024, Nasscom said, adding that India's share in global sourcing stood at 58 per cent as of fiscal year 2025.

Among the segments, the IT services companies' revenues will grow 4.3 per cent to \$137.1 Billion while the BPM industry will see its revenues

grow by 4.7 per cent to \$54.6 Billion.

The engineering research and development space is the fastest growing at seven per cent at \$55.6 Billion, Nasscom said.

The domestic revenues for the sector which has been traditionally focused on exports will grow seven per cent to \$58.2 Billion, outpacing exports' 4.6 per cent growth at \$224.4 Billion, Nasscom said.

The body said the export revenues between Indian and global multinationals are evenly split at present, and denied that the heft of the foreign 'companies has increased courtesy of the global capability centres (GCC) play. It pegged the total number of GCCs at 1,760 and added that such units employ 19 Lakh people at present.

Retail inflation eases slightly for farm workers

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Retail inflation for farm and rural workers eased slightly to 4.61 per cent and 4.73 per cent, respectively, in January from 5.01 per cent and 5.05 per cent in December 2024, showed the government data released on Monday.

The All-India Consumer Price Index for Agricultural Labourers (CPI-AL) and Rural Labourers (CPI-RL) decreased by four points and three points, respectively, for the month of January 2025, reaching 1,316 and 1,328 points, the labour ministry said in a statement.

According to the statement, the CPI-AL and CPI-RL stood at 1,320 points and 1,331 points, respectively in December 2024. The food index for CPI-AL decreased from 1,262 points in December to 1,255 points in January this year.

Gold rises ₹350 to reclaim ₹89,000 mark

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Gold prices rose ₹350 to trade near a record high at ₹89,100 per 10 grams in the national capital on Monday amid firm global trends, according to the All India Sarafa Association.

The precious metal of 99.9 per cent purity had closed at ₹88,750 per 10 grams on Friday.

Gold of 99.5 per cent purity increased ₹350 to ₹88,700 per 10 grams from the previous close of ₹88,350 per 10 grams.

"Gold traded with a modest gain on Monday as geopolitical and trade tensions continued to provide a safe haven demand to hedge against uncertainty," Saumil Gandhi, senior analyst of commodities at HDFC Securities, said.

Last week, gold of 99.9 per cent and 99.5 per cent purity hit fresh peaks of ₹89,450 and ₹89,050 per 10 grams, respectively.

However, silver traded flat at ₹1 Lakh per kg.



Ranjan Dimri

Further, Gandhi highlighted that the US dollar has provided an additional boost for the precious metal. The dollar index fell for the third week in a row and is trading lower amid mixed United States macro data. Meanwhile, in futures trade on the MCX, gold contracts for April delivery appreciated ₹118 to ₹86,128 per 10 grams.

"Gold traded within a range, posting minor gains, supported by Comex gold holding above \$2,925. Rupee weakness provided additional support to MCX gold," Jateen Trivedi, VP research analyst - commodity and currency, LKP Securities, said.

Comex gold futures for April delivery quoted higher at \$2,954.71 per ounce in the

overseas markets. Globally, spot gold also rose \$5.50 to \$2,941.55 per ounce. "Gold prices continue to hover near all-time highs as the dollar weakens amid escalating geopolitical and economic uncertainty," Abans Holdings' chief executive officer Chintan Mehta said.

The precious metal's rally is expected to persist as safe-haven demand remains strong, with central banks worldwide continuing to accumulate gold to hedge against economic volatility and policy uncertainty, Mehta added.

On the other hand, silver futures in the Asian market hours quoted 0.43 per cent lower at \$33.20 per ounce.

According to Kotak Securities, traders are closely monitoring the upcoming Personal Consumption Expenditures (PCE) data release to further understand the US Federal Reserve's policy trajectory, as it directly impacts bullion's investment appeal.

Sensex tumbles over 850 points on weak global cues

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Falling for the fifth straight session on Monday, equity benchmark BSE Sensex plunged over 850 points to drop below the crucial 75,000 level, tracking a weak global market trend and unabated foreign fund outflows amid escalating trade tensions.

Besides, deep losses in IT, telecom and metal stocks added to the gloom, analysts said.

The 30-share BSE benchmark tanked 856.65 points or 1.14 per cent to settle at 74,454.41. During the day, it plummeted 923.62 points or 1.22 per cent to 74,387.44.

The NSE Nifty dropped 242.55 points or 1.06 per cent to 22,553.35.

As many as 2,810 stocks declined, while 1,207 advanced and 183 remained unchanged on the BSE.

"The market is more concerned about the US' likely move to reciprocate higher tariff levies on exporting nations, which could impact developing countries, including India. Also, FIIs

showing no signs of putting brakes on their India exit strategy continue to weigh heavily on markets, with expensive valuations driving investors to curb their equity bets here.

"Heavy selling in banking, IT, telecom and other old economy sectors saw benchmark Sensex end below the crucial level of 75k mark," Prashanth Tapse, Senior VP (Research), Mehta Equities Ltd, said.

In the last five trading sessions, the BSE barometer lost 1,542.45 points or two per cent, and the Nifty tanked 406.15 points or 1.76 per cent. From the Sensex pack, HCL Tech, Zomato, Tata Consultancy Services, Infosys, Tech Mahindra, Bharti Airtel, Tata Steel and NTPC were among the biggest laggards.

In contrast, Mahindra and Mahindra, Kotak Mahindra Bank, Maruti, Nestle and ITC were among the gainers.

Among BSE sectoral indices, BSE Focused IT dropped 2.65 per cent, IT (2.60 per cent), teck (2.56 per cent), telecommunication (2.26 per

cent), metal (2.16 per cent), commodities (1.53 per cent) and utilities (1.42 per cent). On the other hand, Auto and FMCG were the gainers.

The BSE smallcap gauge declined 1.31 per cent, and the midcap index dipped 0.78 per cent.

Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth ₹3,449.15 Crore on Friday, according to exchange data.

Foreign investors have pulled out over ₹23,710 Crore from equity markets so far this month, pushing total outflows past ₹1 Lakh Crore in 2025 amid rising global trade tensions.

"The D-Street indices experienced a sharp drop to an eight-month low as market sentiment remained subdued. The decline was primarily driven by significant losses in heavyweight stocks, especially within the IT sector. This weakness followed reports of declining consumer confidence in the US, casting a shadow over the country's growth outlook.

"The broader market felt the impact, pulling down both

small and midcap indices," Ameya Ranadive, Chartered Market Technician, CFTe, Sr Technical Analyst, StoxBox, said.

In Asian markets, Seoul, Shanghai and Hong Kong settled lower. Equity markets were closed in Tokyo for a holiday.

European markets were trading mostly in positive territory. US markets ended significantly lower on Friday.

"Global headwinds continue to weigh on the domestic market, with persistent volatility causing uncertainty among retail investors, who generally have a lower risk appetite. Weak US consumer sentiment and tariff concerns may further pressure export-oriented sectors such as IT," Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services, said.

Global oil benchmark Brent crude rose 0.04 per cent to USD 74.46 a barrel.

On Friday, the BSE benchmark dropped 424.90 points or 0.56 per cent to settle at 75,311.06. The Nifty declined 117.25 points or 0.51 per cent to 22,795.90.

NTPC, Reliance, Adani commit ₹4 Lakh Crore investment in MP

PTI ■ BHOPAL

Billionaire Gautam Adani's group, Reliance Industries and state-owned power producer NTPC were among over a dozen companies that on Monday committed to invest about ₹4 Lakh Crore across businesses in Madhya Pradesh, amid a high-voltage showcase by the state of its vast opportunities and investment potential.

While Adani promised ₹1.10 Lakh Crore in pumped storage, cement, mining, smart meters, and thermal energy, Reliance committed ₹60,000 Crore to set up bio-fuel projects in the state.

Speaking at the eighth edition of the Madhya Pradesh investment summit, Adani promised another ₹1 Lakh Crore in a greenfield smart city, an airport project, and a coal-gasification project for which the ports-to-power conglomerate is in talks with

the state government. "Today, I am proud to announce new investments of over ₹1,10,000 Crore in the areas of pumped storage, cement, mining, smart-meters and thermal energy. These multi-sectoral investments will create more than 1,20,000 jobs in Madhya Pradesh by 2030," he said.

Adani said the plans are not just about investments, but they are milestones in a shared journey - one that would make the state a national leader in industrial and economic growth.

The inaugural MP Global Investors Summit began with big-ticket announcements - with the state going all out to woo global investors and large business houses to invest in the MP's limitless potential.

NTPC-NGEL (NTPC Green Energy Ltd) and MPPGCL (Madhya Pradesh Power Generation Company Ltd) signed a Memorandum of



Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Mohan Yadav in a meeting with Gautam Adani and other industrialists during Global Investors Summit 2025 in Bhopal. PTI

Understanding (MoU) for 20 GW worth of renewable power generation in the state, with an intent to invest ₹1,20,000 Crore in the energy sector.

NTPC Chairman and Managing Director Gurdeep Singh said his firm and its subsidiaries and joint venture

partners will invest ₹1.2 Lakh Crore in setting up 20 gigawatts of renewable power generation capacity in Madhya Pradesh. NTPC will also look at investing another ₹80,000 Crore in two sites of greenfield nuclear power plants in the state.

Renewable energy player Avaada plans to invest ₹50,000 Crore in setting up solar, wind, and pump hydro storage and battery storage projects and solar photovoltaic module manufacturing facility, its MD Vineet Mittal said.

"We will invest ₹50,000 Crore over a period of next three to five years in solar, wind, pumped storage, as well as battery," Mittal said.

Ahmedabad-based Torrent Power committed ₹26,500 Crore investment in renewable energy projects.

Power Finance Corporation (PFC) and Rural Electrification Corporation (REC) committed ₹26,800 Crore and ₹21,000 Crore of lending support, respectively, to projects coming up in the state.

The Indo-European Chamber of Small and Medium Enterprises, the Germany India Innovation Centre, and the Indo-German Chamber of

Commerce also signed MoUs with Madhya Pradesh Industrial Development Corporation (MPIDC).

OPG Power Generation Pvt Ltd pledged ₹13,400 Crore investment in setting up a manufacturing facility for battery storage systems, small modular reactors, green hydrogen and hybrid (solar and wind) power generation.

The final numbers will change after the state government releases a full list of investment commitments at the end of the two-day summit on Tuesday.

Chief Minister Mohan Yadav, while addressing audiences during the MoU signing ceremony said, the State has hit new milestones on the inaugural day of the Global Investors Summit.

He said that nations across the world have reposed confidence and faith in India's pace of progress and leadership in multiple sectors.

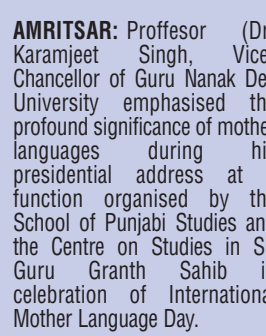
INBRIEF

INTERACTIVE SESSION WITH DIASPORA PUNJABI WRITER HELD AT GNDU



AMRITSAR: In a thought-provoking program organised by the School of Punjabi Studies at Guru Nanak Dev University, diaspora Punjabi writer Neelam Laj Saini shared her insights on diaspora Punjabi literature and her creative process with faculty, research students, and attendees.

MOTHER LANGUAGE CONNECTS INDIVIDUALS TO THEIR HERITAGE: PROF KARAMJEET SINGH



AMRITSAR: Professor (Dr) Karamjeet Singh, Vice-Chancellor of Guru Nanak Dev University emphasised the profound significance of mother languages during his presidential address at a function organised by the School of Punjabi Studies and the Centre on Studies in Sri Guru Granth Sahib in celebration of International Mother Language Day.

Liverpool marching towards Premier League title

PTI ■ MANCHESTER
Can anyone stop Liverpool's march toward the Premier League title? Not Manchester City, that's for sure. With a 2-0 win at the home of the four-time defending champion on Sunday, Liverpool produced a statement performance to move 11 points clear of Arsenal at the top of the standings. "Special" was how Mohamed Salah described the latest victory that left the away fans chanting "We're gonna win the league" after the final whistle. City manager Pep Guardiola, meanwhile, accepted the title was now Liverpool's to lose. First-half goals from Salah and Dominik Szoboszlai put Arne Slot's team on course for a win that leaves it in command of the title race after 27 games. Liverpool is now 20 points above fourth-placed City after completing a league double over Guardiola's once all-conquering team. While Slot tried to dampen title talk with months still remaining of the campaign, Liverpool's advantage is undeniable. "What we do know is that no one

saw us as a title contender when we started in the beginning of the season. And I think no one in the world of football would have expected City not to be so close to the one that leads the league," the Dutch coach said. This was City's eighth defeat in the league this season and 14th overall. The most games City had lost under Guardiola in any of his previous eight seasons was 12 in the 2019-20 campaign, which was the last time it failed to win the title. Then, as now, it was Liverpool that led the way, and the Merseyside club looks likely to win a record-equaling 20th league title this year. City, meanwhile, faces a fight to secure a top-four finish and a return to next season's Champions League. It is above fifth-placed Newcastle on goal difference and just two points ahead of Aston Villa in eighth. **TITLE CHARGE** Arsenal's surprise 1-0 loss to West Ham on Saturday had given Liverpool the opportunity to strengthen its grip on the title race. And the visitors quickly took control at the Etihad through Salah's deflected effort from a well-worked corner routine in the 14th



minute. It was his 30th goal of an outstanding campaign. He turned provider in the 37th to set up Szoboszlai, whose low shot wrong-footed City goalkeeper Ederson and rolled into the bottom corner. City, without the injured Erling

Haaland, rarely looked like getting back into the match, with Omar Marmoush's disallowed goal for offside the closest the home team came to scoring. "Now you're gonna believe us," chanted Liverpool's fans. "The fans can sing whatever they

want. I think they sing it quite long (time) already, but we know as a team how hard we have to work for every single win," Slot said. **CITY SLUMP** Another humbling defeat in an ever-worsening season for City. On Wednesday a 3-1 loss to Real

Madrid sent Guardiola's team crashing out of the Champions League. Back to domestic matters on Sunday and City was powerless to slow down Liverpool's title charge. The FA Cup is now the only realistic trophy available to City this season, while Champions League qualification is the priority for a team that has dominated English soccer under Guardiola. "If it doesn't happen it's because we were not good enough, not because a lack of hunger and desire," Guardiola said. "It is so tight with four or five teams and Nottingham, Newcastle, Aston Villa are so good. It will not be easy but we will try." City went into this season having won an unprecedented four English league titles in a row. Under Guardiola it has won six of the last seven. In total, he has won 15 major trophies at the club, including the Champions League as part of a treble in 2023. **SEVEN-GOAL THRILLER** Newcastle scored four goals in 11 minutes against Nottingham Forest, but still had to withstand a late fightback to seal a 4-3 win. A first-half goal spree — including

two more for Alexander Isak — gave Newcastle a 4-1 lead at the break at St James' Park. But Forest, which had led after six minutes, mounted a comeback that provided a nervous finish. The win moved Newcastle up to fifth and boosted its hopes of a top-four finish and Champions League qualification. Third-placed Forest led through Callum Hudson-Odoi's opener in the sixth. But Newcastle powered back with Lewis Miley's goal in the 23rd sparking a remarkable spree. Jacob Murphy put the home team ahead two minutes later and Isak struck from the penalty spot in the 33rd. A minute later Isak scored his second to take his total for the season to 21. The Sweden striker is level with Erling Haaland on 19 league goals and only Mohamed Salah, with 24, has scored more this season. Forest's fightback began in the 63rd through Nikola Milenkovic and in the 90th, Ryan Yates pulled the score back to 4-3. The defeat was Forest's third in its last four games in the league and saw it miss out on the chance to move to within three points of second-placed Arsenal.

Bayern beats Frankfurt 4-0

PTI ■ BERLIN
Bayern Munich substitute Serge Gnabry grabbed a late goal to cap a 4-0 win over third-placed Eintracht Frankfurt that consolidated the Bavarian powerhouse's Bundesliga lead. Gnabry fired the ball through Frankfurt goalkeeper Kevin Trapp's legs in the second minute of stoppage time, almost 10 minutes after Jamal Musiala ran past a host of defenders and got a fortunate bounce of the ball before firing it past Trapp for Bayern's third goal. Without top scorer Harry Kane, who only played the final half hour or so, Bayern stayed eight points clear of defending champion Bayer Leverkusen with 11 rounds remaining. The only blemish from Bayern's point of view was an injury to Joshua Kimmich in the first half. The Bayern midfielder had to go off after clutching the back of his left thigh. Bayern coach Vincent Kompany opted against starting Kane, who sustained a facial injury in the draw against Leverkusen last weekend. Altogether he made six changes to the team



that drew with Celtic 1-1 in the Champions League playoffs on Tuesday, with Bayern veteran Thomas Müller leading the attack. "We heard a few things about ourselves last week," Bayern board member for sport Max Eberl said of the team's two draws. "We stayed calm. We focused on what we wanted to achieve, namely beating the third-placed team in the German league at home. And that's what we did." Frankfurt forward Hugo Ekitike had the best chance early on after a mistake from Hiroki Ito, before Musiala had Bayern's first opportunity cleared off the line. There were more to come. Bayern dominated proceedings and duly took the lead through Michael

Olise before the break. Ito was left free at a corner to score the second goal in the 61st. It was the Japan defender's first goal for Bayern. **CHAMPIONS LEAGUE HOPES DAMAGED** Both Stuttgart and Leipzig drew their games on Sunday, denting their hopes of qualifying for Europe's top club competition. Leipzig was held to a 2-2 draw at home by relegation-threatened Heidenheim, then Stuttgart failed to capitalize as Hoffenheim fought from a goal down to draw 1-1 in the late game. Those results left Freiburg fourth — in the last place for Champions League qualification — followed by Mainz, ahead of Leipzig on goal difference.

Bengaluru FC seek win against Chennaiyin FC

PTI ■ BENGALURU
A play-offs spot at stake, Bengaluru FC will bank on their impressive home record when they host their southern neighbours Chennaiyin FC in an Indian Super League (ISL) match here on Tuesday. Mohun Bagan Super Giant have already clinched the ISL Shield on Sunday with three rounds of matches remaining, thereby earning a berth in the AFC Champions League 2, but the trophy is still up for grabs. The top two teams at the end of the league will automatically qualify for the semifinals while the four teams from third to sixth will play a single-leg round to fill up the remaining two spots. Both Bengaluru FC and Chennaiyin FC are in two-game-long winning runs currently, with the Blues placed fourth in the table, having 34 points from 21 games on the back of 10 wins and four draws. Chennaiyin FC are eighth with 24 points, eight behind the sixth-placed Mumbai City FC (32), and they will want to keep their qualification hopes

afloat with a positive outcome here. The Blues have a formidable hold over this fixture at home, winning each of their last four games against the Marina Machans and keeping a clean sheet in three of them. However, Chennaiyin FC are stitching a positive string of results, winning their last two matches 3-0 and 2-1 against East Bengal and Punjab FC respectively. The two sides have played 16 matches against each other, with Bengaluru FC winning nine games and Chennaiyin FC emerging victorious four times. Three matches have produced draws. Bengaluru head coach Gerard Zaragoza said that his team needs to produce a positive result and get the three points to confirm their place in the top-6. "We deserve the six points that we won in the last two matches. Now, we have to achieve our objective, which is to arrive in the playoffs," he said. Chennaiyin head coach Owen Coyle laid down straightforward objectives for his team ahead of the match against Bengaluru FC.



Real Madrid 2-0 win against Girona in Spanish league

PTI ■ MADRID
Luka Modric scored a beautiful long-range goal in Real Madrid's 2-0 home win against Girona that moved the defending champion level on points in the Spanish league with leader Barcelona. The veteran midfielder chested the ball down in the 41st minute before firing a right-footed shot into the top corner. "To score a goal like that, you have to keep shooting," Modric said. "I was by myself, controlled the ball, I struck it well and thank God it went in. It was a nice goal and it's always special to score at home in front of the fans at the Bernabeu." Modric received a huge ovation from the crowd at the Santiago Bernabeu Stadium. "I'm very grateful and proud of the affection that Madrid fans show me every day," he said. "Today they've done it again and I can only say 'thank you.'" Vinicius Junior scored Madrid's second goal after an assist from Kylian Mbappé in the 83rd to leave Madrid with the same 54 points as Barcelona, which won 2-0 at Las Palmas on Saturday. Barcelona leads on the head-to-head tiebreaker against Madrid. Atletico Madrid is one point behind the two rivals. Diego Simeone's team won 3-0 at Valencia on Saturday.

Modric made his ninth start in 25 league matches for Madrid in a season in which the 39-year-old has played few minutes off the bench. The former world player of the year scored his fourth goal this season with his neat strike to put Madrid ahead at the Bernabeu. "Modric is a gift for soccer," Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti said. "We've had the luck of having a legend with us." Vinicius scored his first league goal since November from inside the area after a nice through ball by Mbappé, who on Wednesday scored a hat trick to lead Madrid to a 3-1 win over Manchester City at the Bernabeu in the Champions League playoffs. **REGULARS RESTED, ALABA STARTS** Ancelotti rested a few regular starters following the City match at the Bernabeu, including central defender Antonio Rudiger and Federico Valverde, the midfielder who for the first time this season didn't play any minutes. Defender David Alaba made his first start in more than a year following a knee injury, while Lucas Vázquez was back in the lineup after missing a few games to nurse a left hamstring issue. Modric had also started in the league draw at Osasuna last weekend as Ancelotti rotated his squad for the Champions League playoff

games against City. Brahim Diaz was another who got to start on Sunday. Midfielder Jude Bellingham served the first of a two-game suspension for cursing at a referee in the match against Osasuna. Girona, sitting in 12th place, has lost seven of its last eight games in all competitions, including three in a row in the Spanish league. **SEVEN-GOAL ROUT FOR ATHLETIC** Forward Nico Williams scored a goal in each half as Athletic Bilbao trounced last-place Valladolid 7-1 at home. Mikel Jauregizar, Maroan Sannadi, Oihan Sancet, Gorka Guruzeta and Iñaki Williams, Nico's brother, also scored for Athletic. Valladolid, which has lost six in a row, played with 10 men from the 66th after a red card for Stanko Juric. The visitors had what would have been the 1-1 equalizer in the first half disallowed for offside. Before each match, a banner with the words "respect the referee" and "respect soccer" was displayed as players from both teams posed for photos. The campaign comes after several complaints from clubs against refereeing decisions and some threats by fans against the officials. **OTHER RESULTS** Japan forward Takefusa Kubo scored a second-half goal as eighth-placed Real Sociedad comfortably beat Leganes 3-0 at home.

Nobody can handle pressure like Kohli: BCCI, IPL top brass

PTI ■ DUBAI
Virat Kohli provides unmatched stability to the Indian team, according to former Sports Minister Anurag Thakur and BCCI Vice President Rajeev Shukla, who felt the superstar batter displayed exceptional composure under pressure during his century against Pakistan. Kohli's majestic unbeaten century was the backbone of India's six-wicket victory over Pakistan in the Champions Trophy. "Virat Kohli has shown how to handle the pressure and how to play for the country. Through his outstanding innings, Virat has won many hearts and the match for the country," former BCCI



President Thakur said. "If you look at Virat's innings, he never went outright for the century. For him, the priority was India's win. He was rotating the strike, not going for his own runs only. "He wanted to play till the last and win the match for India. That is a big thing about Kohli. For big players like him individual innings is not very important, it's country's victory that matters," he added. After India's bowlers restricted Pakistan to an underwhelming 241, Kohli stitched match-winning partnerships with Shreyas Iyer and Shubman Gill to chase down the target with 45 balls to spare. "Kohli's century was simply

fabulous. The way he scored his century. The way he provided stability to Indian team, nobody can do it," Shukla said. "Shreyas and Gill also played very well. The Indian team is back to full form. All the players were fully fit and they were ready to take on Pakistan. And they did it in style. The team looks well oiled for the finals," he added. Kohli's century, his 51st in ODIs, was laced with seven

Paris Saint-Germain continues to dominate in France league

PTI ■ PARIS
Paris Saint-Germain has no serious rival in France this season and will soon find out if its crushing domestic dominance can translate into the team thriving on European soccer's biggest stage. Still unbeaten in the French league after 23 matches, PSG extended its massive lead at the top of the standings to 13 points on Sunday with a 3-2 win at sixth-placed Lyon. The match came to life after the interval and featured inspired attacking moves from both sides. PSG was the better side and led 2-0 with seven minutes left to play. The only downside for Luis Enrique's team was its players' inability to keep their lead intact when Lyon really upped the tempo. Inspired by the in-form Ousmane Dembélé — who

scored his 17th league goal at Lyon — PSG has made tremendous progress in recent weeks. Achraf Hakimi scored PSG's other goals. There appears little doubt that PSG will win a record-extending 13th league title this season. But a far tougher test looms in March against Premier League leader Liverpool when the two teams face off in a mouthwatering last-16 Champions League tie. The first leg is in Paris on March 5. It's the next big hurdle on the road that separates PSG from their ultimate goal of winning the Champions League, a task that has proved too difficult so far despite the millions injected by Qatari investors since 2011. The only French club to win the Champions League, second-placed Marseille,

made headlines for the wrong reason this weekend. It lost 3-0 at Auxerre, and its president accused French league referees of corruption. In Lyon, Hakimi put PSG ahead in the 53rd minute from Bradley Barcola's cross and Dembélé doubled the lead six minutes later with a superb strike in the opposite corner. Ryan Cherki ensured some suspense when he pulled one back at the end of a fine team move with seven minutes left to play. Hakimi completed his brace soon after to restore PSG's two-goal lead after Gonçalo Ramos delivered a scintillating backheel pass in the buildup, only for Corentin Tolisso to revive the suspense in stoppage time with a header. But that was too little, too late. **NANTES BOUNCES BACK**



Struggling Nantes moved five points clear off the relegation playoff spot with a 3-1 win against Lens. A week after getting hammered 7-1 at Monaco, Nantes bounced back to secure only its fifth win in 23

league games this season. The hosts put on a spirited display against a visiting side that lacked an attacking spark and was reduced to 10 men for the last 20 minutes. French teenager Louis Leroux celebrated his first

Ligue 1 start by opening the scoring in the 36th minute with a powerful shot. Moses Simon then made it 2-0 with a penalty kick on the hourmark following a handball. Neil El Aynaoui pulled one back from the spot five

minutes later but Lens never looked capable of scrambling a comeback, especially after Mbala Nzola was sent off. Meschack Elia Lina secured a Nantes victory in stoppage time from former Arsenal midfielder Francis Coquelin's assist. Lens slumped to a third straight loss and remained in eighth place. **LONG WAIT** According to the league's statistics, Coquelin played his first Ligue 1 game since May 29, 2011, meaning he waited for 13 years and 270 days. The much-traveled Coquelin joined Nantes last month as a free agent. It's the second longest gap between two matches for a player in the French topflight since 1947-48 after Samuel Lobé — 14 years, 79 days between January 1986 and April 2000.

Aboukhalil's scissor-kick goal. Toulouse winger Zakaria Aboukhalil scored a stunning scissor-kick goal in a 4-1 win at Le Havre. The 25-year-old Dutch player put Toulouse in front with his left foot when he connected with a lofted ball from Shavy Babicka in the Le Havre area. With his back to the goal, close to the penalty spot, Aboukhalil rose and unleashed an acrobatic shot that hit the right post and went into the back of the net. It was Aboukhalil's seventh league goal this season. Le Havre remained in the relegation zone, two points above last-placed Montpellier, with Toulouse 10th. **OTHER RESULTS** Jonathan Claus and Hicham Boudaoui both scored as Nice moved back to third place with a 2-0 win over Montpellier.

Australia vs South Africa: Two batting firepower clash

PTI ■ RAWALPINDI

Australia and South Africa, two teams possessing plenty of batting firepower, will look to outmuscle each other here on Tuesday and put one foot in the semifinals of the Champions Trophy (CT). Not many were giving a depleted Australia a chance in the tournament but their record-breaking chase against England in Lahore has once again shown their penchant for rising to the occasion in ICC events. The dew played its part the other night in Lahore and could once again aid the chasing team in Rawalpindi. Australia are bound to miss the pace trio of Pat Cummins, Mitchell Starc and Josh Hazlewood in the tournament but at least in the opener, the audacious batting display compensated for their absence.



to go all the way. "I think as a group we might not have had the best results coming into this tournament, but quietly I think everyone's quite confident. We do have incredibly good players in this team, not just in the team but obviously the whole squad as well," said Rickleton. "There's guys that are maybe a bit young in the side as well that are also looking to make an impact. But I don't think we're too burdened by the hunt to win the whole thing. "Obviously, we're here to do that. But we don't let that restrict us. We have to play our best game, have fun, enjoy each other's company," he added.

Squad:
Australia: Matthew Short, Travis Head, Steven Smith (captain), Marnus Labuschagne, Josh Inglis (wk), Alex Carey, Glenn Maxwell, Ben Dwarshuis, Nathan Ellis, Adam Zampa, Spencer Johnson, Jake Fraser-McGurk, Aaron Hardie, Sean Abbott, Tanveer Sangha.
South Africa: Ryan Rickleton (wicketkeeper), Tony de Zorzi, Temba Bavuma (captain), Rassie van der Dussen, Aiden Markram, David Miller, Wiaan Mulder, Marco Jansen, Keshav Maharaj, Kagiso Rabada, Lungi Ngidi, Heinrich Klaasen, Tabraiz Shamsi, Tristan Stubbs, Corbin Bosch.

Josh Inglis' confidence must be sky high after playing the innings of his life with runs also coming from the bat of Matthew Short, Marnus Labuschagne, Alex Carey and Glenn Maxwell. That leaves out only skipper Steve Smith and opener Travis Head in the batting department and they could score a big one against the

Proteas. A better bowling effort would be expected from left-arm pacer Spencer Johnson and Maxwell too was on the expensive side against England. The sixth bowler's role is likely to be shared by Labuschagne and Short. Like Inglis, Ryan Rickleton in the

not certain. South Africa's pace attack is certainly stronger than their opponents with Kagiso Rabada leading the charge. With first choice players not available, South Africa did not have the best of build ups for Champions Trophy but are backing themselves



Delhi Capitals, Gujarat Giants eye improved batting effort

PTI ■ BENGALURU

Struggling with batting Sraillites, Gujarat Giants and Delhi Capitals will look to return to winning ways when they clash in the Women's Premier League here on Tuesday. Both teams head into this fixture on the back of defeats. Gujarat Giants, who finished last in the previous two seasons, remain at the bottom of the points table with just one win in three games. Meanwhile, Delhi Capitals have slipped to third after a 33-run loss to UP Warriorz, their third defeat in five matches. Despite being one of the most consistent teams since the league's inception, Delhi Capitals have endured a patchy run this season. They are yet to live up to their pre-tournament favourites tag, struggling to put together commanding performances.

Their batting lineup, in particular, has failed to fire consistently. Opens Shafali Verma and Meg Lanning have shown glimpses of form but haven't capitalised. Lanning, in particular, has struggled, with just one strong performance so far, suggesting that international retirement might have impacted her game. While Shafali, Jemimah Rodrigues, and Annabel Sutherland have provided occasional fireworks, none have converted their starts into substantial innings. "We have played extremely well in patches but haven't been as good at other times. We just have to put everything together moving forward," Lanning said after the loss to Warriorz.

Gujarat Giants, on the other hand, have been heavily reliant on Australian all-rounder Ashleigh Gardner, who has been their standout performer. Gardner is the third-highest run-scorer in the tournament, amassing 141 runs in three innings. However, in the match against Mumbai Indians, her failure exposed the team's lack of batting depth, as Gujarat crumbled for just 120. The pressure is mounting on the Indian batters, particularly number three D Hemalatha, to step up. South African batter Laura Wolvaardt is also due for a big innings. With the ball, Gardner has led from the front, receiving good support from leg-spinner Priya Mishra. However, Gujarat will need an all-round effort if they hope to turn their season around.

Squads:
Gujarat Giants: Ashleigh Gardner (c), Bharti Fulmali, Laura Wolvaardt, Phoebe Litchfield, Simran Shaikh, Danielle Gibson, Dayalan Hemalatha, Deandra Dottin, Harleen Deol, Sayali Satghare, Tanuja Kanwar, Beth Mooney (wk), Kashvee Gautam, Mannat Kashyap, Meghna Singh, Prakashika Naik, Priya Mishra, Shaabnam Shakil.
Delhi Capitals: Meg Lanning (c), Jemimah Rodrigues, Shafali Verma, Sneha Deepthi, Alice Capsey, Annabel Sutherland, Arundhati Reddy, Jess Jonassen, Marizanne Kapp, Minnu Mani, N Charani, Niki Prasad, Radha Yadav, Shikha Pandey, Nandini Khatyap (wk), Taniyaa Bhatia (wk), Sarah Bryce (wk), Titas Sadhu.



Our Champions Trophy campaign as good as over, says Rizwan

PTI ■ DUBAI

Pakistan captain Mohammad Rizwan has conceded that his team's Champions Trophy (CT) campaign is as good as over following the loss to India here. The six-wicket defeat to India was Pakistan's second in as many games. From Group A, India and New Zealand are expected to reach the semifinals. Pakistan's last league game is against Bangladesh on February 27. "We can say that our campaign is as good as over. We have to depend on results of other matches. There is hope as there is one more game left. As a captain, I don't like this scenario (depending on other teams). We should have our fate in our hands," said Rizwan at the post-match press conference. He gave due credit to India and especially Virat Kohli, who completed his 51st ODI hundred and his fourth against the arch-rivals. "I am amazed at the hardwork he puts in. The whole world was saying he was out of form but coming into such a big game, he scored runs effortlessly. His fitness and work ethic is indeed praiseworthy. We tried our best to get him out but we could not. "As far as the match is concerned, we are obviously disappointed. We made mistakes in all three

departments. We were not able to take wickets in the middle overs," he added. Pakistan came into the tournament as defending champions having won the last edition back in 2017. They are hosting an ICC event for the first time in 29 years and an early exit as hosts will indeed be a big setback for Rizwan's team. Pakistan had lost to New Zealand in their tournament opener. The Blackcaps had also beaten them twice in the preceding tri-series in Pakistan. Rizwan said the team is not learning from its mistakes. "Look, honestly, we made the same mistake that we have been making in the past with four matches. "We are trying to do our work and put in our efforts. Because what I believe in is that our Indian team put in more effort than us today. Maybe they were more brave than us. And we needed energy in our fielding. So maybe we lacked that energy," said the wicket-keeper batter. Rizwan acknowledged the injuries to openers Saim Ayub and more recently Fakhar Zaman did impact them adversely. "Our loss occurred when we missed out on Saim Ayub, because we had a package with Saim Ayub because of which our team had settled down. But when Saim Ayub left, our balance and our team's combination faced a big impact," he said.

Playing cover drive is 'catch-22': Kohli

PTI ■ DUBAI

Indian batting maestro Virat Kohli admitted that his trademark cover drive puts him in a "catch-22" situation as it has been a weakness lately but playing the shot gives him control over the innings. Kohli crafted a memorable unbeaten century against Pakistan, steering India to a six-wicket win. His 111-ball masterclass featured the cover drive prominently, a shot that has in recent time led to his downfall but remains a signature weapon in his arsenal. "It's a 'catch-22'. I mean, it's (cover drive) kind of been my weakness as well over the years, but I've scored a lot of runs on that shot," Kohli said in a video posted by BCCI.



"I think today was just about backing my shots and I think the first couple of boundaries I got were cover drives on the rise, so I really had to just let it go a little bit and take a bit of risk and follow through with my shots. "Because when I hit that kind of shots, then I feel in control when I bat out there. So, it was a good innings for me personally and it was a great team win," he added. An India-Pakistan game is always a blockbuster, but Kohli felt Sunday's

clash was even more electrifying, with Dubai's stands packed with passionate fans from both nations. "The occasion is a bit more lively when you play against Pakistan, especially in this region because you have an equal number of fans from both countries, yeah, it was a great day for us as a team and for me personally as well." Delighted to contribute to India's victory once again, Kohli, who became the fastest batter to complete 14,000 ODI runs, said his role at number three has remained unchanged over the years

- minimising risk, stabilising the innings, and when possible, finishing the chase. "One thing that I've always thought of batting at three is to minimise risk and make sure that I put my team in a winning position and if you have a chance to finish off the game in a chase, obviously, that's much better and I always preferred that kind of a situation. "My role over the years has remained the same, whatever the demand of the game, I put my head down and try to do that," he added.

Kuldeep feels good rhythm after comeback from injury

PTI ■ DUBAI

Indian spinner Kuldeep Yadav feels he has found his rhythm following a comeback from injury and expects to get better with every game he plays in the ongoing Champions Trophy (CT). Kuldeep struck thrice in the death overs against Pakistan on Sunday and was also on a hat-trick. The 30-year-old had undergone a surgery for sports hernia last year, keeping him away from the game for more than three months. "Injuries take six months to recover. I played two matches against England. I had a good rhythm. I had a good rhythm even against Bangladesh. "But obviously, you always look for wickets (he went wicketless against Bangladesh). But today, when I bowled my first over, I felt that I am in a better rhythm. I am in a comfortable position. "Even now, I feel that I can bowl

better. I have played 3-4 matches. I will get better as I play more," Kuldeep told newsmen in the Mixed Zone after six-wicket win over the arch-rivals. Kuldeep's three victims included Salman Agha, Shaheen Afridi and Naseem Shah. Talking about his specific plans, he said; "In the first spell, I hit a lot of Chinaman. And the wrong one is a variation of mine. I also hit a topspin with the wrong one. "The first wicket of Salman was a normal Chinaman. It was slow, but I varied the pace. Obviously, the second wicket was a first-ball swing. I was targeting the wicket. I thought it was a better option to hit the wrong one. "So, I have to think about which delivery I can hit. And the incoming deliveries are difficult if it's a slow track. So, that was my plan." However, Kuldeep feels he can get better on the accuracy front.



"To be very honest, in terms of accuracy, I feel that if I play more games, I will be much better. Obviously, when you play a lot of games, you tend to mix your pace."

difficult to hit spinners when you have variations. Luckily, it was good for me. The wicket was slow. I was trying to mix with the pace and wrong ones or topspin. "If you get one or two wickets in the middle, the batsmen tend to block you. That's what they did in the last 10 overs. Playing Pakistan, there is a lot of pressure from the fans. There are a lot of expectations. I enjoy it," said Kuldeep. The wily operated credited the NCA for his speedy recovery from hernia. "I give a lot of credit to the NCA. I worked with Rajni. Dhananjay, who is our physio, was under Nitin Patel. I didn't take a day off. I took two days off. He called me back. I was very focused. I knew that if I delayed even a little, I would miss the Champions Trophy. I didn't expect to recover in time, but the staff was working very hard," Kuldeep added.

Love to take on bowlers when we are under pressure: Shreyas Iyer

PTI ■ DUBAI

Giving a peek into his mindset when faced with high-pressure situations, India batter Shreyas Iyer has said that he likes to be aggressive to "steady the ship", something that he demonstrated quite well in the Champions Trophy (CT) win over arch-foes Pakistan after making a sedate start. Iyer's 56 off 67 was the perfect supporting act to Virat Kohli's unbeaten 100 as India chased a 242-run target with more than seven overs to spare on Sunday night. The win has pushed Pakistan to the brink of elimination and taken India within touching distance of a semifinal berth. "I love to take on the bowlers

when we are under pressure. And that is my mindset. If we take charge, if we gain the momentum towards us, then it is easy to steady the ship," Iyer said in the post-match press conference. "And from there on, the rest of the batsmen, when they come in, it becomes easy for them." He expected India to take way less than the 42.3 overs that the side consumed for the six-wicket victory. "I think we could have won a bit earlier, could have been a convincing win based on how the wicket was playing. It was initially coming on pretty well with the new ball and after that it was difficult to score runs when the ball got a bit old," he said.

"But if we would have played more aggressively we would have won a bit earlier I felt," he added. Iyer, nonetheless, termed India's as a "sweet" one because it came against a competitive team and involved warding off a lot of "external pressures." "I haven't played that many matches in Pakistan, so I don't know exactly how it would have felt. But it's a neutral venue and it's a challenge for both the teams. But any victory against Pakistan is sweet because they are always competitive," Iyer told reporters. "It's a challenge and there's a lot of pressure externally as well. It was a lot of fun. It was my third game in Pakistan,"



he added but did not elaborate what exactly he meant by external pressure. Iyer, who formed a vital 114-run alliance with Kohli for the third wicket, lauded his

senior colleague for making a fluent hundred. It was Kohli's 51st ODI hundred, and he also completed 14,000 runs in the format during the course of the knock.

"I have never thought of Virat struggling for runs. He is always hungry for runs. I remember yesterday, he had come almost an hour before us for the practice session and he played a few balls and he was looking from outside," the 30-year-old said. "He looked as crisp as he looks all the time. So, I never feel that he is struggling for his runs," he added. "No injury to Shami, Rohit The Mumbaier also allied injury concerns over skipper Rohit Sharma and veteran pacer Mohammed Shami. Both had to stay away from the field during the initial phase of the Pakistan's innings. "I had a brief chat with them and both of them were quite

comfortable with the way things progressed and yeah from my knowledge, I don't think there is any issue," he said. "Adapting is important" Iyer played a two-layered innings, in which he focused on singles early on before opening up to punish the Pakistan bowlers. He explained the rationale behind his approach. "See, it is clear as sweeps and reverse sweeps cannot be played straightaway. But rotating the strike is going to be important because that puts a decent amount of pressure on the bowlers. "They keep changing their line lengths. And once you keep taking singles, the bowlers are more under

pressure and you can keep hitting the scoreboard from there on," he added. Iyer also lauded the Indian spinners for keeping Pakistan batters quiet in the middle overs. "They bowled tremendously, especially in the middle phase where the ball was turning. As we know, even in the previous game when we played over here, the wicket is a bit slow. "It's spinner friendly and the way they have been bowling consistently over a period of time, I think the amalgamation of all three bowlers mixing up quite well, also the experience that they possess. I think that brings a lot of clarity in their bowling," he said.