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नारी सशक्तिकरण के लिए समर्पित मध्यप्रदेश

मकर संक्रांति के पावन पर्व की मंगलकामनाएं

- शासकीय सेवाओं में महिलाओं को 35% आरक्षण
- 1.27 करोड़ लाइली बहनों को हर माह ₹ 1250
- 26 लाख लाइली बहनों को ₹ 450 में सस्ता गैस सिलेंडर
- 81 लाख हुआ लाइली लक्ष्मी परिवार
- 1 लाख से अधिक बनीं लखपति दीदी



FAITH, CHARITY, BUSINESS, CONVERGE AT MAHAKUMBH 2025

BISWAJEET BANERJEE
MAHAKUMBH NAGAR

The sacred banks of the Ganga, Yamuna, and the mystical Saraswati came alive with a sea of humanity as the Maha Kumbh commenced on the auspicious day of Paush Purnima with over 1.65 crore people took a dip at the holy river.

Pilgrims from every corner of the country, carrying faith in their hearts and offerings in their hands, gathered to take the first holy dip. The air was filled with reverberating chants of "Har Har Gange" and "Jai Shri Ram," creating an atmosphere of divine fervor.

The devotion of the pilgrims was palpable as they began arriving at the Sangam from midnight, braving the biting cold. Wrapped in woollens, they carried their belongings on their heads, the weight of which seemed insignificant before their unwavering faith. "It feels like a burden lifted from my soul when I take a dip here," said Savitri Devi, a 65-year-old pilgrim from Rajasthan, as she emerged from the water with a serene smile.

The banks of the Sangam turned into a kaleidoscope of colors as people dressed in traditional attire

thronged the ghats. Children played in the shallow waters, their laughter mingling with the chants of mantras, while elders sat in prayer, their lips murmuring sacred hymns. The youthful enthusiasm was especially striking, with many capturing the moments on their phones and sharing them instantly. "It's a proud moment for us to be here and celebrate our culture with the world," said 22-year-old Aniket Mishra from Allahabad, holding a selfie stick as he stood at the edge of the waters. The spiritual energy was matched by nature's grace, with a light drizzle the previous night followed by a cool breeze enhancing the sanctity of the occasion. Pilgrims were seen lighting diyas, offering flowers, and performing rituals on the ghats. "The cold water feels like the blessings of the goddess herself. This is not just a bath; it's a spiritual rebirth," said Ramesh Gupta, a trader from Delhi who had traveled with his family for the occasion.

The elaborate security arrangements ensured a smooth flow of devotees. Police personnel stood alert at every corner, guiding the crowds and maintaining order. Drones hovered overhead, providing real-time monitoring from the Integrated Command and

CRORES OF BELIEVERS BATHE IN THE ETERNAL GLORY OF SANGAM



Devotees take a holy dip at Sangam during Maha Kumbh Mela 2025, in Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh

Control Center. "We feel safe and cared for. The arrangements this year are truly commendable," said Kavita Joshi, a teacher from Uttarakhand. For many, the Maha Kumbh was

not just an act of faith but also a celebration of cultural heritage. The ghats became a stage for impromptu performances of bhajans and folk songs, as groups of devotees formed circles and sang

in unison. The atmosphere was electric yet peaceful, a blend of human devotion and divine energy. Social media was abuzz with posts, photos, and videos from the event.

"I shared a live video of the aarti, and my friends back in Mumbai were amazed. This is a part of our culture we should all be proud of," said Prerna Mehta, a first-time visitor to the Kumbh. As the sun rose over the horizon, casting a golden glow over the confluence, the Sangam appeared like a painting brought to life. The sight of millions standing waist-deep in the water, hands folded in prayer, was both humbling and awe-inspiring. "This is the heart of India, where the soul of our nation resides," said Dr. Vinod Kumar, a historian observing the event. The first day of Mahakumbh also saw a bustling market atmosphere, with devotees enthusiastically shopping for food, puja items, and other essentials from both established stores and small vendors. Ramkumar, a food vendor from Hardoi who arrived two weeks ago, shared his experience: "Here, we are not only feeding devotees but also earning spiritual merit. We are not overcharging anyone, and everything is running smoothly." Similarly, Sunil from Bhadohi, who is serving tea at the event, expressed gratitude for the opportunity. "I've come here for 45 days to earn a livelihood. On this chilly first day, tea is being served

to the devotees without any extra charge," he added. Mahakumbh 2025 is turning into a unique confluence of commerce and charity, as the first day witnessed both thriving business and widespread acts of generosity. Various organisations set up Bhandaras across the fairgrounds, distributing food and tea in abundance to the countless devotees present. From piping hot Kichdi to Puri Sabzi, devotees were treated to a variety of meals, while tea was served at numerous stalls throughout the day. Renowned saints, including Satua Baba, have also extended hospitality by organizing Bhandaras and making arrangements for devotees to stay in their camps, ensuring that no one leaves without being cared for. This seamless blend of spiritual service and economic activity highlights the inclusive spirit of Mahakumbh. The first day of the Maha Kumbh had already become an unforgettable chapter in the lives of the pilgrims. For them, this was more than a ritual—it was a connection with something eternal, a reminder of the timeless bond between humanity and the divine.

India summons Bangladesh Deputy High Commissioner

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI

India on Monday summoned Bangladesh Deputy High Commissioner Nural Islam amid escalating border tensions between the two nations. The development comes a day after the Bangladesh Foreign

Ministry summoned Indian High Commissioner to Dhaka Pranay Verma. The border tensions between India and Bangladesh have escalated after Dhaka alleged that India was trying to construct fences at five locations along the India-Bangladesh border, violating a bilateral agreement.

In a statement, the Bangladeshi foreign ministry said, "Bangladesh Foreign Secretary Ambassador Md Jashim Uddin on Sunday expressed the deep concern of the Government of Bangladesh to the High Commissioner of India Pranay Verma at his office at the Ministry of Foreign

Affairs over the recent activities of the Border Security Force (BSF) of India along the Bangladesh-India Border." The conflicts have surfaced in five areas, including (northwestern) Chapainawabganj, Naogaon, Lalmonirhat, and the Tin Bigha Corridor.

FII's exit, Sensex drops sharply

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
MUMBAI

The equity benchmark Sensex cracked over 1,000 points to dive below the 77,000 level on Monday, tracking heavy selling in global equities and a spike in international crude prices. A strong US jobs data, which dampened early rate cut expectations, the rupee logging its steepest single-day fall in nearly two years and unabated foreign fund outflows also dampened investors' sentiment.

MARKETS



Falling for the fourth straight session, the 30-share BSE benchmark Sensex tanked 1,048.90 points or 1.36 per cent to finally settle at 76,330.01. During the day, it plunged 1,129.19 points or 1.45 per cent to 76,249.72. The NSE Nifty dropped 345.55 points or 1.47 per cent to close at 23,085.95. From the 30-share blue-chip pack, Zomato cracked nearly 7 per cent. Power Grid, Adani Ports, Tata Steel, NTPC, Tata Motors, Tech Mahindra, Mahindra & Mahindra, Asian Paints, Sun Pharma and UltraTech Cement were the other major laggards. In contrast, Axis Bank, Hindustan Unilever, Tata Consultancy Services and IndusInd Bank were the gainers.

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CM lauds workers for contribution in nation building

STAFF REPORTER ■ BHOPAL

Chief Minister Mohan Yadav on Monday inspected the work of Kanh Close Duct Diversion Project under construction for Kshipra purification by descending into the 32-meter-deep Shaft-3 under construction tunnel located in Bamora village of Ujjain. Chief Minister Dr. Yadav instructed the officials to pay special attention to the quality of work and time limit. Highlighting the importance of Kanh Close Duct Diversion Project in view of Simhastha-2028, he said that this scheme will help our long standing resolve take shape. With this project, the polluted water of Kanh will not be found on any bank of Kshipra. After purification,

the water of Kanh river will be transported to the downstream of Gambhir river, due to which farmers will also get sufficient water for irrigation. **CM interacts with workers working in the tunnel and enquired about their well-being** Chief Minister Dr. Mohan Yadav entered the tunnel of the Kanh Close Duct Diversion Project to interact with workers, inquiring about their work, lifestyle, hours, and well-being. His kind and sensitive approach encouraged the workers to openly share their experiences. The workers expressed pride in contributing to the nation by working diligently to clean the Kshipra River. Dr. Yadav appreciated their dedication,

acknowledging their significant role in nation-building and their patriotic spirit. Prior to the tunnel visit, ACS Dr. Rajesh Rajoura briefed Chief Minister Dr. Mohan Yadav, Union Water Power Minister CR Patil, Water Resources Minister Tulsiram Silawat, Minister-in-charge Gautam Tetwal, and Municipal Corporation Chairperson Kalavati Yadav on the progress of the Kanh Close Duct Diversion Project till Monday. Chief Minister Mohan Yadav performed the Bhoomi-Pujan of the Kanh Close Duct Project in June 2024. The project is set for completion by September 2027, with a 15-year provision for operation and maintenance by the implementing agency. Once completed, the

Kshipra River will flow continuously with clean and pure water, free from pollution caused by the Kanh River. The project spans a total length of 30.15 km, comprising a 12 km tunnel and an 18.15 km cut-and-cover section. The Kanh Diversion Close Duct Project is currently under construction, with significant progress in various sections. Excavation and PCC work are ongoing in the initial 6.90 km of the cut-and-cover portion. In the tunnel section, vertical and horizontal excavation is being carried out through four shafts. Additionally, pre-cast segments are being cast at the casting yard in Gangedi village. Soon, these pre-cast segments will be transported to the project's

alignment, placed on the PCC bed, and joined to advance the construction. The tunnel section of the Kanh Diversion Close Duct Project includes four shafts located in the villages of Palkhedi, Chintaman Jawasia, Bamora, and Devrakhedi. Vertical excavation work is ongoing in shafts 01 and 02, while shafts 03 and 04 have completed vertical excavation, and horizontal excavation work is currently underway. Mayor Mukesh Tatwal, Ravi Solanki, Divisional Commissioner Sanjay Gupta, ADGP Umesh Joga, DIG Navneet Bhasin, Collector Neeraj Kumar Singh, Superintendent of Police Pradeep Sharma and other public representatives were present.



Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Mohan Yadav with Union Minister for Jal Shakti CR Patil performs the Bhoomi Pujan of Sevarakhedi-Silarkhedi project in Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh on Monday. Pioneer photo

Rajoria for reward to Brahmin couples with four children

STAFF REPORTER ■ BHOPAL

The Chairman of the Parshuram Kalyan Board in Madhya Pradesh, Pandit Vishnu Rajoria, has sparked controversy by announcing a Rs 1 lakh reward for young Brahmin couples who choose to have four children. Rajoria, who holds the rank of a state cabinet minister, made the statement during a community event in Indore. Addressing the gathering, Rajoria expressed concerns about the declining family sizes among Brahmins. "The number of heretics is increasing because we have largely stopped focusing on our families. Youngsters settle down and stop after having just one child, which is problematic. I urge you to have at least four children," he said. He further assured that the

reward would be given irrespective of his tenure as board president. "Whether or not I am the board president, the ₹1 lakh award will be provided," he declared. When questioned by the media, Rajoria clarified that his announcement was a personal initiative, not an official government policy. "This is my social statement made during a community program. The Brahmin society has the resources to ensure proper education and training for children to achieve higher positions," he said. The announcement drew criticism from Congress leader Mukesh Nayak, who urged Rajoria to reconsider his statement. "Population growth is one of the world's biggest challenges today. Fewer children make it easier to ensure proper education and care. Creating paranoia that Muslims will out-

number Hindus is an imaginary fear. Our strength as a country lies in unity," Nayak said. The BJP distanced itself from the remarks, emphasizing that the government adheres to the Constitution and individual rights. "The government believes such decisions should be left to parents. Whatever he said is his personal opinion, and the BJP has nothing to do with this," a party spokesperson stated. Rajoria also addressed concerns about the rising costs of education, urging young couples to "manage somehow" but prioritize having more children. He claimed this was essential to prevent "heretics" from "capturing the country." The statement has sparked widespread debate, with many criticizing the call for larger families amidst concerns about population control and resource management.

Vibrant cultural performances mark UMA's Christmas-New Year celebration

STAFF REPORTER ■ BHOPAL

United Malayalee Association (UMA) organized a grand Christmas and New Year celebration on 12th January at Sri Vaibhav Marriage Garden, Kolar Road, Bhopal. The event featured a vibrant array of cultural programs, including traditional music, dance performances, and festive presentations, showcasing the rich heritage of Kerala. The celebration was graced by the presence of many senior dignitaries and esteemed guests, enhancing the grandeur of the occasion. The Chief Guest, Alok Sharma, Member of Parliament, was welcomed and felicitated as this was his first function of Malayalee community after becoming an MP. In his address, he commended the



Association's efforts over the past 40 years and praised its initiative of celebrating diverse festivals. Bhagawandas Sabnani, MLA, the Guest of Honour, was also felicitated and, in his speech, congratulated the community for promoting cultural values and unity through such events. Bhpendra Gupta, Chief Spokesperson of MPCC also addressed the gathering.

During the function, meritorious students of Class X and XII were honored, along with children who excelled in professional degrees. CD Daniel, recipient of the President's Police Medal, was felicitated, as was Mrs. Aji Koshi, who recently won first runner-up in the Mrs. Central India beauty contest. The event was further graced by prominent personalities

including John Kingsly, Secretary, Narmada Valley Development Project; Raghuraj Rajendran, Secretary, Technical Education, Government of Madhya Pradesh; Sabu Antony, DGM, RBI; and V.C. Satyapal, DGM, Canara Bank and others. All extended their good wishes on the occasion. Several entrepreneurs from the community who have actively supported the Association's social initiatives were also felicitated. The event was inaugurated by Fr. Mathew Thomas, Secretary, Ecumenical Welfare Society, who extended seasonal greetings. The program was coordinated by President O.D. Joseph, Vice President Anil Kumar K, Secretary Udayan Nair, Finance Secretary Unnikrishnan Nair, Arts Secretary K.M. Raghu, Women's Wing Secretary Smt. Shyamala Soman, Patron John Cherian, and other office bearers of the Association. A large number of community members attended the celebration. Carol singing was performed by the troupes of St. Peter's Marthoma Church and St. Sebastian Church, Kolar. The SN Parishad team from Kolar presented a captivating Kaikottikali performance, while various dance performances by children on different themes added to the festive spirit. Tension Mathew presented soulful solo songs, and a melodious orchestra conducted by K.M. Raghu, Biju Antony, and team enthralled the audience. United Malayalee Association extends its heartfelt gratitude to all participants, members, and well-wishers for making the event a memorable success.



Senior Congress leader and Rajya Sabha MP Digvijaya Singh with leader of opposition Umang Singhar and senior leader Kantilal Bhuria during a premiere show of a movie "Jungle Satyagrah" based on 1930s Tribal movement that originated from Betul, at the Madhya Pradesh State Assembly in Bhopal on Monday. The show was organised by senior Congress leader and Rajya Sabha MP Digvijaya Singh. Pioneer photo

Tamil Sangam members call on TN Governor

STAFF REPORTER ■ BHOPAL

The Bhopal Tamil Sangam members called on Tamil Nadu Governor RN Ravi at Chennai on Monday. The meeting was a momentous occasion for the Sangam's delegates as they discussed vital matters related to the preservation of Tamil culture and explored future collaborations with the state of Tamil Nadu. The Bhopal Tamil Sangam has been instrumental in promoting Tamil heritage and values, particularly among the younger generations in Bhopal. Through its efforts, the community is able to stay deeply connected to the rich cultural legacy of Tamil Nadu. The Sangam's outreach includes educational programs, cultural workshops, festivals, and various social initiatives aimed at preserving the Tamil language, arts, and traditions. These initiatives have fostered a sense of pride and

belonging among the Tamil-speaking population in Bhopal while also strengthening their cultural ties to Tamil Nadu. During the meeting with His Excellency RN Ravi, the delegates presented the Governor with a comprehensive overview of the Sangam's ongoing cultural and social projects. These initiatives, such as educational workshops, cultural festivals, and Tamil language promotion activities, have not only contributed to maintaining Tamil culture but also helped integrate it into the social fabric of Bhopal. Additionally, the Sangam has been engaged in numerous social welfare programs aimed at supporting the Tamil diaspora in the areas of healthcare, education, and employment. The Governor expressed his heartfelt appreciation for the Bhopal Tamil Sangam's dedication to preserving Tamil culture beyond Tamil Nadu. He acknowledged that the

Sangam's work was more than just cultural preservation—it also served to foster a deep sense of community and belonging for Tamil-speaking individuals living far from their native land. "The efforts of the Bhopal Tamil Sangam are commendable. You are not just preserving our culture, but also contributing to the unity of the Tamil community across India and beyond. This is a valuable endeavor that deserves support," Ravi remarked during the meeting. The Governor also encouraged the Bhopal Tamil Sangam to continue its excellent work and explore further avenues of engagement with Tamil Nadu, particularly in areas such as education, cultural exchange, and social welfare. He emphasized the critical role cultural organizations play in bridging regional gaps, fostering understanding, and promoting unity across communities.

Vivekananda Jayanti celebrated

Indore: On the occasion of 162nd birth anniversary of Swami Vivekananda and National Youth Day, Madhya Pradesh Jan Abhiyan Parishad, District Indore, organized a lecture on the topic "Dimensions that are necessary for a person to achieve success" at Vaishnav College, Gumasta Nagar. Indire MP Shankar Lalwani was specially present in the program. The keynote speaker was Swapnil Kothari, Chairman, Renaissance University. The program was presided over by Mala Thakur, senior social worker and Secretary of Abhyas Mandal. The keynote speaker of the program, Kothari, appealed to all the youth to maintain their purity and develop talent and dedication in themselves so that no one can stop you from moving forward. He also said that there comes a time for success in life, and that time has to be fully utilized.

Revenue officials on mass leave in protest of 'humiliation'

STAFF REPORTER ■ BHOPAL

Taking the wind out of an ongoing state government campaign to correct and update land revenue records, Tehsildars and Naib Tehsildars across Madhya Pradesh proceeded on a three-day mass leave on Monday. The junior provincial services officers have blamed the protest on state revenue minister Karan Singh Verma, whom they accuse of humiliating them. At a recent public meeting in Ichhawar, the minister had promised to transfer a lady Naib Tehsildar out of the district after receiving complaints of corruption in the revenue department. Last week, Minister Verma had also reprimanded revenue officials in the state capital due to the district's poor performance in the ongoing Revenue Campaign 3.0. On Monday, revenue officials in Bhopal attended the weekly Time Limit (TL) meeting at the collector's office before presenting a memorandum and leave applications. The officials will now resume duties on January 16. Revenue officials—Tehsildars, Naib Tehsildars, or Patwaris—

often face charges of corruption in Madhya Pradesh. Landowners say that no revenue file or application in the state moves unless palms are greased. Organised in powerful unions, revenue services personnel are known to employ pressure tactics to stonewall disciplinary actions and reforms in the outdated land record and tax regime. Only last month, over a hundred Patwaris in the capital district went on leave to protest the suspension of three of their colleagues who were found working out of private offices in blatant contravention of norms. In an attempt to minimise the pendency of land-related cases, the state government launched Revenue Campaign 3.0 on November 15. Though the drive was scheduled to end on December 15, it was later extended until January 26. The land revenue system in the country dates back several centuries. The British placed unbridled power in the hands of Patwaris and Tehsildars by leaving them in charge of crucial land records. Revenue workers have since fought successive governments to block reforms by resorting to pressure tactics.

Woman nabbed for stealing silver idol

STAFF REPORTER ■ BHOPAL

Misrod police have arrested a woman for stealing a silver idol from a private hospital in Misrod. The woman, who is a physiotherapist, stole the idol from a temple on the hospital premises to fulfill her needs and fled the scene in a car. CCTV footage of the incident has been released, showing the woman entering and leaving the temple. On January 11, the hospital's GM Operations, Rajesh Kumar Singh, reported the theft to Misrod police. He informed the police that on January 9, at around 5:40 pm, a priest, who had come to offer prayers at the Shri Ram temple, noticed that the silver idol was missing. Following the complaint, the police reviewed the CCTV footage, which captured a woman entering the temple and later exiting with two boxes in her hands. After leaving the temple, she got into a car and drove away. A police team, led by SI Kishan Sharma, traced the car's driver using the vehicle number, identifying her as Monika Chellani. The police raided her house in Sadhna Enclave and questioned her, leading to the discovery of the stolen idol in her cupboard.

AIIMS hosts sensitization workshop on Health Technology Assessment

STAFF REPORTER ■ BHOPAL

The Resource Centre for Health Technology Assessment (HTA) at AIIMS Bhopal successfully organized a Sensitization Workshop on Health Technology Assessment aimed at raising awareness about the significance of HTA in evidence-based policymaking and its role in enhancing healthcare outcomes. The workshop brought together 40-50 esteemed stakeholders, including healthcare experts, policymakers, and representatives from government agencies, academia, and development partners such as Nutrition International, Evidence Action, UNICEF, and NIPI. Prof. (Dr.) Bertha AD Rathinam represented AIIMS Bhopal and reinforced the institute's commitment to transparency in evidence-based policymaking, free from pharmaceutical and corporate influences. Prof. (Dr.) Rehan-UI-Haq, Dean (Research), AIIMS Bhopal, commenced the workshop by introducing its agenda and setting the tone for the sessions. The keynote address was delivered by Dr. Beena

Joshi, Scientist-G, ICMR-NIR-RCH, Mumbai, who provided an insightful overview of HTA and its application in India. Dr. Saloni Sidana (IAS), Mission Director, NHM Madhya Pradesh, highlighted the critical importance of HTA in addressing the state's unique health challenges and optimizing healthcare resources. An online session was presented by Dr. Yogesh Gurav, Scientist-F, NIV Pune, who emphasized the need for continuous evidence generation in public health. AIIMS Bhopal ED Prof. (Dr.) Ajai Singh provided overall guidance for the workshop and emphasized, "Health Technology Assessment is a vital tool for ensuring optimal use of healthcare resources and delivering high-quality, cost-effective health services to the population. AIIMS Bhopal is committed to advance evidence-based health policies for the benefit of public health." The workshop featured interactive sessions on critical topics, including valuing health outcomes through evidence-based assessments, conducting cost analyses for healthcare interventions, and translating HTA studies into actionable public health programs.



National Cadet Corps (NCC) contingents take part in a rally during a traffic awareness campaign "Parvaah" under Traffic Safety Month-2025 launched by traffic police in Bhopal on Monday. Pioneer photo

CM performs Bhumi puja for temple at Kapila Gaushala

STAFF REPORTER ■ BHOPAL

Chief Minister Mohan Yadav on Monday visited Kapila Gaushala with a fund of Rs 3.5 crore provided by Chief Minister Dr. Yadav. During this, Union Jal Shakti Minister CR Patil was also present. Yadav had declared the year 2024 as Gau Savardhan Year. CM Yadav's goal is to protect and conserve all breeds of

and other development works being carried out by the Municipal Corporation with a fund of Rs 3.5 crore provided by Chief Minister Dr. Yadav. During this, Union Jal Shakti Minister CR Patil was also present. Yadav had declared the year 2024 as Gau Savardhan Year. CM Yadav's goal is to protect and conserve all breeds of

cows and prevent accidents caused by stray cows, promote indigenous breeds of cows, encourage organic farming with organic manure. The state government has doubled the cow-feed subsidy for cow protection. Now, animals in registered Gaushala are being given a feed subsidy of Rs. 40 per day.

TB eradication works should be given top priority: Governor

STAFF REPORTER ■ BHOPAL

Governor Mangubhai Patel has stated that the government's target is total elimination of TB disease by 2025. TB Association should carry out the campaign against the disease with top priority. All activities related to TB treatment and awareness should be carried out consistently at an intensive level. These instructions were given by Governor Shri Patel in the meeting of MP State TB Association. He provided Rs 1 lakh to the association from the Discretionary Fund for TB elimination efforts. Additional Chief Secretary to the Governor Shri KC

Gupta was also present in the meeting. Governor Mangubhai Patel said that awareness is most crucial in TB eradication efforts. Therefore, continue TB awareness activities in remote rural areas, slums, schools and colleges. Along with TB treatment, do the counseling of patients and their families. Also provide them advisory cards. **Take the help of public representatives in TB eradication work** Governor Shri Mangubhai Patel said that the association should inform the public representatives of the area about TB eradication efforts. Take the help of MPs and MLAs in eradication efforts. He said that TB

awareness activities should be conducted with activism and sensitivity. Support of local NGOs and industrial institutions should also be obtained for participation in TB eradication efforts. Governor Patel obtained detailed information about TB patient treatment process, Nishkay Mitra, distribution of nutritional food in the meeting. He reviewed the training, publicity, health checkup camps, grants, income sources, construction works etc. of the association. He also provided guidance to the officials. Association Chairman Jairam Sachdeva and other officials were present in the meeting.

Dense fog disrupts air traffic

Bhopal: The dense fog that engulfed Indore severely affected air traffic, resulting in significant flight delays on Monday as more than 22 flights to and from Indore were delayed due to the reduced visibility caused by the thick fog. Twelve flights departing from Indore were delayed by 1 to 3 hours, and approximately 9 incoming flights also faced delays. At Bhopal Airport, minimum visibility was recorded at just 50 meters, making the travel tough in the region. The cold wave, combined with poor visibility, led to disruptions across the state. On Monday, the temperature in several cities, including Indore and Bhopal, dropped drastically. Indore recorded its first cold day of January, with the temperature falling by 5 degrees to 22.4 degree celsius. Bhopal witnessed a 3-degree drop in a single day. The cold was accompanied by fog and drizzle in many parts of the state, including Bhopal and Gwalior-Chambal, where visibility was severely impaired. In response to the severe cold, especially in Umaria, the district collector declared a holiday for schools from classes 1 to 8. The chilly conditions persisted throughout the day, with temperatures in several cities such as Raisen and Seoni dropping below 18 degree celsius. In addition to the flight disruptions, moderate to dense fog prevailed in several districts, including Ratlam, Ujjain, Bhopal, Sehore, Agar, Rajgarh, Shajapur, Indore, Dewas, Vidisha, Sagar, and Tikamgarh. Shallow to moderate fog was observed in districts like Anuppur, Ashoknagar, Betul, Bhind, Burhanpur, Chhindwara, and others.



Unemployed youths participate in a Rozgar Mela, organised at Industrial Training Institute (ITI) Govindpura in Bhopal on Monday. Pioneer photo



BJP workers, Sadhus and Saints hold kites during a campaign for the maximum participation of devotees in Prayagraj Maha Kumbh Mela-2025, on the eve of Makar Sankranti festival in Bhopal on Monday. Pioneer photo

Spot fines fail to curb C&D waste

STAFF REPORTER ■ BHOPAL

With an intensifying cold wave and air pollution levels causing havoc for citizens' health, the Bhopal Municipal Corporation (BMC) on Monday initiated action against over 350 people for failing to comply with sanitation and environmental guidelines. The civic body collected a total of Rs 68,450 from 356 polluters, including nine cases involving the inefficient disposal of construction and demolition (C&D) waste. Since the onset of the high-pollution winter season, civic officials have urged builders and developers to cover their sites with green nets to prevent the dispersal of stagnating pollutants into the city air. The city is battling PM2.5 and

PM10 contamination, which are known to have a hazardous impact on human and animal health. Pollution control board officials say that meteorological factors contribute to a rise in the concentration of these airborne and breathable toxins during the winter months. Both PM2.5 and PM10 are known to permeate the bloodstream and irreparably damage the health of those susceptible to cardiopulmonary ailments, the elderly, and children under the age of five. Though the BMC's efforts this year have included a number of measures to check the contamination of air, heavy footfall in the cardiology departments at city hospitals suggests that it is up to the citizens of the state capital to be more responsible towards the air we breathe.

Collector joins TB fight, adopts nutrition for five patients

STAFF REPORTER ■ BHOPAL

Collector Kaushalendra Vikram Singh registered as a Nikshay Mitra on Monday and adopted responsibility for providing nutritional support to five TB patients every month for a six-month period. The community support programme under the Prime Minister's TB-Free India Campaign allows citizens to join as Nikshay Mitras and help provide additional nutritional support to TB patients. Singh said that every capable citizen can contribute to TB elimination by participating in this public initiative while urging department officials and staff to voluntarily participate in the

Suryavanshi reviews BMC Seva camps

Bhopal: In a bid to ensure easy access to government welfare schemes, Bhopal Municipal Corporation (BMC) Chairman Kishan Suryavanshi on Monday reviewed camps for the identification and support of differently-abled and deprived beneficiaries in the state capital. Suryavanshi reviewed the camps for the identification and testing of differently-abled persons in Ward No. 82, under Zone No. 18 of the Huzur assembly area. He also addressed the resolution of cases related to welfare and service schemes for eligible deprived persons in Ward No. 46 under Zone No. 08. During his visit, the Corporation President interacted with the concerned officials, employees, differently-abled persons, and other beneficiaries. Suryavanshi visited the camp

for the identification and testing of differently-abled persons organised at Danish Kunj-2. He sought information regarding the identification and testing procedures. Suryavanshi also engaged in discussions with the differently-abled persons attending the camp. Subsequently, he reviewed the camp in Ward No. 46, Zone No. 08, organised for the resolution of cases related to gaps in the enlistment of beneficiaries for welfare schemes. The BMC Chairman expressed gratitude to Chief Minister Mohan Yadav for his state-wide humanitarian effort to enlist beneficiaries for welfare initiatives of both the state and central governments. He told civic officers to ensure that welfare benefits are made available to the differently-abled, deprived, and dispossessed.

Jan Abhiyan Parishad organises motivational programme

PNS ■ INDORE

Jan Abhiyan Parishad district Indore organized a motivational speech program on 162nd birth anniversary of swami vivekanand at vaishnav college Auditorium Indore. Indore M P Shankar Lalwani, president of Vikas Vishwa Kalyan Samridhi Sanstha journalist Vikas Tyagi, Educationist Swapneel Kothari, Social Worker Mala Thakur, J D Indore Jan Abhiyan Parishad Amit Shah and Indore Incharge Rituja Pahade addressed the youth

ALL INDIA INSTITUTE OF MEDICAL SCIENCES, BHOPAL		
Saket Nagar, Bhopal-462020 (India)		
NIT No. AIMS/BHOPAL-Tender/NIT/25-26/014	Date: 13/01/2025	
NOTICE INVITING TENDER (NIT)		
AIIMS Bhopal invites e-Tender from registered manufactures/dealers/distributors/Contractors for below mentioned items:		
E-Tender ID No.	Required Items/Services at AIIMS Bhopal	Est. Cost
16/SE/Project Cell/ ABEU/AIIMS/BL/2024-25	Annual Maintenance Contract of Horticulture and Landscaping of entire Campus(2025-2026) At AIIMS Bhopal.	Not Disclosed
GEM/2024/B/5652795	Ultrasound Machine	2,00,00,000/-
For further details of the above e-Tenders, the prospective bidders may please visit email: www.aimsbbhopal.edu.in and Email: seoffice@aimsbbhopal.edu.in , spso@aimsbbhopal.edu.in Tenders may be downloaded from the e-procurement portal www.aimsbbhopal.edu.in and CPP Portal www.eprocure.gov.in . Any corrigendum/ amendments related to this NIT shall be published in the same websites only		
I/c Senior Procurement Cum Store Officer For & On behalf of Director, AIIMS Bhopal.		

Liquor ban to be enforced in religious cities: CM

Bhopal: Chief Minister Mohan Yadav has said that the state government is considering implementing liquor ban in religious cities by amending the policy. The state government is serious about suggestions given by the sadhus and saints in this regard. Complaints keep coming regarding the environment of religious cities getting affected. Our effort is that the sanctity of these cities remains intact. Therefore, the state government will take a decision soon and take concrete steps in this direction. Chief Minister Dr. Yadav expressed these views in a message issued to the media from the residence.

Devotees set to celebrate Makar Sankranti: SDRF and divers deployed for safety

STAFF REPORTER ■ BHOPAL

As soon as the Sun enters the zodiac sign of Capricorn, the Makar Sankranti festival will be celebrated across the state, with scores of devotees flocking to the Narmada ghats for a ceremonial dip on Tuesday. Chief Minister Mohan Yadav has already instructed officials regarding the security arrangements and preparations. Devotees will begin arriving at the ghats for a bath from midnight. The administration has declared a local holiday for the festival in several districts, including Bhopal and Indore. The auspicious time for the bath begins at 9 AM, but many

The administration has declared a local holiday for the festival in several districts, including Bhopal and Indore devotees will start their bath from midnight, after which charity and donations will be offered. Large groups of devotees are seen departing from Bhopal for dips in the ghats neighbouring the city. Devotees are reaching the ghats on foot, by train, and by bus, causing a rush in these transport facilities. District authorities have already issued instructions to the relevant officials regarding security arrangements at the ghats. Narmadapuram Collector Sonia Meena has already visited the ghats. The Raisen Collector has advised against the use of Chinese manjha (kite string) during Makar Sankranti kite flying. Chief Minister Yadav had given strict instructions for the cleaning of the ghats, and the municipal corporation, along with workers at the ghats, are actively involved in the cleaning process. To prevent any untoward incidents, SDRF teams are stationed at the ghats, and notice boards have been put up advising people not to enter deep water. Additionally, arrangements for divers and motor-

boats have been made at all the ghats. After the bath, separate changing arrangements for men and women have been made. Adequate lighting will also be provided at all the ghats. To ensure smooth movement, traffic and city police will supervise vehicular transit, and if necessary, routes may be diverted. The administration is taking strict action regarding the use of Chinese manjha (thread) during Makar Sankranti kite flying, leading to raids at shops in Bhopal, Narmadapuram, and Raisen, with strict

Transgender tenements remain castles in the air

KISHAN SINGH RANA ■ BHOPAL

More than a hundred transgender individuals who applied for housing under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana are still waiting for their homes. Among them is Sanjana Singh Rajput, who previously served as a brand ambassador for the State Election Commission. Sanjana recalls that in 2016, the then Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan visited the transgender community at Mangalwara and announced that free housing would be provided to transgenders in Bhopal. The tenements were to be jointly funded by the central and state governments. While the former was to bear 80% of the expenses, the remaining 20% was to be borne by the latter. Close on the heels of the chief



minister's announcement, Bhopal Municipal Corporation (BMC) staff visited the area and filled out forms for more than 100 applicants under the scheme. However, to date, not a single transgender individual in Bhopal has benefited from this scheme. Most of these applicants reside in the Mangalwara and Budhwara areas. Sanjana stated that although the government had

promised free housing, when she and other applicants followed up after submitting their forms, they were informed that they were required to deposit more than Rs 55,000 with the civic body. When Sanjana discussed this issue with the officials, they advised her to take a loan from the bank. However, upon approaching banks, she was told that loans were not provided to transgender individuals and that no such schemes existed to accommodate their needs. Currently, there are over 500 transgenders in Bhopal, but only 168 are registered on the government's voter list. Many others lack the necessary paperwork. Additionally, transgender individuals often lack financial stability, making it nearly impossible for them to pay the amount demanded by the govern-

ment. Since they struggle to make ends meet, saving up for a house remains a pipedream for the community. Shivraj, the head of Sahara Saksharta NGO, explained that when trans individuals approach government officials regarding this issue, they receive vague and dismissive responses. Transgender individuals lack official means of income that could help them secure a housing loan. Despite applying for the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana eight years ago in 2016, the transgender community in Bhopal is still waiting for their homes. With the launch of the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana 2.0 by the central government, it remains to be seen whether these individuals will finally receive housing or if their wait will continue.

Aadhar Housing Finance Ltd.

Corporate Office: Unit No.802, Nattraj Rustomjee, Western Express Highway and M.V.Road, Andheri (East), Mumbai-400069
Shujalpur Branch: House No.17, Ward No.15, Panjabji Mohalla, Digambar Jain Mandir Road, Shujalpur, Shujalpur Mandi, Dist. Shujalpur-465333 (Madhya Pradesh)
Authorised Officer: Deepak Malviya, Mob.: 7583898990

PROPERTY FOR SALE UNDER PROVISIONS OF SARFAESI ACT, 2002 THROUGH PRIVATE TREATY
Whereas the Authorised Officer, Aadhar Housing Finance Limited (AHFL) has taken the Possession u/s 13(4) of the Securitisation & Reconstruction of Financial Assets and Enforcement of Security Interest Act, 2002 (The SARFAESI Act, 2002) of the property ("The Secured Asset") given below The Authorised Officer has received offer of Sale from some interested party against the above mentioned Secured Asset under the SARFAESI Act for recovery of the Secured Debt. Now, the Authorised Officer is hereby giving the Notice to Sale of the above said property through Private Treaty in terms of rule 8 and 9 of the Security Interest (Enforcement) Rules 2002. The Details of the Account are as follows:

Loan Code No./ Branch	Name of the Borrower/ Co-Borrowers	Demand Notice Date & Amount	Reserve Price (RP)	Total Outstanding Loan Amount	Description of the Secured Asset
(Loan Code No. 09110000133/ Shujalpur Branch)	Harinarayan Rathore (Borrower) Tulsı Rathore (Co-Borrowers)	10-12-2023 & ₹ 25,91,780/-	₹ 20,00,000/-	₹ 31,35,419/- as on date 27-12-2024	All that part & parcel of property bearing, GF and FF House No. 200 Pachore Road Ward No. 02 Ambedkar Ward Talen Rajgarh, Madhya Pradesh 465680 Boundaries: East: Family Road, West: Gali, North: Road and Family Plot, South: House of Shyam Rathore

The Authorised officer will hold auction for sale of the Secured Asset on 'As is where is Basis', 'As is what is basis' and 'Whatever is there is basis'. AHFL is not responsible for any liabilities whatsoever pending upon the said property. The Authorised Officer reserves the right to accept or reject the offer without assigning any reason whatsoever and sale will be subject to confirmation by Secured Creditor. On the acceptance of offer of proposed buyer, he/she is required to deposit 25% of accepted price inclusive adjustment of Earnest Money Balance immediately and the balance amount shall be paid by the purchaser within 15 (fifteen) days from date of acceptance of Offer by the Secured Creditor. The proposed buyer is to note that in case of failure of payment of balance amount by him/her within the time specified, the amount already deposited shall stand forfeited and property will be resold accordingly.
This is 15 DAYS SALE NOTICE UNDER SARFAESI ACT, 2002 hereby given to the public in general and in particular to the Borrower (s), Co-Borrower (s) and Guarantor (s) that the above described immovable property mortgaged/charged to the Secured Creditor, the Physical Possession of, which has been taken by the Authorised Officer of Aadhar Housing Finance Limited (AHFL) Secured Creditor, will be sold on "As is where is", and "Whatever there is", and "Whatever there is taken by the amount due to Aadhar Housing Finance Ltd., in full before the date of sale, auction is liable to be stopped.
If the Borrower(s), co-borrower(s) has any buyer who is ready to purchase the mortgage property/secured asset at price above the given reserve price then Borrower(s), Co-borrower(s) must intimate to AHFL on or before 29-01-2025 AHFL shall give preference to him. If Borrower(s), co-borrower(s) fails to intimate on or before 29-01-2025 the AHFL will proceed sale of property at above given reserve price.
The Date of Auction is fixed for 29-01-2025.
Place : Madhya Pradesh, **Date :** 14-01-2025

(Authorised Officer)
For Aadhar Housing Finance Limited

Situation along LAC 'sensitive but stable': Army Chief

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Army chief General Upendra Dwivedi said here on Monday the situation along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) is "sensitive but stable". Addressing a press conference ahead of the Army Day on January 15, he said there is still a "degree" of standoff in the eastern Ladakh region and efforts are needed to restore trust between the Indian and the Chinese militaries. The Army chief said patrolling and grazing in traditional areas have started in Depsang and Demchok, the two friction points from where the two sides have disengaged in October. Our deployment is balanced and robust and we are capable of handling any situation, he said. We are focusing on boosting border infrastructure and capability development.

He said there is still a "degree" of standoff between the Indian and Chinese militaries along the LAC in eastern Ladakh and both sides need to sit down and firm up a broader understanding on how to calm down the situation. General Dwivedi, describing the situation in the region as "sensitive but stable", said the corps commanders have now been delegated powers to resolve "trivial" matters or "minor frictions" relating to patrolling and grazing so that they do not become "big" issues later. The Army chief also said there was no such thing called buffer zones as a temporary moratorium was put on patrolling in certain areas to avoid chances of violence. Delving into changes witnessing the region since the face-off began in April 2020, General Dwivedi said both sides "doctored" the terrain, carried out

constructions, made deployment of troops and resorted to stocking of military hardware. "Therefore, what it means is that there is (still) a degree of standoff. Now as you have changed the situation after April 2020, so the trust between the two countries has to have a new definition," the Army chief said. "Therefore, there is a requirement for us to sit together and thereafter come to a broader understanding of how we want to calm down the situation and restore the trust," he said. General Dwivedi said the Army is looking forward to the next meeting of the Special Representatives on the boundary question of the two countries as well as talks under the framework of WMCC (Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination) on India-China border affairs. "We will be moving forward based on the guidance emerging from the



meetings," he said. Following an understanding reached on October 21 last year, the two sides completed the disengagement of troops at the two remaining friction points of Demchok and Depsang. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping held talks on the mar-

Wang Yi on the boundary dispute. "As you are aware, the situation is sensitive but stable. In October 2024, the situation in Depsang and Demchok in eastern Ladakh was resolved," General Dwivedi said. "The patrolling to traditional areas in these two sub-sectors has commenced. Similarly, the traditional grazing has also commenced in these two areas," he added. Calling India's military deployment along the LAC as "balanced and robust", he said the Army is "well poised" to deal with any situation. "A focused capability development for northern borders enabled infusion of niche technology into a war-fighting system," he said. Asked about the creation of buffer zones as part of disengagement process at certain friction points, Dwivedi said the terminology was used for temporary moratorium on

patrolling. "It means that both sides will remain back and will not go to the common areas because we still feel that if we meet at those places, the violence level may go high. The terminology was used for temporary moratorium," he explained. On the situation in Manipur, the Army chief said "synergised efforts" by security forces and "proactive" government initiatives have brought the situation in the state under control. "However, cyclic incidents of violence continue. We are working towards establishing peace in the region," he said. General Dwivedi said various NGOs and Army veterans are reaching out to the community leaders in an attempt to ensure reconciliation. He said the Army has put in place "enhanced surveillance" and "domination" along the India-Myanmar border to insulate the areas from a "spillover of turbulence" taking place in

Myanmar. "Fencing is a significant step and we have started new progress on this," he said. As regards Jammu and Kashmir, the Army chief said the situation is "firmly" under control and the 2021 "ceasefire" with the Pakistan military on the Line of Control (LoC) was holding up. At the same time he said: "The violence level is being orchestrated by the epicentre of terrorism that is Pakistan." The Chief of Army Staff said infiltration attempts are continuing including at the IB (International Border) sector along with attempts to smuggle in war-like stores and narcotics. "Last year, 60 per cent of terrorists eliminated were of Pakistan origin. As of today, whatever is a remnant in the Valley and Jammu area, we feel that around 80 per cent or more are of Pakistan origin," he said.

CDS urges youth of India to never give up in their journey of life



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) General Anil Chauhan on Monday urged the youth of India to never give up in their journey of life, underlining that "a bend in a road is not the end of the road". Addressing a gathering of cadets and officers during his visit to the ongoing National Cadet Corps (NCC) Republic Day Camp at Delhi Cantonment, he also said the country's youth will contribute towards reaching the goal of becoming a 'Viksit Bharat' by 2047 and they will also be the largest beneficiary of it. General Chauhan said January is a month of festivities and Tuesday is Veterans' Day followed by the Army Day on January 15. Then comes the Republic Day on January 26 and immediately next day the prime minister's rally happens at the NCC R-Day Camp, he said, adding, "this is symbolic of the fact that future of a nation rests with the youth of the country". A total of 2,361 NCC cadets from across the country are taking part in the month-long camp, which began on December 30. The annual event is also witnessing the participation of 917 girl cadets, the largest so far. Out of the total number of cadets, 114 are from Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh and 178 from the northeast region. General Chauhan said youths are the microcosm of the society, a demographic truth, a statistical reality. "The nation desires to be a Viksit Bharat by 2047. The youth of the coun-

try will contribute towards reaching that goal and will also be the largest beneficiary of it," he said. The CDS said he was sure that "as a nation we will be able to achieve this goal or dream of being a Viksit Bharat by 2047". The momentum will take it as the mass exists and the velocity is the vector which coupled with it, will help achieve the target, he added. General Chauhan said the country's youth will provide the speed and the direction will be provided by the senior leadership. The CDS also offered some life lessons to the cadets and through them to the youth of the country. "Destiny and success is not preordained, you have to work for it. It is often said, destiny is not by chance, it is by choice. And, for success you will have to work hard to achieve it," he asserted. "There will be ups and downs in life. So, remember a bend in a road is not the end of the road," the CDS said. In his address, he also quoted lines from a poem 'If' by Rudyard Kipling and recited poetry 'Koshish Karne Walon ki Haar Nahin Hoti' by Sohanlal Dwivedi. "That is the message I want to leave with you, 'koshish karne walon ki kabhi haar nahin hoti'. So, never, never, ever give up," the CDS said. General Chauhan during his visit to the NCC R-Day Camp also visited the 'flag area', the NCC Hall of Fame and also interacted with a few cadets before being treated to some colourful cultural performances by groups of cadets from different directorates of the Corps.

Dhankhar lauds EC for conducting polls that earned global accolades

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar on Monday here lauded the Election Commission (EC) for holding polls that have earned global accolades, saying there will always be an urge to criticise it to get the best of it. He also said the independence of the poll panel is never a casualty as the bureaucracy is so trained and the election machinery so greased and fuelled. His remarks came against the backdrop of the opposition's attacks on the EC over alleged discrepancies in electoral rolls, allegations of fudges voter turnout data and the efficacy of

electronic voting machines. Addressing a book launch event, Dhankhar said "We have an Election Commission that has worked. And it has worked in a fashion that global recognition is coming to it. Many countries in the world want their elections to be overseen by our Election Commission." There will always be, the vice president said, an urge to criticise to get the best of it. "But we all are assured because our bureaucracy is so trained. Our election machinery is so greased and fuelled. Independence is never a casualty". Dhankhar, who is also the Rajya Sabha chairperson, said a functional Parliament is quintessential to the survival of democracy because it is



Parliament that allows the power of expression. "A power of expression where no one can question. What you say in Parliament, you are immunised from any other concern, you can't be taken to civil court, you can't feel culpability in it. When you have that supreme authority, that no matter what you say in Parliament, no citizen of this country can take recourse to law if they are hurt," he said explaining parliamentary privileges. He said it puts a heavy obligation on Parliament itself. The privileges come with "heavy responsibility," he explained. The vice president opined that Parliament is the "most possible" platform for the represen-

tation of the people. "... Most possible because eligibility to vote has an age factor and those below that age are not entitled to reflect themselves. Therefore it is not very idealistic, but it is very close to idealism. So Parliament reflects the will of the people," he said. One of Parliament's powers is to hold the executive accountable. He said the executive is held accountable only through a parliamentary mechanism which is based on dialogue, debate, discussion and deliberation. He said Parliament is not a place for a free fall of information and not a place to settle scores with people or institutions that cannot have their say in Parliament.

GMDA Enforcement Wing acts heavily on encroachment at SPR

STAFF REPORTER ■
GURUGRAM

The Enforcement Wing of the Gurugram Metropolitan Development Authority (GMDA) on Monday acted heavily on encroachment on SPR where in 12 acres of green belt area was cleared of encroachment. DTP GMDA R. S. Baath with his team including ATP Mange Raam with four earth movers and 50 police persons held the demolition drive. About 12 acres area was cleared by GMDA by removing big nurseries and illegal parking and building material. Nurseries developed across four acres and building materials spread across three acres were cleared. In the drive DTP GMDA also got the building material that was encroaching green belts mixed by earth movers and thereafter all concerned requested for one day time to remove all material. Additionally, about five permanent rooms and 10 temporary structures were also removed. GMDA looks after the important stretches and major sector dividing roads and green belts in gurugram. Recently the Enforcement



Wing of GMDA led by DTP GMDA, R.S. Baath assured that entire SPR of about 12 km length from national highway to Ghata will be cleared by 31st January. Though efforts were made earlier however now strict enforcement drives will be conducted and systematic ways will be worked out to make the area greener. Earlier Minister of Environment and Industry Minister Rao Narbir Singh also directed that SPR road must be made clean and green. Furthermore, CEO GMDA also directed DTP GMDA to work on important roads and green belts on top priority to further enhance the development and infrastructure. DTP R.S. Baath also visited surrounding area and directed all to remove the encroachment in 24 hours and drive will be continued.

Ramesh's petition challenging tweaking of election rules to come up for hearing on Wednesday

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Congress general secretary Jairam Ramesh's writ petition in the Supreme Court challenging the recent amendments to the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961, will come up for hearing in the apex court on Wednesday. The matter will come up for hearing before the bench headed by Chief Justice of India Sanjiv Khanna on January 15, according to the cause list uploaded on the Supreme Court website. The Congress had filed the writ petition in the Supreme Court last month challenging the recent amendments to the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961 and expressed hope that the apex court will help restore the "fast eroding" integrity of the electoral process. The government has tweaked an election rule to prevent public inspection of certain electronic documents such as CCTV camera and webcasting footage as well as video recordings of candidates to prevent their misuse. AICC general secretary Jairam Ramesh, who has filed the petition, had said, "The integrity of the electoral process is fast eroding. Hopefully the Supreme Court will help restore it."



"A writ has just been filed in the Supreme Court challenging the recent amendments to the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961," he had said earlier in a post on X. Ramesh had said the Election Commission, a Constitutional body charged with the conduct of free and fair elections cannot be allowed to unilaterally, and without public consultation, amend such a vital law in such a brazen manner. "This is especially true when that amendment does away with public access to essential information that makes the electoral process more transparent and accountable," he had said. Based on the recommendation of the Election Commission of India, the Union law ministry in December amended Rule 93(2)(a) of the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961, to restrict the type of "papers" or documents open to public inspection.

India signs Hajj agreement with Saudi Arabia, finalises quota of 1,75,025 pilgrims



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

India on Monday signed a Hajj Agreement with Saudi Arabia, finalising a quota of 1,75,025 pilgrims for itself. Ministry of Minority Affairs Minister Kiren Rijiju signed the agreement with Saudi Arabia's Minister for Hajj and Umrah Tawfiq Bin Fawzan Al-Rabiah in Jeddah. "Hajj Agreement 2025 signed with Tawfiq Bin Fawzan Al-Rabiah, Minister for Hajj and Umrah of Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Finalized a quota of 1,75,025 pilgrims from India for Hajj 2025. We are committed to providing the best possible services to all our Haj pilgrims," Rijiju said in a social media post. "In the meeting with Dr Tawfiq bin Fawzan Al Rabiah, Saudi Minister of Hajj and Umrah,

we discussed important matters related to Hajj 2025 and explored steps to further improve the pilgrimage experience for Indian pilgrims. It will also strengthen our bilateral relation," the minister said. Reacting to the development, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said he welcomes this agreement, which is a "wonderful news" for Hajj pilgrims from India. He said, "Our Government is committed to ensuring improved pilgrimage experiences for devotees." In a written reply to a question in the Rajya Sabha last month, Rijiju said that for the year 2025, the quota has been distributed within the same range between HCoI and HGOs, in the ratio of 70:30, which has been communicated vide the Haj Policy-2025 issued on August 5, 2024.

Army Day Parade to see participation of all-girl marching contingent from NCC

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Army Day Parade this year will see participation of an all-girl marching contingent from the National Cadet Corps (NCC) and showcasing of four thematic tableaux, including one based on the force's Mission Olympics Wing. An all-women Agniveer contingent from the Corps of Military Police (CMP), Centre and School at Bengaluru, and a set of marching 'robotic mules' will also register their presence at the prestigious annual parade for the first time, defence sources said. The Army Day Parade will take place at Bombay Engineering Group (BEG) and Centre in Maharashtra's Pune on January 15 which comes under the Army's Southern Command. In the evening, a programme called 'Gaurav Gatha' is planned to be held showcasing

the evolution of welfare from ancient period to the contemporary era. Defence Minister Rajnath Singh is likely to grace this event, the sources said. The theme for the 77th Army Day celebrations is 'Samarth Bharat, Saksham Sena', and the focus this time is to demonstrate the capabilities of the Army contributing to a stronger nation. Some of the platforms that will be showcased during the parade include K9 Vajra self-propelled howitzer, BMP-2 Sarath infantry combat vehicle, T-90 tanks, Swathi weapon locating radar, Sarvatra Bridging System, Multi-Barrel Rocket System, ATOR N1200 all-terrain vehicle, drone jammer systems and mobile communication nodes, sources in the defence establishment said. "This year's parade will include an all-girl contingent of the NCC and an all-women

Agniveer contingent from the Corps of Military Police centre in Bengaluru and both will be taking part in the Army Day Parade for the first time," a defence source said. Besides, "12 robotic mules" standing in two equal rows followed by their handlers will also be taking part in the parade for the very first time. These mules were inducted last year and represent the Army's steps towards modernisation of the force. These nimble-footed machines can carry loads, go to inaccessible areas and engage militants also, they said. "While marching, when they reach in front of the dais, the robotic mules will salute the dignitaries before carrying forward in the parade," the source added. "Also, in line with the theme of the parade, four tableaux akin to the ones seen



at the Republic Day Parade will also be showcased depicting the Indian Army's prowess, green initiatives, the value of the veterans and the force's role in fostering the Olympic spirit to produce winners," the source told PTI. As per the plan, the tableau depicting the Army's Mission Olympics Wing will be the leading tableau and one

themed on technology absorption in the last one decade will be the last in the series, an official said. The Indian Army's Mission Olympics Wing was established in 2001 under which a large number of sportspersons are training at various different sports nodes in the country. Besides, there are total of many Boys Sports companies and

Girls Sports companies for nurturing the talent from young age (9-16 years). Additionally, a Paralympic Node was earlier established to motivate and train soldiers with any disability for paralympic sports. "The Mission Olympics tableau will show moving depiction of athletes doing fencing, wrestling aboard it and some paralympic athletes who have brought laurels for the country, while some members of the Army Sports Institute, Pune, will be walking on ground alongside the tableau," the source said. The next in line will be the veterans' tableau depicting their contribution to nation-building even after they have hung their boots. Paralympic athlete and Army veteran Murlikant Petkar, who had earned a gold medal in swimming (in 1972) and on

whose life the film 'Chandu Champion' was based, will also be part of the parade through the tableau, he added. Another tableau will portray the Army's efforts in adopting green measures to contribute towards achieving net-zero emission, including the achievement by Pune's College of Military Engineering in this field, officials said. The fourth tableau's theme is on technology absorption, the cutting-edge technology inducted by the Army in the last decade such as drones, nano technology, UAVs and tethered drones will be showcased in it, they said. The Army has declared 2024-25 as the 'year of technology absorption'. In the run-up to the Army Day Parade, several events such as display by a dog squad, exhibition of weapons and equipments, and defence companies

putting up stalls were held at various locations falling within the Southern Command area. The Southern Command traces its origin to the erstwhile Bombay Command established on April 1, 1895, the day which marks the raising of the command in Pune (then called Poona). The Southern Command encompasses 11 states and four Union Territories covering nearly 41 per cent of the country's landmass, according to its official website. Traditionally, the annual Army Day Parade had been held in Delhi. This long-standing practice saw a shift in January 2023 when the parade was conducted in Bengaluru, which comes in the Southern Command area. The Army Day Parade 2024 was hosted in Lucknow, which falls in the Central Command area.

MAHAKUMBH 2025: SPECIAL COVERAGE

Unique themed entry gates captivate devotees



BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■
MAHAKUMBH NAGAR

thematic designs. Themed entry gates across the Mela area go beyond being visually stunning, serving as markers of identity, helping pilgrims locate and reach specific organisations. CM Yogi Adityanath's vision of making Mahakumbh more grand and divine than ever is clearly visible in the Akhara area. Various Akharas and organisations have not only enriched their camps spiritually, but have also designed their entry gates with distinctive themes. Located near Jhunsi, these gates come in various designs, including airplane models, Shivlings, and crowns, enhancing the overall grandeur of the camps. The artisans behind these gates have come from all across India, including Kolkata, Varanasi, and South India. According to the artists, it took them 10 to 15 days to construct these gates, with costs running into lakhs of rupees. These gates serve a dual purpose: they enhance the aesthetic appeal of the camps and act as identifiers, helping pilgrims locate specific camps in the sprawling Mela area.

Under the leadership of Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, the Akhara area at Mahakumbh 2025 is a sight to behold. Camps for various organisations, including the Akharas, Khak Chowk, Dandiwada, Acharyawada, and Prayagwal, are fully set up and adorned with vibrant decorations. While the camps are beautifully designed as always, this year, the entry gates are stealing the spotlight with their unique and



PM Modi welcomes Maha Kumbh 2025

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

As Maha Kumbh began in the holy city of Prayagraj on Monday, Prime Minister Narendra Modi described it as a very special day for

those who cherish Indian values and culture, saying the massive religious event embodies India's timeless spiritual heritage. "A very special day for crores of people who cherish Bharatiya values and culture! Maha Kumbh

2025 commences in Prayagraj, bringing together countless people in a sacred confluence of faith, devotion and culture. The Maha Kumbh embodies India's timeless spiritual heritage and celebrates faith and harmony," he said in a

social media post. The prime minister said he was happy to see Prayagraj abuzz, with countless people coming there, taking the holy dip and seeking blessings. He wished the pilgrims and tourists a wonderful stay.



UP Police ensure robust security

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■
MAHAKUMBH NAGAR

On Monday, the Uttar Pradesh Police intensified security and crowd management measures at the 2025 Maha Kumbh Mela in Prayagraj, one of the world's largest human congregations. Police personnel, including mounted units, patrolled the grounds to ensure a seamless and secure experience for devotees flocking to the Triveni Sangam for the auspicious Paus Purnima Snan. Deputy Inspector General (DIG) Vaibhav Krishna said over 10,000 personnel from local police stations, paramilitary forces, and specialized units have been deployed for the event. Speaking to ANI, he noted

that approximately 60 lakh devotees had already taken the holy dip, and final figures would be released later. "The arrangements made by the police are functioning well. Crowd regulations, traffic diversions, and parking accommodations are being efficiently managed. We are fully prepared to address any challenges," DIG Krishna stated. Additional Director General (ADG) Bhanu Bhaskar echoed these sentiments, emphasizing the preparedness of the police force. "The fair administration is fully alert, with all forces deployed since 3 a.m. Bathing ghats are under constant surveillance, and there have been no reported issues so far," he

said. Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP) Rajesh Dwivedi added that devotees continued to arrive in large numbers throughout the day. "The ghats are fully occupied, and the first day of the Maha Kumbh is proceeding peacefully. We are monitoring the influx and ensuring a safe environment for all," he said. In a notable upgrade, five American Warmblood horses were deployed for mounted police patrols. Known for their ability to sense danger from a distance, these horses provide an additional layer of security at the sprawling Mela grounds. Prime Minister Modi Lauds Maha Kumbh 2025

Dome city promises hill-station experience for visitors

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■
MAHAKUMBH NAGAR

This year's Maha Kumbh has an extraordinary addition: the state-of-the-art Dome City in Araiil. Designed to provide an unparalleled blend of luxury and spirituality, this ambitious project by Evo Life Space in collaboration with the Uttar Pradesh Tourism Department promises visitors an experience reminiscent of a hill station. "For the first time, pilgrims will have access to accommodations that combine modern comfort with the serene spirituality of the Kumbh. Dome City is not just a facility; it is an experience that will leave a lasting impression," said Amit Johari, Director of Evo Life Space. A Unique concept Elevated 15 to 18 feet above ground, Dome City comprises 44 uniquely designed domes, each measuring 32x32 feet. Constructed with 360-degree polycarbonate sheets, these domes are bulletproof and fireproof, ensuring safety and comfort. "Visitors can enjoy the panoramic views of the Kumbh from the domes while feeling as if they're in a hill station," Johari explained. "It's an effort to redefine how people experience the Maha Kumbh." Mukesh Meshram, Secretary of the Uttar Pradesh Tourism Department, emphasized the innovative vision behind Dome City. "The Maha Kumbh is not just a religious event; it is a global gathering. This Dome City concept adds a modern dimension to its timeless appeal, making it accessible to a



broader audience, including international tourists," he said. The domes city will feature 176 air-conditioned cottages equipped with amenities like geysers and provisions for satvik (pure vegetarian) meals. These 16x16-foot cottages are priced at ₹1.1 lakh per day during peak bathing days and ₹81,000 on other days. Travel agents are already witnessing interest in the bookings. "We have received numerous inquiries, especially from NRIs and tourists looking for a unique way to experience the Kumbh," said Pankaj Sharma, a Prayagraj-based tour operator. "This concept of luxury within a spiritual framework is very appealing to international visitors."

Online bookings for both domes and cottages have commenced. "We encourage early reservations as demand is expected to peak closer to the event," added Sharma. The Dome City will also host cultural and spiritual programs, including religious discourses, yoga sessions, and live musical performances. "Our goal is to enhance the spiritual environment while ensuring visitors have an engaging cultural experience," said Johari. Meshram echoed this sentiment, stating, "Dome City reflects our commitment to combining tradition with innovation. Visitors can immerse themselves in the spiritual energy of the Kumbh while enjoying modern conveniences."

Government's vision During a visit to Prayagraj on December 23, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath inspected the Dome City and lauded its potential. "This initiative is a testament to our efforts to make the Maha Kumbh a globally renowned event. It sets a new benchmark for hospitality and spiritual tourism," he said. Shishir Singh, a government spokesperson, highlighted the broader vision. "The Dome City is an example of how we are elevating the Maha Kumbh experience. It is not just about accommodations but about redefining tourism standards in India." Tour operators believe this initiative will place Prayagraj firmly on the global tourism map. "Dome City offers a chance for visitors to experience the Kumbh in a way that has never been done before. It will attract both pilgrims and leisure tourists looking for a unique spiritual getaway," said Sunita Verma, a Delhi-based travel consultant. The Future Beckons With its innovative design and luxurious amenities, Dome City is poised to revolutionize the Maha Kumbh experience. "This is not just about luxury; it is about creating memories that resonate with the soul," concluded Johari. As the countdown to Maha Kumbh 2025 begins, Prayagraj is ready to welcome the world to an unforgettable journey of faith, culture, and comfort.

Kumbh becomes a global spiritual hub and symbol of world unity

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■
MAHAKUMBH NAGAR

The Maha Kumbh has emerged as a global epicenter of faith and a symbol of world unity. Pilgrims from across India and countries like the United States, Russia, Germany, Italy, and Ecuador were captivated by the grandeur of Sanatan culture. They took holy dips at the Sangam, donned tilaks, and strolled along the sacred sands. The atmosphere was charged with chants of "Jai Shri Ram" and "Har Har Gange," echoing in Spanish, German, Russian, and French. This year, the Sangam Ghat has transformed into a major spiritual and cultural attraction for the world. Visitors, both Indian and international, described it as a center for profound experiences. Christina from

Germany shared, "Being here brings immense peace to my soul. I had heard about the Maha Kumbh, but experiencing it is unforgettable." Christina, born in Ecuador, later moved to Germany with her parents. Her companions from Ecuador also expressed admiration for India's spirituality, saying, "Taking a dip in the Ganga feels like washing away all sins." **New Yorker Coby Halperin Discovers India's Cultural Depth** Fashion designer Coby Halperin from New York called the Maha Kumbh a life-changing experience. "Witnessing India's culture and traditions in such a grand form is entirely new for me. The Maha Kumbh has given me an opportunity to understand Indian culture deeply. This event is not just



spiritual but also culturally inspiring," he said. **A Life-Changing Experience for Russia's Mikhail** Mikhail and his friends from Russia chanted "Har Har Gange" after taking a holy dip at the Sangam. "I had read about the Maha Kumbh, but witnessing its scale and divinity is the most beautiful experience of my life," said Mikhail. "It's a moment we will never forget." **Pilgrims from Italy and Australia Hail the World's Largest Gathering** Paulo from Italy, along with his 12-member group, bathed at the Sangam and praised the Uttar Pradesh government's arrangements. "An event of this scale is unimaginable anywhere else in the world. It showcases India's greatness. The leadership here

(referring to Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath) deserves appreciation," Paulo said. Similarly, Alex from Australia, inspired by his friends in Germany, attended the Maha Kumbh and described it as the most memorable experience of his life. This year's Maha Kumbh has not only drawn Indian devotees but also attracted thousands of international tourists and spiritual seekers. Visitors from around the world came to experience Indian culture, spirituality, and the sacred significance of the Ganga. The event stands as a testament to India's rich traditions and also serves as a convergence point for global unity and spirituality. The Maha Kumbh has captivated the world, firmly establishing itself as a symbol of India's cultural and spiritual heritage.



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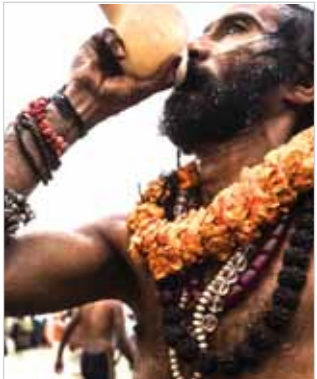
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PAPER WITH PASSION

Confluence of faith

Truly a once-in-a-lifetime experience, the Maha Kumbh celebrates India's unity, diversity and enduring spiritual heritage

There are fairs and festivals but none like Maha Kumbh, a once-in-a-lifetime event that is as spiritual as it is eventful, showcasing tenacity, modernity, culture and human will to endure—all at the same time. The Maha Kumbh Mela 2025, the world's largest religious congregation, began on January 13 in Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh, drawing millions of devotees to the sacred confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna, and the mythical Saraswati rivers. This event is expected to host over 45 crore pilgrims, including 15 lakh from foreign nations, over its 45-day span. The Maha Kumbh is a deeply spiritual event, rooted in ancient Hindu traditions. The ritual of taking a holy dip at the Triveni Sangam is believed to cleanse one of sins and pave the way for salvation (moksha). This grand gathering is a testament to India's enduring spiritual heritage and celebrates the unity and diversity of its cultural fabric. As Prime Minister Narendra Modi noted, the Maha Kumbh is a "sacred confluence of faith, devotion, and culture." The Uttar Pradesh



government, in collaboration with central agencies, has made extensive preparations to accommodate the unprecedented number of pilgrims. The state has allocated a budget of Rs 7,000 crore for the event, focusing on sanitation, security, and technological integration.

Like any mega event Maha Kumbh is also not free from fear of mishaps especially stampedes which have happened in the past. To avoid that, there have to be elaborate security arrangements especially on the designated bathing days. The State government has deployed AI-enabled cameras, underwater drones for 24/7 monitoring, and teams from PAC, NDRF, and SDRF for crowd and water safety are on the watch. A first-of-its-kind initiative featuring digital monitoring systems to streamline crowd management and enhance safety has also been put in place. Besides, this time expansion of ghats, installation of remote life-saving buoys, and a fleet of 700 flagged boats have been made to ensure smooth movement and safety of devotees. Maha Kumbh's appeal lies in its fusion of ancient spirituality with modern infrastructure. This year's 'mela' exemplifies this synergy, blending cutting-edge technology with age-old rituals. The congregation serves as a melting pot for devotees, saints, and tourists, creating a vibrant tapestry of faith and culture. On *Paush Purnima*, the first 'Shahi Snan' witnessed more than 40 lakh devotees taking a holy dip at the Sangam. The ceremonial bath marks the beginning of the 'mela,' symbolising the purification of body and soul. Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath welcomed devotees, emphasizing the event as a celebration of 'unity in diversity' and the blending of faith with modernity. With meticulous planning and unwavering commitment, Maha Kumbh 2025 stands as a shining example of India's ability to honour its spiritual roots while embracing technological advancements. As the Maha Kumbh unfolds, it offers a transformative experience to millions who seek spiritual solace and cultural enrichment.

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PICTALK



Devotees take a holy dip at Sangam on the first day of Maha Kumbh Mela 2025, in Prayagraj

The calculus behind global invitations

The guest list of Republic day, over the years has reflected India's growing global aspirations, balancing diplomacy with pragmatism



BHOPINDER SINGH

Beyond the obvious suggestions of bilateral bonhomie and relationship, there is an invisible calculus of cold strategy in inviting foreign Heads of State to events like the Republic Day, in the Indian context. This year, the President of Indonesia, Prabowo Subianto, graces the occasion. Last year it was the French President, Emmanuel Macron, who heads what the Hudson Institute has described as "India's new best friend". This is unsurprising, given that France was one of the rare countries to avoid condemning India's nuclear test (later emerged as amongst the foremost nuclear fuel and reactor suppliers), supports Delhi's bid to become a permanent member of the United Nations, besides offering strategic defence platforms like Rafale fighters, Scorpene submarines etc.

Before Macron it was the Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi (reviving memories of Nehru-Nasser era) whose visit signified India's increased leverage within Ummah (Islamic world), negating Pakistan's age-old rhetoric. Still earlier were stalwarts from BRICS comity i.e., Brazil and South Africa, which was reflective of India's expanded outreach and ambition to assert its strategic independence, beyond superpower-led 'Bloc's. But one region that has increasingly concerned India in terms of the duality of opportunities and threats, is from the East feeding its 'Act East' (evolved from prior 'Look East') policy.

Part of the opportunities is to stitch alliances and further the latent opportunities of the prosperous ASEAN region, and part of its security concern is the shared fear of China's expansionism which makes these Eastern countries, natural allies with India. Therefore the 2018 guest list for the Republic Day parade was a virtual who's who of Heads of State under the commemorative theme 'Shared Values, Common Destiny' from Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

This year's guest is yet again the President of Indonesia, Prabowo



Subianto, who will be the third Indonesian Head of State to come as the Chief Guest after Joko Widodo in 2018, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono in 2011, and Sukarno in 1950 (who incidentally was the first foreign Head of State in a Republic Day parade).

Beyond the deep civilisation and cultural connection between the two Asian countries, Indonesia as the world's largest Muslim population country with institutionalised tenets of religious tolerance and diversities, has much in common with India. But perhaps the most significant commonality is the wounded history with China as the purge unleashed by Indonesian dictator and strongman, Suharto (killing between 0.5 to 1 million communists, also banning Chinese literature, culture and diplomatic relations) took decades for the Sino-Indonesian diplomatic relations to reopen in 1990.

But it is the brazen Chinese claims of territorial usurpation in the South China Seas that affect Indonesia the most, especially with its sovereignty over the Natuna Islands getting repeatedly punctured by Chinese transgressions. China's infamous nine-dash line formulation has consumed the waters of the Natuna Islands from a cartographical sense, even though the Permanent Court of Arbitration Ruling validated Indonesian claims. But it is an issue that remains testy with Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto



THEREFORE THE 2018 GUEST LIST FOR THE REPUBLIC DAY PARADE WAS A VIRTUAL WHO'S WHO OF HEADS OF STATE UNDER THE COMMEMORATIVE THEME 'SHARED VALUES, COMMON DESTINY'

recently signing a memorandum of understanding with the Chinese for "joint maritime development" whilst acknowledging an "overlapping claim" - it was a move of acknowledgement that was slammed by many international commentators who believe it gave credence and support to Chinese claims.

That said, the usually unconcerned Indonesians who had warmed up to the Chinese with its Belt & Road Initiative (BRI) largesse and other investments are gradually becoming more Sino-wary and concerned. The visit of the Indonesian President to India will be carefully watched in Beijing for what is said or suggested during the visit. Besides the Chinese angularity, there are enough commercial and diplomatic stakes to be tapped bilaterally, which chooses the Indonesian Head of State, very apt and strategic.

However, across the oceans, it is the guest list of invitees for the swearing-in of the 47th President of the United States (20th Jan) that is raising eyebrows, about the unpredictability of the Trump 1.0.2 tenure, that it signifies. Reportedly the Trump-Vance Inaugural Committee has raised an unbelievable \$170 million (compared to \$107 in 2016) from the deep-pocketed donors and corporations who presumably seek to curry favour with him at the jamboree. But it is the personal invite list of Trump (doing away with the traditional

avoidance of Head of State to US Presidential swearing-in) that is extremely disconcerting, for it includes ideological hard right-wingers like Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, Argentinian President Javier Milei, El Salvador President Nayib Bukele, Hungarian President Viktor Orban, ousted Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro and French far-right leader Eric Zemmour! But the strangest invite was to the Chinese President Xi Jinping, onto whom his Presidential campaign diatribe and threats were ostensibly directed. Xi tellingly declined and may instead send some other official.

The much-believed invite to the Indian Prime Minister never came, and it will be left to the External Affairs Minister, S Jaishankar, to represent the Indian government, as per the invite received. Another notable omission has been the Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky who went public in expressing interest to attend the same but hasn't received the invite. Trump's unsaid 'frenemy' Vladimir Putin would be smiling at emerging signals from Washington DC. US Ambassador to India's reassurance given the "crowded swearing-in ceremony" doesn't seem too convincing or reassuring.

(The writer, a military veteran, is a former Lt Governor of Andaman & Nicobar Islands and Puducherry. The views expressed are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

DECODING ANCIENT LANGUAGES

Madam — The Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu MK Stalin has announced a prize of \$1 million for deciphering the script of the Indus Valley Civilisation (IVC), or Harappan Civilisation, aka Dravidian Civilisation, the Bronze Age culture that originated in the Indus River valley around 6000 BCE. For over a century, "the pictographic and logo-syllabic script, probably standing for one or two languages, has been the most vexing problem for epigraphists and archaeologists. However, "Indus script scholars John Marshall, Yuri Kozorov, Nikita Gurov, Kamil Zvebil, Asko Parpola, Iravatham Mahadevan and Bryan Wells agree that the language underlying the Indus script is Dravidian." A science paper pointed out that the Indus Valley people spoke a Dravidian language, while the Vedic people spoke an Indo-European language, Sanskrit. The paper argues, "A possible scenario combining genetic data with archaeology and linguistics is that proto-Dravidian was spread by people of the Indus Valley Civilisation." At an event in Chennai to mark the centenary of the IVC, Stalin said that the discovery of Sir John Marshall, the then Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India, completely changed the understanding of India's past. Stalin added that the discovery debunked the claim that Aryans and Sanskrit originated in India. Marshall's argument that the IVC predated Aryan (Vedic) civilisation and that the language in the Indus Valley could be Dravidian was a turning point in history. Ironically, his statue is being installed in Tamil Nadu, though he is credited with discovering IVC through excavations in Harappa and Mohenjodaro, now in Pakistan.

Haridasan Rajan | Kozhikode

END POST-RETIREMENT POSTINGS

Madam — The suggestions of the Vice President to go on merit while deciding postings are welcome. His suggestion to

India a developed nation by 2047



The ambition of transforming India into a 'Viksit Bharat' by 2047 demands bold and innovative economic strategies. The recent proposal to create an 'Amrit Kaal Fund', inspired by Singapore's GIC model, appears to be a highly promising approach to achieve the financial goals necessary for sustainable growth. India's public sector enterprises have demonstrated significant improvement in earnings and the market value of public sector stocks has nearly tripled

in recent years. By transferring PSU holdings in excess of 51 per cent into this fund, the government can effectively leverage these assets to raise resources, reduce fiscal deficits, retire public debt and improve India's sovereign credit ratings.

The strategic shift away from traditional privatisation toward shared public ownership addresses valid concerns about the concentration of wealth and political sensitivities. Furthermore, listing the fund as an exchange-traded vehicle would allow domestic and international investors to participate in India's growth story, thereby unlocking additional capital. It is imperative that the 2025 budget prioritises this visionary initiative to propel India towards 8+ GDP growth to achieve the goal of a developed nation by 2047.

Vishal Mayur | Tumakuru

do away with post-retirement rehabilitations is also a valid one to avoid decisions being incentivised and inductive to grab posts. But these are happening as policy of the ruling party. The top executives of public service commissions do not decide such political policies. Therefore, he should use his good office and prevail upon the ruling dispensation to do away with the system of taking their favourable judgements to decide their post-retirement rehabilitations.

A blanket ban avoiding posting after retirement for five years may be thought of. Postings lack logic. The governor is selected based on political lenience, and he is expected to appoint apolitical academicians as vice chancellors of universities. It cannot happen so. As such, postings are made on merit, but the merit here means normally the speed and commitment with which the line of the ruling party is toed up. In a system where caste, cash and commitment to policies are predominant, expecting activities meant for Puritans is like

searching for fuel sticks in a desert land.

A G Rajmohan | Anantapur

EMPOWERING WOMEN INVESTORS

Madam — The participation of women in India's equity markets is steadily growing, marking a significant shift in financial dynamics. Factors like increased financial independence, digital accessibility through investment platforms, and rising financial literacy have empowered women to actively invest in stocks. Women are adopting a research-driven, long-term approach, contributing to a more balanced and stable market environment.

Despite challenges like cultural biases and limited confidence in some cases, the trend is gaining momentum. This rise not only promotes gender inclusivity but also strengthens retail participation in India's equity landscape, heralding a more diverse financial future.

Anushka Bohra | Ujjain

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

How to give a golden touch to the silver years

Old age often conjures images of frailty, dependence and withdrawal. But it can be a second bloom—a chance to embrace life with renewed vigour

John and Hazel are a couple in their eighties. They were our neighbours at a mountain resort in Germany and were on a two-week holiday. They had come from the UK, driving nonstop for hours. They went hiking in the woods, drove to nearby places of interest even on snowy and rainy days without cursing the weather, made their own breakfast in their room instead of indulging in the buffet, and seemed to be having the best of their times. When I spoke to them, I saw how enthused they were about their retired lives, looking forward to travelling more, seeing more places on earth, and not once did they mention any discomfort that might be commonplace at their age: creaking knees, waning memory, shivering hands, feeble limbs.



chance to drink life to the lees. Health issues have started giving me early warnings. And every time I travel to the West and see people older than me by a few decades living with independence, engagement, and joy, I am overcome not with envy but with wonder—and a quiet determination. Why do we, in India, not envision such a golden old age for ourselves? Why do we resign ourselves so early to physical decline, social withdrawal, and the weight of ailments? Somewhere along the way, we have been conditioned to expect aging as a slow retreat from life rather than an opportunity for a second bloom. Part of it lies in our cultural mindset, perhaps—where old age is often equated with quietude,

dependence, and spiritual pursuits. In contrast, many Western cultures emphasise personal fulfillment and activity well into the later years of life. Retirees continue to travel, explore hobbies, and stay physically active, seeing old age as a continuation of life rather than its decline. We Indians often embrace a more sedentary old age, citing health issues, familial obligations, or even spirituality as reasons to wind down. But does spirituality have to mean withdrawal?

The narrative around aging needs to shift—from enduring to embracing, from retiring to thriving. Perhaps, if we break free from the cultural mould of passive aging and take cues from people like John and Hazel, we can look forward to a life where the sunset years are not just endured but truly, deeply lived.

To achieve this, we must adopt a proactive approach. Regular physical activity tailored to our abilities can significantly enhance mobility and reduce age-related health issues. Prioritising balanced nutrition with a focus on protein intake and essential

vitamins is key to maintaining strength and mental clarity. Beyond physical wellness, fostering emotional well-being by staying connected with friends, family, and community can counter isolation and loneliness, which often accompany aging. Moreover, financial planning cannot be overlooked. A secure financial base can empower older adults to pursue passions, travel, and stay engaged in life. Ultimately, aging is a privilege—a phase of life that can be as vibrant and fulfilling as any other if approached with the right mindset.

Let us not merely aspire for longer lives but richer ones, where we continue to explore, learn, and inspire generations that follow. The golden years can truly be golden if we choose to make them so. To John, Hazel and dozens others that I come across on my jaunts to the other side of the globe, thank you. For making me see life in a whole new perspective.

(The author is a Dubai-based columnist and children's writing coach. She has published six books. View are personal)

FIRST COLUMN
AN ODE TO MY MOTHER

A woman of immense strength and boundless compassion, she dedicated her life to healing



RAVI VALLURI

Always be associated with people who are good at heart, said Swami Vivekananda. My mother shared her birthday with Swami Vivekananda (12th January). She nurtured strong bonding with spiritually inclined stalwarts. I recall her association with Sathya Sai Baba, Ganapathi Sachchidanda Swamiji, Raghavendra Swami Mutt, Swami Chinmayananda, Jiddu Krishnamurti, Mahesh Yogi and Gurudev Sri Sri Ravi Shankar. She wanted to pursue medicine but life did not take that trajectory. So, she upended the pyramid and became a qualified medical social worker and worked diligently at the Rajan Babu TB (RBTB) Hospital, in Delhi.

Gurudev says, "Open your hands and sky is in your hands." To combat and challenge the disease of tuberculosis she initiated several rehabilitation projects. This included a creche for the children of those afflicted with this malady, a Stitching Centre, candle and match-making units. She used to tell patients and their children that "Fear is only as deep as the mind allows." Thus, patients afflicted with TB, but not bedridden participated in the projects. This was what she called "Diversionary Therapy". Climate changes, civilisations collapse, governments change, political affiliations alter and even the best possible model collapses.

This is inevitable. It was extremely traumatic for my mother and she became a patient of Paroxysmal Atrial Tachycardia (PAT). This is a type of arrhythmia (irregular heartbeat). Paroxysmal means that the episode of arrhythmia originates and terminates abruptly. Atrial implies the arrhythmia starts with atria or in the upper chambers of the heart. The tachycardia results in a significant increase in the heartbeat per minute. It is accompanied by severe sweating, dizziness, palpitations, angina, and



acute breathlessness. Normally a patient suffers from such a condition owing to emotional upheavals, physical exhaustion, deep anxiety, and consumption of caffeine or alcohol. She was administered medication but it worked only to an extent. The real help came in the form of a pentagon-shaped talisman. That is through Siddha Healing, Pranik Healing, the 10-day Vipassana Course and the Part 1 and Part 2 Art of Living courses.

Indisputably it is the infinitesimal and scientific power of breath. Breathing techniques, meditation, medication and proper diet changed the trajectory of the life of the patient and brought back the mojo in her life. The year 2020 A virulent virus that is assumed to have originated in the dragon land of China assumed monstrous proportions and spread like a pandemic across the swathes of the globe. The robust lady, a woman of substance contracted the disease on the 23rd of December that year, a day after I was detected positive with the pestilence. Six days before when she would have celebrated her eighty-fourth birthday, and despite testing negative for COVID, life was snuffed out and she entered the empyrean. She was on the ventilator, something my mother would have abhorred as the lethal virus had entered her lungs. Strangely at 7:30 a.m. that morning, though enfeebled by the pernicious disease, I was performing Sudarshan Kriya and had a premonition that my mother had entered Vaikuntha. A few minutes later my wife knocked on the door and with misty eyes and a choked voice conveyed the news. We are yet to recover from the body blow. My mother used to get up at twelve in the night and followed a strict regimen that included Vipassana meditation, Pranik Healing, Siddha Healing, Mudra Pranayama and then Sudarshan Kriya. This lasted for almost six hours. She was also religious in taking her short walks... how did she contract the disease and leave for her heavenly abode? Destiny or Karma?

(The writer is the CEO of Chhattisgarh East Railway Ltd. and Chhattisgarh East West Railway Ltd. He is a faculty of the Art of Living; views are personal)

Deciphering the concerns in State of Forests Report 2023



V K BAHUGUNA

While the total forest and tree cover rose by 1,445.81 sq km since 2021, the findings reveal deeper concerns about the health and sustainability of India's natural forests



The Forest Survey of India (FSI) has a few weeks ago released its 2023 state of Forest report which shows an increasing trend in forest and tree cover in the country. The current assessment has shown a very meagre increase in forest cover by 156.41 sq km compared to the past assessment of 2021. However, the total forest and tree cover of the country has increased by 1445.81 sq km compared to the last assessment of 2021.

The results are good to show to the nation that its forest machinery is doing a good job in maintaining and also increasing the resources it is managing and controlling. This also is a good political tool in the hands of the Central government to show its success in conserving the forest resources and the overall environment. However, as the saying goes 'the proof of the pudding is in the eating'. The benchmark of any such professionally well-prepared report can be judged only if it shows the correct picture.

This year the team of the FSI brought out several key features like decadal changes in the various forest parameters and tree cover/ agro-forestry by preparing a change matrix, growing stock calculations both inside and outside the forest cover, information on canopy density of different classes of forests, carbon stock calculation, changes in western ghat eco-sensitive zone, fires and grazing status and status of natural regeneration, division wise forest cover for 16 states etc. The FSI officers have put up the data collected and analysed in the public domain and it is necessary that as professional administrators people like me bring some of the urgent issues that need the attention of the Prime Minister who is keen to see the success of conservation in the country, because the health of the forest of the country is not good rather the natural forests are in bad shape and



THE CONDITION OF FORESTS SHOULD NOT BE ASSESSED BY CARBON GROWTH OR TREE NUMBERS BUT BY THE CONDITION OF RESERVE AND PROTECTED FORESTS WHICH ARE THE SOURCE OF MORE THAN 450 RIVERS AND RIVULETS OF OUR COUNTRY AND SOURCE OF RECHARGING THE AQUIFERS, BINDING THE SOIL AND CONTROLLING THE HYDROLOGY

overall scenario demand a serious rethink on the way we manage our forest bio-diversity, even though India is ranked 3rd in top ten countries for an average net gain in the forest area. Let us discuss some of the points for action by the professionals/ administrators as well as the political leaders. Before I flag the issues let us accept the fact that Trees outside the recorded forests are to the tune of 30.7 million ha which is 37.11 per cent of the total forest and tree cover of the country. All kinds of plantations like rubber, coconut, palm, areca nut etc are also included in it have saved the foresters from criticism with around 1289.40 sq km increase in tree cover between 2021 and 2023 and 20,286.57 sq km almost a 20 per cent increase since 2013.

On Paris's commitment to carbon stock India had compared to 2005 had already reached 2.29 billion tonnes of carbon capture. One of the issues of serious concern is the fact that the canopy density of over 40,709.28 sq km has shifted from high-density (70 per cent) and medium (40 per cent and above) density forests to open-category forests (10 per cent or less canopy density). A major portion of this must be in recorded forests and catchments of major rivers and the habitat of Tigers. Apart from this 5573 sq km of good or open forest forests have become scrub and refractive wastelands. Thus almost 46707 sq km of forests have become non-forest inside the recorded forests as per page 73 of the report. Apart from this glaring forest /tree cover losses are in major forested states like Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Andhra

Pradesh, Assam, Gujarat, Tripura, Telangana, Ladakh and Nagaland, North-eastern states and Himalayas.

However, some states reported an increase also and among them are Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh but the question today is how healthy is our forests. Now let us take the condition of regeneration. Only 48 per cent of the recorded forests have adequate natural regeneration 24 per cent have inadequate regeneration and another 9 per cent have no regeneration at all and for the last 10 years, there has been a severe loss of regeneration. The condition of forests should not be assessed by carbon growth or tree numbers but by the condition of reserve and protected forests which are the source of more than 450 rivers and rivulets of our country and source of recharging the aquifers, binding the soil and controlling the hydrology so vital for sustaining the food, nutritional, climate, livelihoods and water security of millions of people of the country. So in a nutshell, we may feel happy to have a figure of 82 million ha of forest and tree cover (25.17 per cent of geographic area) which covers 71 million ha of forest cover (21.76 per cent) and 3.4 per cent Tree cover. But the fact is we have only 9 million ha of very dense forests with 70 per cent canopy density and 24.35 million ha of forest with 40 per cent and above density. Another 18.5 million ha is with 10 per cent density or above and this includes the Green Wash area outside the recorded forests on private lands adjacent to recorded forests. Thus only 33 million ha of forest

cover is worth good density in the recorded forests compared to 30 million ha of trees outside the forests. Thus the real good forest is only around 10 to 11 per cent of the geographic area and it must give a wakeup call to foresters and political leaders. One of the reasons is the poor implementation of the Forest Right Act 2006 which has become an apolitical tool in the hands of competitive politics.

The Director General of Forests who is the Chief Technical Advisor of the government of India must tell the Prime Minister and Forest minister of the real situation in natural forest management as a professional like the then Army Chief Gen Vij told Prime Minister Manmohan Singh when he asked him to make adjustments in Siachin area and do not be hawkish. He told him firmly that being a professional he would never agree and after his presentation the Prime Minister supported him.

The IFS lobby should propose immediate remedial measures and one of the measures should be to change the format of the future State of Forest Report of FSI. The first part should only deal with the assessment of forests in recorded forests, the second part should deal with Trees outside forests and the third part should deal with fire management, carbon and change matrix etc. Hope the powers that be will notice the suggestion given here and stop the hotchpotch reporting.

(The writer is former Director-General of ICFRE in the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change; views are personal)

India and Afghanistan: Navigating a complex diplomatic landscape The Taliban's return to power and Pakistan's enduring influence have created a multifaceted challenge for India

The evolving relationship between India and Afghanistan presents a multifaceted diplomatic challenge. India's engagement with Afghanistan, particularly after the Taliban's return to power, is closely linked to its broader strategic interests in the region, especially its rivalry with Pakistan.



K S TOMAR

The Taliban's close ties with Pakistan and its association with terrorism pose a serious security threat, making India's diplomatic engagement a complex but necessary endeavor. While seeking to safeguard its regional influence and counter Pakistan's dominance in Afghanistan, India must carefully navigate the Taliban's authoritarian rule, human rights concerns, and the risk of further destabilizing the

region. **India's Diplomatic and Developmental Footprint** India's involvement with Afghanistan extends beyond diplomatic posturing and is driven by long-term strategic and developmental goals. Through substantial investments in infrastructure, education, and humanitarian aid, India has positioned itself as an important partner to

Afghanistan. Projects such as the construction of the Afghan Parliament, the Salma Dam, and educational scholarships for Afghan students have significantly enhanced Afghanistan's infrastructure while fostering goodwill between the two nations. India's developmental efforts have had a direct positive impact on Afghanistan's stability and growth, providing a counterbalance to Pakistan's attempts to exert control over Afghan affairs. Strengthening ties with Afghanistan offers India significant strategic benefits, including access to Central Asia. By bypassing Pakistan, India secures a direct route to Central Asia's markets and resources, reducing Pakistan's monopoly over Afghanistan's

trade routes. This economic advantage is coupled with enhanced counterterrorism cooperation, as both nations share concerns about the proliferation of extremist groups. This collaboration not only bolsters India's position as a responsible regional power but also contributes to regional stability. **Pakistan's Strategic Setback:** India's strengthened relationship with Afghanistan poses a significant challenge to Pakistan's strategic objectives. Historically, Pakistan has viewed Afghanistan as a strategic depth, crucial for its security and regional influence. Any shift in Afghanistan's alliances toward India directly undermines this narrative. The development of an India-Afghanistan trade corridor,



particularly through Iran's Chabahar Port, bypasses Pakistan entirely, diminishing its leverage over Afghanistan's trade routes. This economic shift erodes Pakistan's ability to influence Afghan policy, further isolating it in the region. Security concerns compound Pakistan's challenges. The increasing Indian presence in Afghanistan is perceived as a potential avenue for intelligence-gathering and support

for nationalist movements within Pakistan, particularly in its Pashtun and Baloch regions. **The Taliban's Role:** Despite Pakistan's close ties with the Taliban, India's diplomatic engagement with Afghanistan has the potential to empower elements within the country that resist Pakistan's control. This could shift power dynamics within the Taliban or exacerbate internal divisions. The Taliban's governance and its approach to extremism remain critical factors in shaping the future of India-Afghanistan relations. India's diplomatic strategy hinges on the Taliban's willingness to adopt inclusive governance and curb extremism, which could open avenues for constructive engagement.

Regional Stability Regional stability remains precarious as tensions between India and Pakistan persist, coupled with the Taliban's uncertain governance. Proxy conflicts could spill over into Afghanistan, exacerbating instability. **The Road Ahead:** India's long-standing commitment to Afghanistan's reconstruction, particularly through investments in infrastructure and humanitarian aid, has been central to its regional strategy. India has invested over \$3 billion in Afghanistan, supporting projects such as the Zaranj-Delaram Highway, the Afghan Parliament building, and the Salma Dam. These initiatives have directly contributed to Afghanistan's economic and social develop-

ment. Other contributions include power transmission lines, healthcare programs, educational scholarships, and food aid, reflecting India's commitment to Afghanistan's well-being and stability. The Taliban's return to power in 2021 cast uncertainty over the future of these projects. Despite the political upheaval, India has maintained a humanitarian approach, continuing to provide support where possible. However, the Taliban's restrictive policies and authoritarian rule complicate these initiatives. India's cautious engagement seeks to balance its strategic interests with the need to uphold humanitarian values. (Writer is a senior political analyst and strategic affairs columnist; views are personal)

Los Angeles wildfire death toll surges to 24

Gaza ceasefire talks press on in Qatar

PTI ■ LOS ANGELES



A car drives past homes and vehicles destroyed by the Palisades Fire at the Pacific Palisades Bowl Mobile Estates on Sunday, in Los Angeles. AP/PTI

After a weekend spent blocking the explosive growth of fires that destroyed thousands of homes and killed at least 24 people in the Los Angeles area, firefighters got a slight break with calmer weather but cast a wary eye on a forecast for yet more wind.

Should that happen, already burned homes and valleys could flare anew, sending embers to unburned territory miles downwind. New fires could add to the complication.

The death toll surged late Sunday with an update from the Los Angeles County medical examiner. At least 16 people were missing, a number authorities said was also likely to rise.

The relative calm Sunday allowed some people to return to previously evacuated areas, however.

The National Weather Service issued red flag warnings for severe fire conditions through Wednesday, with sustained winds of 50 mph and gusts in the mountains reaching 70

mph. The most dangerous day will be Tuesday, warned fire behaviour analyst Dennis Burns at a community meeting Sunday night.

"It will kind of ebb and flow

over the next couple days," Burns said. "Tomorrow night, it will really ramp up."

Spotting - new fires caused by blowing embers - could happen as much as 2 miles (3.2 km) or

more downwind of areas that have already burned, Burns said. Despite their recent losses, stress, and uncertainty, the crowd in a Pasadena City College gym was mostly respectful, in contrast with harsh criticism elsewhere for Los Angeles and California leaders. Applause followed each of the experts, police, firefighters and community leaders who spoke.

Los Angeles County Fire Chief Anthony C Marrone said 70 additional water trucks arrived to help firefighters fend off flames spread by renewed gusts. "We are prepared for the upcoming wind event," Marrone said.

Fire retardant dropped by aircraft will act as a barrier along hillsides, officials said.

Fierce Santa Ana winds have been largely blamed for turning the wildfires sparked last week into infernos that levelled entire neighbourhoods around the city where there has been no significant rainfall in more than eight months.

Twelve people were missing within the Eaton Fire zone and four were missing from the Palisades Fire, Los Angeles County Sheriff Robert Luna said. Investigators were reconciling whether some of the missing might be among the

dead but so far no children were among those reported missing, he said.

Meanwhile, the death toll rose to 24 over the weekend. Eight deaths were attributed to the Palisades Fire and 16 to the Eaton Fire, according to the Los Angeles County coroner's office.

The toll could rise still more as cadaver dogs conducted systematic searches in levelled neighbourhoods. Authorities established a centre where people could report the missing. Officials also were building an online database to allow evacuated residents to see if their homes were damaged or destroyed. In the meantime, LA city Fire Chief Kristin Crowley urged people to stay away from scorched neighbourhoods.

"There are still active fires that are burning within the Palisades area, making it extremely, extremely dangerous for the public," Crowley said at a Sunday morning briefing. "There's no power, there's no water, there's broken gas lines, and we have unstable structures."

PTI ■ JERUSALEM

Israel and Hamas appear to be inching closer to a phased ceasefire agreement, officials said Monday.

But a deal hasn't been reached yet, and there are a number of obstacles that could still scupper the talks in Qatar. The war in Gaza has ground on for more than 15 months, starting on Oct 7, 2023, when Hamas militants stormed into southern Israel and killed about 1,200 people, and abducted around 250. A third of the 100 hostages still held in Gaza are believed to be dead.

More than 46,000 Palestinians have been killed in Israel's offensive, according to Gaza health authorities, which don't distinguish between fighters and civilians.

Israel and Hamas have been holding indirect talks for more than a year aimed at ending the war in Gaza and returning scores of militant-held hostages in exchange for Palestinians imprisoned by Israel.

There has been intensive mediation by the United States, Qatar and Egypt. But the talks have repeatedly stalled over several key issues. They include details of the exchange, whether the ceasefire would be permanent and the withdrawal of Israeli forces. The war has ground on as each side has accused the other of backtracking. US and Arab mediators made significant progress overnight toward brokering a ceasefire in the Israel-Hamas war and the release of scores of hostages held in the Gaza Strip, but a deal hasn't been reached yet, officials said Monday.

Three officials acknowledged that progress has been made and said the coming days would be critical for ending more than 15 months of fighting that has destabilised the Middle East. They spoke on condition of anonymity because they weren't authorised to discuss the talks. One of the three officials and a Hamas official said that there were still a number of hurdles to clear.

UK PM Starmer lays out plan to make Britain 'world leader' in AI

EU ministers to consider easing sanctions on Syria

PTI ■ LONDON

Prime Minister Keir Starmer on Monday laid out his plans to unleash the potential of Artificial Intelligence (AI) with the help of billions of pounds of investment and dedicated AI Growth Zones to speed up infrastructure to make the UK a "world leader" in the sector.

Unveiling details of the Labour government's AI Opportunities Action Plan, Starmer said he believes AI can transform the lives of working people and has the potential to speed up planning consultations to get Britain building, help drive down admin for teachers and even help improve roads through cameras to spot potholes.

It comes as three major tech companies - Vantage Data Centres, Nscale and Kyndryl - have committed to GBP 14 billion investment to build the AI infrastructure the UK needs to harness the potential of this technology and deliver 13,250 jobs across the UK.

"Artificial Intelligence will drive incredible change in our country. From teachers personalising lessons, to supporting small businesses with their record-keeping, to speeding up planning applications, it has the potential to transform the lives of working people," said Starmer.

But the AI industry needs a government that is on their side, one that won't sit back and let opportunities slip through its fingers; and in a world of fierce competition, we cannot stand by. We must move fast and take action to win the global race," he said.

"Our plan will make Britain the world leader. It will give the industry the foundation it needs and will turbocharge the Plan for Change. That means more jobs and investment in the UK, more money in people's pockets, and transformed public services," he added. Downing Street pointed out that AI is already being used in hospitals up and down the UK to deliv-

er "better, faster, and smarter" care - spotting pain levels for people who can't speak, diagnosing breast cancer quicker, and getting people discharged quicker. This is already helping deliver the government's mission to build an NHS fit for the future, it noted.

According to IMF estimates, AI can boost productivity by as much as 1.5 percentage points a year, which is estimated to be worth up to an average GBP 47 billion to the UK each year over a decade.

"AI is a powerful tool that will help grow our economy, make our public services more efficient and open up new opportunities to help improve living standards," said UK Chancellor Rachel Reeves.

"This action plan is the government's modern industrial strategy in action... This means better living standards in every part of the United Kingdom and working people have more money in their pocket," she said.

According to the British gov-

ernment, the aim is to "mainline AI into the veins of this enterprising nation", introducing a raft of new measures learning from the US and European Union (EU) approach to deliver "dynamism, flexibility and long-term stability" for businesses.

"This government is determined that the UK is not left behind in the global race for AI, that's why the actions we commit to will ensure that the benefits are spread throughout the UK so all citizens will reap the rewards of the bet we make today," said Peter Kyle, UK's Science, Innovation, and Technology Secretary. "This is a plan which puts us all-in - backing the potential of AI to grow our economy, improve lives for citizens, and make us a global hub for AI investment and innovation," added Matt Clifford, a British entrepreneur who drafted the 'AI Opportunities Action Plan' being followed by the government.

PTI ■ RIYADH

European Union foreign ministers will meet in late January to discuss easing sanctions imposed on Syria, the bloc's foreign policy chief said on Sunday. However, she said the move would depend on Syria's new rulers carrying out an inclusive political transition after last month's overthrow of president Bashar Assad.

Kaja Kallas's comments came at a gathering of top European and Middle Eastern diplomats in the Saudi capital of Riyadh to discuss Syria's future.

Saudi Arabia called for the lifting of sanctions, which threaten to undermine Syria's recovery from nearly 14 years of civil war that killed an estimated 5,00,000 people and displaced half the country's pre-war population of 23 million.

European countries and the US have been wary over the Islamist roots of the former insurgents who drove Assad out of power and who now lead an interim government. The former rebels have

promised to hold a national dialogue summit that includes different groups across Syria to agree upon a new political road map leading to a new constitution and an election. Kallas said EU foreign ministers will look at how to ease sanctions during a January 27 meeting in Brussels.

"But this must follow tangible progress in a political transition that reflects Syria in all its diversity," she said in a post on the social media platform X. She also posted a photo of herself meeting the new Syrian foreign minister, Asaad al-Shibani at Sunday's gathering.

The US, the EU and some Arab nations began imposing sanctions on Syria after Assad's brutal crackdown on the 2011 uprising against his rule and tightened them as the conflict spiralled into war.

Some of the measures are against individuals in Assad's government, including freezing of assets. But many target the government in general, including bans on many financial and banking dealings, on oil purchases and on invest-

ment or trade in some sectors, crippling the wider Syrian economy.

German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock said sanctions against "Assad's henchmen who committed serious crimes" must remain in place. But she called for "a smart approach to sanctions, providing rapid relief for the Syrian population.

Syrians now need a quick dividend from the transition of power". Baerbock did not elaborate but announced an additional USD 51.2 million in German aid for food, emergency shelters and medical care.

At the gathering, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan said international and unilateral sanctions on Syria should be lifted.

Continuing them "will hinder the aspirations of the brotherly Syrian people to achieve development and reconstruction", he said.

He praised steps taken so far by the interim Syrian government, including promises to start a political process "that

includes various components" of the Syrian people.

Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan said his country, which was a strong supporter of the Syrian opposition to Assad, would try to help Syria in normalising ties with the international community.

He said it was important to establish a "balance between the expectations of the international community and the realities faced by the new administration in Syria".

He pledged Turkish support to the new government, especially in combating threats from the Islamic State group.

"As Turkey, we are ready to do our part to ease the difficult path ahead for the Syrian people," he said in comments carried by Turkey's state-run Anadolu Agency.

Last week, Washington eased some of its restrictions on Syria, with the US Treasury issuing a general licence, lasting six months, that authorises certain transactions with the Syrian government, including some energy sales and incidental transactions.

Nigerian military airstrike mistakenly kills civilians

Trump team questions NSC staff loyalty, plans overhaul

Trudeau urges consumers to consider harm of tariff threats

Abuja (PTI): A Nigerian military airstrike targeting armed groups in the conflict-battered north-west mistakenly killed a number of civilians working in community security outfits, authorities and residents said.

This is the third misfire by the military in a little over a year during aerial bombardments of extremists and rebel groups. The Nigeria Air Force was targeting rebels in the hard-hit Zamfara and Maradun areas of Zamfara state, Sulaiman Bala Idris, the state governor's spokesman, said on Sunday.

"Regrettably, some members of the Civilian Joint Task Force and local vigilantes were also affected during the operation in Tungar Kara, resulting in the loss of lives," Idris said in a statement, saying they were "mistakenly identified as bandits fleeing" from the area.

Officials did not say how many civilians were killed and the air force has not issued a statement.

However, Salisu Maradun, a local resident, said they counted up to 20 bodies while 10 others were being treated for injuries.

Meanwhile, the Zamfara government called the weekend airstrike "successful" as it "decisively targeted bandits" in a "renewed onslaught" by the military. "We will continue to offer support to enhance intelligence sharing, provide logistics, and strengthen community engagement," the statement said.

Nigeria's military often conducts air raids to battle extremist violence that has destabilised the country's north. These air raids have ended up killing some 400 civilians since 2017, according to the Lagos-based SBM Intelligence research firm.

In December 2023, more than 80 civilians were mistakenly killed during a religious gathering in the northern Kaduna state.

Washington (PTI): Incoming senior Trump administration officials have begun questioning career civil servants who work on the White House National Security Council about who they voted for in the 2024 election, their political contributions and whether they have made social media posts that could be considered incriminating by President-elect Donald Trump's team, according to a U official familiar with the matter.

At least some of these non-political employees have begun packing up their belongings since being asked about their loyalty to Trump — after they had earlier been given indications that they would be asked to stay on at the NSC in the new administration, the official said, speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive personnel matters.

Trump's pick for national secu-

rity adviser, Florida Rep Mike Waltz, in recent days publicly signalled his intention to get rid of all nonpolitical appointees and career intelligence officials serving on the NSC by Inauguration Day to ensure the council is staffed with those who support Trump's agenda.

A wholesale removal of foreign policy and national security experts from the NSC on Day 1 of the new administration could deprive Trump's team of considerable expertise and institutional knowledge at a time when the US is grappling with difficult policy challenges in Ukraine, the Mideast and beyond.

Such questioning could also make new policy experts brought in to the NSC less likely to speak up about policy differences and concerns.

White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan is making a robust case for the incoming Trump administra-

tion to hold over career government employees assigned to the NSC at least through the early going of the new administration.

"Given everything going on in the world, making sure you have in place a team that is up to speed, and, you know, ready to continue serving at 12:01, 12:02, 12:03 pm on the 20th is really important," Sullivan said on Friday. The NSC staff members being questioned about their loyalty are largely subject matter experts who have been loaned to the White House by federal agencies — the State Department, FBI and CIA, for example — for temporary duty that typically lasts one to two years. If removed from the NSC, they would be returned to their home agencies.

Netting of the civil servants began in the last week, the official said. Some of them have been questioned about their politics by Trump appointees who will serve as directors on

everybody their clearances and through the transition process now," Waltz said. "Our folks know who we want out in the agencies, we're putting those requests in, and in terms of the detailees they're all going to go back." A Trump transition official, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss personnel matters, said the incoming administration felt it was "entirely appropriate" to seek officials who share the incoming president's vision and would be focused on common goals.

The NSC was launched as an arm of the White House during the Truman administration, tasked with advising and assisting the president on national security and foreign policy and coordinating among various government agencies. It is common for experts detailed to the NSC to carry over from one administration to the next, even when the White House changes parties.

Vancouver (PTI): Canada's outgoing Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on Sunday suggested that US President-elect Donald Trump's remarks about Canada becoming America's "51st state" has distracted attention from the harm that steep tariffs would inflict on US consumers.

Trump has threatened to impose 25 per cent tariffs on all Canadian imports.

"The 51st state, that's not going to happen," Trudeau said in an interview with MSNBC. "But people are talking about that, as opposed to talking about what impact 25 per cent tariffs (has) on steel and aluminium coming into the United States."

Trudeau told MSNBC, "No American wants to pay 25 per cent more for electricity or oil and gas coming in from Canada. That's something I think people need to pay a little more attention to."

Trump has also said that if Canada merged with the US, taxes would decrease and there would be no tariffs.

"I know that as a successful negotiator he likes to keep people off balance," Trudeau said of Trump's threats to use economic force to turn Canada into the 51st state. Trump has also erroneously cast the US trade deficit with Canada — a natural resource-rich nation that provides the US with commodities like oil — as a subsidy.

Canadian officials say that if Trump follows through with his threat of punishing tariffs, Canada would consider slapping retaliatory tariffs on American orange juice, toilets and some steel products. Already during Trump's first term in the White House, Canada responded to Trump's tariffs on Canadian steel and aluminium with its own on American products like bourbon, Harley Davidson motorcycles and playing cards.

"He got elected to try and make life easier for all Americans, to support American workers," Trudeau said of Trump.

Biden speaks with relatives of Americans held by Taliban but deal to bring them home still elusive



SpaceX's mega rocket Starship is prepared for a test flight from Starbase in Boca Chica, Texas, Sunday. AP/PTI

Washington (PTI): President Joe Biden spoke on Monday with relatives of three Americans the US government is looking to bring home from Afghanistan but no agreement has been reached on a deal to get them back, family members said.

Biden's call with family members of Ryan Corbett, George Glezmman and Mahmood Habibi took place in the waning days of his administration as officials try to negotiate a deal that could bring them home in exchange for Muhammad Rahim, one of the remaining detainees at Guantanamo Bay.

Corbett, who had lived in Afghanistan with his family at the time of the 2021 collapse of the US-backed government, was abducted by the Taliban in

August 2022 while on a business trip and Glezmman, an airline mechanic from Atlanta, was taken by the Taliban's intelligence services in December 2022 while travelling through the country.

Officials believe the Taliban is still holding both men as well as Habibi, an Afghan American businessman who worked as a contractor for a Kabul-based telecommunications company and also went missing in 2022. The FBI has said that Habibi and his driver were taken along with 29 other employees of the company but that all except for Habibi and another person have since been freed.

The Taliban has denied that it has Habibi, complicating talks with the US government and the prospect of finalising a deal.

On the call, Biden told the families that his administration would not trade Rahim, who has been held at Guantanamo since 2008, unless the Taliban releases Habibi, according to a statement from Habibi's brother, Ahmad Habibi.

"President Biden was very clear in telling us that he would not trade Rahim if the Taliban do not let my brother go," the statement said. "He said he would not leave him behind. My family is very grateful that he is standing up for my brother."

Dennis Fitzpatrick, a lawyer acting on behalf of Glezmman's family, expressed dismay at the lack of progress, saying in a statement, "President Biden and his national security adviser are choosing to leave George Glezmman in Afghanistan. A deal is available to bring him

home. The White House's inaction in this case is inhumane." Ryan Fayhee, a lawyer acting on behalf of Corbett's relatives, said the family was grateful to Biden for the call but also implored him to act on the deal.

"A deal is now on the table and the decision to accept it — as imperfect as it may be — resides exclusively with the president," Fayhee said in a statement. "Hard decisions make great presidents, and we hope and believe that President Biden will not let perfection be the enemy of the good when American lives are at stake."

The White House confirmed the call with the families in a statement in which it said they "discussed the US government's continuing efforts to reunite these three Americans with their families."

Growing complexity widening cyber inequity: World Economic Forum report

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Growing complexity in the cyber landscape is further exacerbating cyber inequity, deepening the divide between developed and emerging economies, and widening the gap between large and small organisations, the World Economic Forum said on Monday.
In its Global Cybersecurity Outlook 2025, the WEF said nearly 54 per cent of large organisations have identified supply chain interdependencies as the greatest barrier to achieving cyber resilience.
About 45 per cent of cyber leaders were also found to be concerned about disruption of operations and business processes. It further found



that geopolitical turmoil has affected the perception of risks, with one in three CEOs citing cyber espionage and loss of sensitive information or intellectual property theft as their top concern. The WEF report said that the rising complexity in cyber space arises from the rapid growth of emerging technologies, prevailing geopolitical uncertainty, the evolution of threats, regulatory challenges,

vulnerabilities in supply chain interdependencies and the growing cyber skills gap. "Cyberspace is more complex and challenging than ever due to rapid technological advancements, growing cybercriminal sophistication and deeply interconnected supply chains," WEF Managing Director Jeremy Jurgens said, calling for collaborations between public and private sector stakeholders to secure the benefits of digitalisation for all.
The study found that 66 per cent of organisations expect AI to have a major impact on cybersecurity in 2025, but only 37 per cent reported having processes in place to assess the security of AI tools before deployment.

Retail inflation eases to four month low of 5.22 per cent in December



PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Retail inflation slowed to a four-month low of 5.22 per cent in December compared to 5.48 pc in November, mainly due to easing of prices in food basket, according to government data released on Monday.

The inflation based on Consumer Price Index (CPI) was 5.48 per cent in November and 5.69 per cent in December 2023. According to CPI data released by the National Statistics Office (NSO), the inflation in the food basket reduced to 8.39 per cent in December. It was 9.04 per cent in November and 9.53 per cent in December 2023. "The CPI (General) and food inflation in December 2024 is the lowest in the last four months," the NSO said. Last month, the Reserve Bank of India raised the inflation projection for the current fiscal year to 4.8 per cent from 4.5 per cent.

Infra development imperative to achieve Viksit Bharat goal: Gadkari



PTI ■ SONAMARG
Union Minister Nitin Gadkari on Monday said infrastructure development is imperative to achieve the goal of Viksit Bharat, as the economy depends on good transport and communication facilities. "The Prime Minister has given us a mission of developed and prosperous India. If we have to achieve a Viksit Bharat, we will have to improve the country's infrastructure. "Until water, power, and transport,

communication do not develop, industry, business, and tourism will not get a boost," Gadkari said, addressing a rally after Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated the Sonamarg tunnel here. The Union Minister said Modi has taken a pledge to develop J-K along with the country. "He has given us the task of developing this infrastructure. Good roads make a country developed and prosperous. We are working on a mission to make J-K developed and prosperous so that industries are established here, tourism increases, employment opportunities are created for the youth and poverty is eradicated. With that view, we are developing the infrastructure in J-K," he added. Gadkari said the inauguration of the Sonamarg tunnel, which was

previously known as the Z-Morh tunnel, was historic and would provide all-weather connectivity to the tourist resort town. "Today is a historic day that the Sonamarg tunnel is being inaugurated by the Prime Minister. Due to the closure of this road (due to heavy snowfall), some areas remained closed for five to six months per year. "It was started in 2012, but there were several difficulties. Today, I am happy that the work has been completed. By the opening of this tunnel -- Srinagar to Ladakh, Leh highway will especially be connected, which used to remain shut for 5-6 months," he noted. He said the work on the nearby Zojila tunnel was going on and once open, it will reduce the travel time from Srinagar to Leh by 3.5 hours and keep the road open throughout the year.

Gold maintains rising streak for fifth straight session, silver remains flat



PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Gold prices rallied for a fifth straight session, rising Rs 110 to Rs 80,660 per 10 grams in the national capital on Monday, according to the All India Sarafa Association. The precious metal had settled at Rs 80,550 per 10 grams in the previous session on Friday. In the past five trading sessions, gold prices appreciated Rs 1,660, or 2.1 per cent, to Rs 80,660 per 10 grams. The price of gold of 99.5 per cent purity rose Rs 110 to Rs 80,260 per 10 grams against the previous close of Rs 80,150 per 10 grams on Friday. "Gold prices advanced as the rupee weakened by touching 86.61, driven by elevated crude oil prices. The rise in crude prices came on the back of fresh sanctions imposed on

Russia by US President Joe Biden, escalating geopolitical tensions," Jateen Trivedi, VP Research Analyst of Commodity and Currency at LKP Securities, said. The rupee logged its steepest single-day fall in nearly two years and ended the session 58 paise down at its historic low of 86.62 (provisional) against the US dollar on Monday, weighed down by a stronger American currency and surging crude oil prices. "This rupee depreciation supported gold prices in the domestic market, amplifying the impact of global cues," Trivedi added. However, silver traded flat in the second straight session at Rs 93,000 per kg on Monday. Meanwhile, gold contracts for February delivery on the MCX increased Rs 227, or 0.29 per cent, to Rs 78,650 per 10 grams in futures trade on Monday.

Rupee sinks to record low, settles 58 paise down at 86.62 against US Dollar



PTI ■ MUMBAI
The rupee logged its steepest single-day fall in nearly two years and ended the session 58 paise down at its historic low of 86.62 (provisional) against the US dollar on Monday, weighed down by a stronger American currency and surging crude oil prices. At the interbank foreign exchange, the rupee opened at 86.12, and moved 1 paise during intraday to 86.11 before closing the session with a loss of a staggering 58 paise at its lowest-ever level of 86.62 (provisional) against the greenback. The fall of 58 paise, or 0.67 per cent, in one session was the steepest since February 6, 2023 when the unit had lost 68 paise. The Indian currency has witnessed the deepest plunge of more than Re 1 in the past two weeks from the closing level of 85.52 on December 30. Rupee had breached the 85-paise-dollar mark for the first time on December 19, 2024. On Friday, the local currency had declined 18 paise to settle at 86.04 against the US dollar, a day after registering a marginal gain of 5 paise. In the preceding back-to-back sessions on Tuesday and Wednesday, it had plunged 6 paise and 17 paise, respectively. The unprecedented fall was attributed to the relentless chase of the US dollar by investors, which also led to a massive withdrawal of foreign capital from Indian equities. Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth Rs 2,254.68 crore on Friday. So far this month foreign investors have withdrawn Rs 22,194 crore from Indian equities, according to exchange data. According to analysts, the Reserve Bank of India has allowed the fall in rupee's exchange rate versus US dollar amid dwindling forex reserves and declining emerging market currencies. "RBI will allow the weakness as demand keeps moving up and supplies dwindle," said Anil Kumar Bhansali, Head of Treasury and Executive Director, Finrex Treasury Advisors LLP. The Reserve Bank of India on Friday said the country's forex reserves dropped by USD 5.693 billion to USD 634.585 billion in the week ended January 3.

Mutual funds collect ₹1.18 Lakh Crore via NFO in 2024; thematic funds dominates space

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Asset management companies launched 239 new fund offerings (NFOs) mobilising Rs 1.18 lakh crore in 2024, with sectoral or thematic equity funds emerging as the top choice of investors, according to a report by Germinate Investor Services Research. This was higher than 212 NFOs collecting Rs 63,854 crore in 2023 and 228 NFOs garnering Rs 62,187 crore in 2022.



than doubled from Rs 53,703 crore in 2020. The trend suggests a strong growth trajectory and heightened investor confidence. Usually, NFOs come during a surging market when investor sentiments are high and optimistic. The NFOs

were floated to capitalise on the mood of investors and attract their investment as they were willing to invest at that time. Industry experts said the stock market performance along with the positive investor sentiments led to higher fund mobilisation through NFOs in 2024. In the entire 2024, Sensex jumped 5,898.75 points or 8.16 per cent, and the Nifty surged 1,913.4 points or 8.80 per cent. Overall, thematic/sectoral funds, index funds and exchange traded funds (ETFs) captured significant investor interest. "With 53 NFOs raising Rs 79,109 crore, these funds

emerged as the top choice for investors," the report said. Tailored to specific sectors or themes, sectoral or thematic equity funds resonated with investors for their focused approach and alignment with market trends. Notable examples include funds targeting sectors like manufacturing, technology, and ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) themes. Individually, HDFC Manufacturing Fund NFO led the pack, with a record inflow of Rs 12,500 crore in April 2024. In terms of month, the highest number of NFO launches was recorded in December,

marking a strong year-end momentum. Going ahead, the report said the mutual fund industry is likely to face a recalibration in 2025 after the strong gains of recent years. "While extraordinary returns may not sustain, the focus will shift to ensuring stability, maintaining liquidity, and achieving reasonable returns in line with market trends. Investors must adapt to a more balanced approach, safeguarding capital while managing expectations. This calls for strategies that align with changing market dynamics and ensure a steady performance even in uncertain times," it added.

India ranks third globally in fintech funding despite 33 per cent lower infusion in 2024

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
India ranked third globally in terms of funding received in the fintech segment despite a decline of 33 per cent on a year-over-year basis to USD 1.9 billion in 2024, market intelligence firm Tracxn said in a report on Monday.



was received by the sector in the third quarter which was 61 per cent higher on a year-over-year (Y-o-Y) basis. Additionally, 59 per cent of the total funding in 2024 was secured during the second half of the year, indicating a late-year recovery while August emerged as the most robust month for funding, contributing USD 434 million to the annual total. "Despite the global funding slowdown, India's fintech ecosystem continues to demonstrate remarkable resilience and adaptability. The emergence of two new unicorns and a record eight IPOs in 2024 underscore the sector's ability to thrive amidst challenges," Tracxn, Co-Founder, Neha Singh said. "As we look to the future, the sector is poised to build on these successes, driving financial inclusion and innovation while solidifying its position as a global leader in the fintech space," Singh said. The year 2024 witnessed the emergence of two unicorns, Money View and Perfios, compared to a single unicorn in 2023 though there were only three USD 100 million-plus funding rounds recorded, marking a 50 per cent decline from the six such rounds in 2023. The digital lending solutions dominated the funding received by accounting for 64 per cent of the total funding raised during the year. The notable deals in 2024 included DMI Finance raising USD 334 million funding led by MUFG and Credit Saison raising USD 144 million during the year. The late-stage rounds are the most affected. Late-stage funding amounted to USD 1.1

billion, marking a 42 per cent reduction compared to the USD 1.9 billion raised in 2023, the report said. The late-stage funding was USD 3.1 billion in 2022. Early-stage funding rounds recorded a 16 per cent Y-o-Y drop to USD 562 million in 2024 from USD 667 million raised in 2023 and a 70 per cent decline compared to USD 1.9 billion in 2022. Seed-stage funding declined 19 per cent Y-o-Y to USD 178 million in 2024 from USD 219 million in 2023 and 66 per cent from USD 529 million in 2022. "Mergers and acquisition activity saw a slight dip, with 26 acquisitions recorded in 2024, down 16 per cent from 31 in 2023. Notable transactions included the USD 94.5 million acquisition of PureSoftware by Happiest Minds, and the USD 44 million acquisition of ET Money by 360 One," the report said. The sector recorded eight IPOs in 2024 which was a 300 per cent increase compared

to the two IPOs in 2023. "Bengaluru maintained its leadership as the top hub for fintech funding in 2024, followed by Mumbai and Delhi. Among investors, Peak XV Partners, LetsVenture, and Y Combinator emerged as the top contributors overall. Venture Catalysts, Y Combinator, and Antler led in seed investments, while Elevation Capital, GMO Venture Partners, and Peak XV Partners dominated early-stage funding," the report said. Late-stage investments were spearheaded by Creaeigis, The Rise Fund, and Amara Partners. The Investment Tech segment garnered USD 320 million in funding in 2024, reflecting an 11 per cent decline from the USD 358 million raised in 2023. The Payments segment, however, experienced a sharper decline, attracting USD 194 million, a 77 per cent drop from USD 836 million in 2023 and an 81 per cent decrease from USD 1.01 billion in 2022.

INBRIEF

SURJIT PATAR MEMORIAL FUNCTION-2025 ON 14TH JANUARY
AMRITSAR: "Surjit Patar Memorial Function-2025" will be organised by Guru Nanak Dev University in collaboration with Punjab Kala Parishad, Chandigarh, and the Department of Languages, Punjab, Patiala on January 14th, Tuesday, at the Golden Jubilee Convention Centre of the University, at 10 am.

PVUNL HOSTS FIRST ASH USER MEET 2025 AT RANCHI
Patratu Vidyut Utpadan Nigam Limited (PVUNL) successfully organized its inaugural Ash User Meet 2025 at Chanakya BNR Hotel, Ranchi, emphasizing innovative and sustainable applications of fly and bottom ash.

PONGAL FESTIVAL OBSERVED AT NARUVI HOSPITALS
The annual Pongal celebrations at Naruvi Hospitals, Vellore, was celebrated with fervour, with enthusiastic participation from people cutting across age, gender, religion, and community.

REC LIMITED COMMITS ₹8.44 CRORE UNDER CSR TO SUPPORT 1MW SOLAR PHOTOVOLTAIC POWER PLANT
REC Limited, a Maharatna CPSE under the Ministry of Power and a leading NBFC, has signed a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with the Gandhigram Rural Institute under its Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiative.

Jannik Sinner starts his Australian Open title defence with a straight set win

PTI ■ MELBOURNE

After wasting a set point in the second tiebreaker with an ill-conceived drop shot, Jannik Sinner quickly reverted to what's been working for him and finished off a straight-set win over Nicolas Jarry to begin his Australian Open title defence.

for two long, tiebreak sets against No. 35-ranked Jarry, a 29-year-old from Chile, before finding his touch. "It was a very close one because the first sets, they can go both ways," Sinner said. "In the third set when I broke it the first time, that gave me a little bit of room to breathe."



First marquee match and dropped an early service game before quickly settling into a rhythm in a 6-3, 6-3 win over 2020 champion Sofia Kenin. Third-seeded Gauff beat Swiatek

victory at the United Cup last week, against beating No. 2 Swiatek in the final. Gauff, the 2023 U.S. Open champion is wearing a Marvel-inspired bodysuit and skirt at Melbourne Park and she's radiating confidence and calm. "I knew going in it was going to be difficult, but you know I'm happy with how I played," she said of the 1-hour, 20-minute win over Kenin, who at No. 81 is a much tougher opponent than her ranking suggests.

of the fourth set helped him earn a vital break against the 11th-seeded Tsitsipas and, after shaking off jitters on his own serve, he closed out for his first victory over a player ranked in the top 20 at a Grand Slam. No. 17 Frances Tiafoe advanced in five sets over Arthur Rinderknech of France. Gauff went into her opening round on a streak of winning 33 matches against players ranked outside the Top 50, dating to a loss to Kenin at Wimbledon 2023.

Paris Saint-Germain remains unbeaten in French league

PTI ■ PARIS

Paris Saint-Germain remained unbeaten and seven points clear at the top of the French league — halfway through the season — after Ousmane Dembélé scored twice in a 2-1 win over Saint-Etienne.



close to conceding an equalizer. Earlier, Deiver Machado scored late as seventh-place Lens won 2-1 at struggling Le Havre to move one point behind Lyon in sixth. The Colombia defender headed powerfully home from Poland winger Przemyslaw Frankowski's cross in the 77th minute.

bottom Montpellier had two players sent off near the end of a 3-1 home loss to Angers. Dutch striker Emanuel Emegha scored two first-half goals for Strasbourg and then had a third ruled out for offside in the 38th minute. Toulouse scored from Ismaël Doukouré's own-goal in the 35th and, in the 75th, striker Zakaria Aboukhllal prepared to take a penalty to make it 2-2 after being fouled. However, the referee changed his mind following a video review and instead awarded Toulouse a free kick right on the edge of the area.

More frustration followed for the home side moments later. Toulouse thought it had equalized when Frank Magri side-footed in Aboukhllal's pinpoint cross from the left. But VAR intervened again to rule the goal out because United States defender Mark McKenzie was narrowly offside. Forward Esteban Lepaul netted twice as Angers moved up to 13th place. He scored in each half, either side of a penalty from Montpellier midfielder Téli Savanier.

Montpellier lost its composure in the closing stages when defender Boubakar Kouyaté and captain Jordan Ferri were sent off within one minute of each other. Midfielder Zinedine Ferhat added the third goal for Angers in the ninth minute of stoppage time.

Nick Taylor wins another playoff with clutch play

PTI ■ HONOLULU

Nick Taylor in a playoff is tough to beat. Getting there was hardest part for the Canadian, who delivered another highlight reel of clutch moments in the Sony

Open. Down to his last shot, Taylor chipped in from 60 feet for eagle on the par-5 closing hole at Waialea for a 5-under 65 to get into a playoff with Nico Echavarria. He holed a 10-foot birdie putt on the first extra hole. And

then he hit a wedge from 46 yards that was close to perfect to set up a 3-foot birdie putt for the win. The last shot might have been the easiest shot he had in the final hour. "I'm a bit stunned this worked out this way," Taylor said.

Alex Michelsen upsets Tsitsipas at the Australian Open

PTI ■ MELBOURNE

Alex Michelsen produced the biggest win so far of his fledgling career to upset 2023 runner-up Stefanos Tsitsipas in the first round of the Australian Open, and he knew instinctively where credit was due.



balls from the baseline every day. We'd go like 30 minutes up the middle, then we go across each way for like an hour and a half. "I mean we would just go out there and she would never miss a ball — she's incredible. But no chance I'd be here without without her, so thanks Mom. Love you."

set that helped earn him a vital break. He got a bit tense on serve, surrendering two hard-earned breaks in the fourth set, but stayed composed in the last game. "Yeah, I didn't take the most direct path, that's for sure. Shouldn't have got broken twice in the fourth. My serve let me down. Served double faulting way too much," he said. "But I was also returning really, really well. I felt like I was winning most of the baseline rallies when I was inside the baseline and controlling the point."

saying, You're still in this, just play every point for what it is. I played a great 4-all game and got it done at 5-4."

Regularly peeping into past glory keeps Sindhu hungry for more success

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

When the going gets tough for P V Sindhu, the star badminton player dives into her highly successful past to seek inspiration to keep going in her quest for more glory.



you look at it, it feels like wow, you know, you have done so much and you know why can't I do it more? You question yourself, and that's when it all starts, so yes," Sindhu said during an interaction facilitated by sports brand PUMA, which has signed her as an ambassador. Sindhu understands that she will have to endure plenty of struggles but she can't afford to lose hope.

"I am saying this because when you see those wins, how happy it makes you and how much confidence it gives you, that itself will take you to another level. Seeing wins again and again keeps that hunger going, so definitely yes. "There are some clips when you are really young when you look at it, it feels like wow, you know, you have done so much and you know why can't I do it more? You question yourself, and that's when it all starts, so yes," Sindhu said during an interaction facilitated by sports brand PUMA, which has signed her as an ambassador. Sindhu understands that she will have to endure plenty of struggles but she can't afford to lose hope.

"I have seen a lot through sport, it was important for me to believe in myself when there were days where I was injured and I didn't know if I can come back and I can be my 100 per cent, which happened in 2015, when I had an injury, but then I bounced back, and I got a silver at Rio.

Office of the Executive Engineer P.W.D. (Maintenance) Division No. 2 Bhopal NIT 23 of 2024-25 Bhopal, Date 08/01/2025 Tender Notice Online Tender for mentioned below are being invited. The Tender have been uploaded on the e-Procurement system of Public Works Department on the Portal www.mptenders.gov.in Tender details are as below:-

Table with 5 columns: S. No, Tender No., Name of work, Call No., Cost of Project (PAC) (Rs. In lack)

The document can only be purchased online from the above website after making online payment. The last date & time for Purchase and Submission of document on line is 28/01/2025 up to 17:30 PM. Detailed NIT and other details can be viewed on the above mentioned portal.

Executive Engineer PWD (Maint.) Division No. 2 Bhopal

Aadhar Housing Finance Ltd. Corporate Office: Unit No. 802, Natraj Rustomjee, Western Express Highway and M.V. Road, Andheri (East), Mumbai - 400069

Biaora Branch : Guptaaji Building, 1st Floor, Ward No. 07, Old AB Road, Near Axis Bank, Vishwanth Colony, Bakhapura Biaora, Dist Rajgarh - 465674 (Madhya Pradesh)

POSSESSION NOTICE Appendix IV (for immovable property)

Whereas, the undersigned being the Authorized Officer of Aadhar Housing Finance Limited (AHFL) under the Securitisation and Reconstruction of Financial Assets and Enforcement of Security Interest Act 2002 and in exercise of powers conferred under section 13(12) read with Rule 3 of the Security Interest (Enforcement) Rules 2002, Demand Notice(s) issued by the Authorised Officer of the company to the Borrower(s) / Guarantor(s) mentioned herein below to repay the amount mentioned in the notice within 60 days from the date of receipt of the said notice.

Table with 5 columns: S. N., Name of the Borrower(s)/ Co-Borrower(s) (Name of the Branch), Description of Secured Asset (Immovable Property), Demand Notice Date & Amount, Date of Possession

Place : Madhya Pradesh Date : 14-01-2025 Authorised Officer Aadhar Housing Finance Limited

Barcelona thrashes Real Madrid 5-2 to win Spanish Super Cup final

PTI ■ MADRID

Real Madrid came out looking for some payback in the latest "clasico" against Barcelona but ended up being embarrassed again. Madrid lost 5-2 to Barcelona in the Spanish Super Cup final at Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, on Sunday. That followed a 4-0 loss at home to Barcelona in the Spanish league in October. Kylian Mbappé put Madrid ahead early in his second clasico, but Barcelona then ran away with goals by Lamine Yamal, Robert Lewandowski, Raphinha — who scored twice — and Alejandro Balde. Rodrygo scored for Madrid on the hour mark after Barcelona goalkeeper Wojciech Szczesny was sent off early in the second half. It was the third straight win for Barcelona in 2025 after it

lost two games in a row to end last year. "The Christmas break helped us reflect on what we had done wrong," Lewandowski said. "Now we can look forward to the run of games that we have until the end of the season." Madrid lost for the first time after a run of five consecutive victories. "It was a bad night," Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti said. "It's a disappointment, we won't hide it, but it's soccer... You have to try to learn from the losses. We have to look forward to what's ahead." Mbappé had been contained when the rivals met in October but scored a superb goal five minutes into the match at King Abdullah Sports City stadium after picking up the ball just inside Madrid's half, running at the defense and then finding the net with a clever finish. But Yamal evened the match with



a nice run in the 22nd and Lewandowski, who scored twice in the earlier clasico, put the Catalans ahead in the 36th. Raphinha added goals in the 39th and 48th minutes, while Balde scored in first-half stoppage time. Rodrygo scored from a free kick in the 60th after Szczesny was sent off for a

foul outside the area to stop a breakaway. Lewandowski has 26 goals in 27 appearance across all competitions for Barcelona, while Raphinha has scored 19 times and Yamal eight. Barcelona was able to count on Spain midfielder Dani Olmo after the Spanish government stepped in to provisionally allow the club to register him with the league. The final came after Mallorca fans said they were harassed by local men who support Madrid after Thursday's semifinal. Two wives of Mallorca players said they were groped. The Spanish Super Cup has become a moneymaker for the federation and competing clubs since the federation struck a deal in 2019 to hold it in Saudi Arabia. ATLETICO'S RECORD Atletico Madrid set a club all-time record of 14 straight victories with a 1-0 win over Osasuna on Sunday and went top of the Spanish league at the halfway stage. Julián Alvarez scored in the 55th minute at the Metropolitan stadium to give Atletico the milestone victory and a one-point lead over second-place Madrid. Diego Simeone's team has a six-point gap to third-place Barcelona. Atletico has won all of its matches across all competitions since October. Its last setback was a 1-0 loss at Real Betis in the Spanish league on Oct. 27. Eight of the victories have come in the league. "It's an important streak to show the growth of this club," Simeone said. "We have been working really hard." It was the seventh consecutive league game without a win for Osasuna, which is in 11th place.



Cummins, Hazlewood in Australia CT squad despite injury concerns

PTI ■ SYDNEY

Pat Cummins was on Monday named captain of Australia for next month's Champions Trophy while fellow pacer Josh Hazlewood too was included in the squad despite lingering injury concerns surrounding both players. Cummins was managing an ankle injury throughout the recent Border-Gavaskar Trophy against India, which played a part in him missing the upcoming tour to Sri Lanka along with the pacer wanting to stay back at home to welcome his second baby. "I don't really have any more information than what I shared when we announced the Test squad (for Sri Lanka series) a few days ago," said Chair of Selectors George Bailey. "I believe he's had the scan, I have no idea what the scan said. But we want to give him a little bit of space at the back end of the Border-Gavaskar; obviously baby pending. "We'll work through that with Pat and obviously the selection panel and the medical team... But I know he's very keen," he added. Hazlewood, side lined from the Melbourne and Sydney Tests due to a calf niggle, was similarly not picked for the Sri Lanka series but has been named in the preliminary 15-player Champions Trophy squad.

Under ICC guidelines, Australia needed to name a squad by Monday, but can change it for injuries at any time before the tournament starts. The Aussies, a two-time winners in the event and the reigning ODI world champions, also picked all-rounder Mitchell Marsh, who was dropped for the fifth Test at SCG against India after mediocre outings in the first four matches. "This is a balanced and experienced squad with the core having been involved in the previous one-day World Cup, the West Indies series, last year's successful tour of the UK and the more recent Pakistan home series," Bailey said. "It offers a variety of options for touring management depending on opposition and the conditions that may present in Pakistan," he added. The squad will assemble, prepare and play a one-off ODI against Sri Lanka following the Test series before heading to Pakistan for the group stage matches of the ICC showpiece. Australia gave prominence to all-rounders in the squad selection as Matthew Short and Aaron Hardie were drafted in ahead of out-of-form Jake Fraser-McGurk. Adam Zampa is the lone specialist spinner in the squad. He will be supported by part-timers Short and Glenn Maxwell.

You cannot compare one generation of cricketers with another, says Kapil Dev

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

It is needless to compare two generations of players and pass a judgement on who was better, legendary cricketer Kapil Dev said on Monday and refused to get into a debate if BCCI selectors were right in excluding Yashasvi Jaiswal and Rishabh Pant from the T20I squad for the five-match series against England. Kapil bowled nearly 300 overs during the 1991-92 Test series against Australia and in the same rubber he became the first Indian to take 400 wickets in the traditional format apart from contributing with the bat in the team's cause. India pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah could not bowl in the second innings of the fifth Border-Gavaskar Test recently because of back spasms. India lost the five-match series 1-3. The 31-year-old Bumrah bowled



more than 150 overs and emerged the highest wicket-taker on both sides with 32 scalps. "Please don't compare. You cannot compare one generation with another. That is not required. Today, players are scoring 300 runs in a day. It didn't happen during our time. So don't compare the two (generations)," said Kapil during an event hosted by the Professional Golf Tour of India (PGTI) of which he is the president. The 1983 World Cup-winning skipper also added that one should not question the judgement of the selectors as they would have arrived at the decision to not play Jaiswal and Pant after giving it a thought. The two cricketers played all five Tests during the gruelling Australia series, with Jaiswal (391) emerging the second-highest run-getter, second only to Travis Head (448).

Asked if it was the right decision to drop two for the home series, Kapil said, "How can I comment on the judgement of others? I think the selectors would have thought about it." "So, if I say something it would be criticising them. I don't want to criticise them. They (selectors) are a group of people who must have planned and thought about that." With batting stalwarts Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli dishing out below-par performances in Australia, and talks of whether it's time for them to retire swirling, Kapil said the decision should be left to them. "They are very big players. Let's hope when they think it's the right time to play, when they think it's not, they will call it off," said Kapil, in response to a question whether they should be there for the Test series in England later this year.



Gauff starts her Australian Open with a straight-sets win over Sofia Kenin

PTI ■ MELBOURNE

Coco Gauff had a little difficulty adjusting to the sun at one end of Rod Laver Arena and dropped an early service game but quickly settled into a rhythm to start her Australian Open with a 6-3, 6-3 win Monday over 2020 champion Sofia Kenin. Third-seeded Gauff won the title at the WTA Finals last November and started this season by helping the U.S. to victory at the United Cup last week, a run that gives her a chance to move atop the rankings. The 2023 U.S. Open champion is wearing a Marvel-inspired bodysuit and skirt at Melbourne Park and she's radiating confidence and calm. "I knew going in it was going to be difficult, but you know I'm happy with how I played," she said of the 1-hour, 20-minute win over Kenin, who at No. 81 is a much tougher opponent than her ranking suggests. "I mean (I) could serve better, but like on that side I was struggling to see the ball," Gauff said, pointing to one baseline on the main show court that was bathed in sun. "So I'm just happy that I was able to manage through that." Another 20-year-old American, Alex Michelsen, produced the biggest win of his young career with a 7-5, 6-3, 2-6, 6-4 first-round upset of 2023 Australian runner-up

Stefanos Tsitsipas. Michelsen's three booming service returns in the ninth game of the fourth set helped him earn a vital break against the 11th-seeded Tsitsipas and, after shaking off jitters on his own serve, he closed out for his first ever victory over a player ranked in the top 20. Gauff went into her opening round on a streak of winning 33 matches against players ranked outside the Top 50, dating to a loss to Kenin at Wimbledon 2023. It was tough going early, with Gauff converting an early break before Kenin got back on serve at 2-2, hitting deep ground strokes and getting good bounce off the hard court. But Gauff, who had five aces and four double-faults in her first two service games, lifted her tempo, started taking the ball earlier and won four of the next five games. She finished the match with 12 aces and nine double-faults, and saved seven of the eight breakpoints she faced. She also had 28 winners, including two rifling backhands on key points in the second set, and 13 unforced errors. The draw presented another tough trip to Australia for Kenin. It was the third straight year Kenin faced a Grand Slam champion in the first round in Australia, and her fourth consecutive first-round exit here.

SA include Ngidi, Nortje in CT squad

PTI ■ JOHANNESBURG

South Africa on Monday included Lungi Ngidi and Anrich Nortje in the Temba Bavuma-led squad for next month's Champions Trophy after the pacers recovered sufficiently from their respective injuries. Nortje sustained an injury on his big toe last month which ruled him out of the series against Pakistan while a groin strain in November forced Ngidi to miss the series against Sri Lanka and Pakistan. South Africa, the semifinalists of the 2023 ODI World Cup, are placed in group B of the Champions Trophy. They will start their campaign against Afghanistan in Karachi on February 21 before meeting Australia in Rawalpindi on February 25 and their final group game is against England on March 1. However, frontline pacer Gerald Coetzee was not picked because of the groin injury that he suffered during the first Test against Sri Lanka in Durban last year. Subsequently, he missed the second Test at Gqeberha and the entire home



rubber against Pakistan. Pacer Nandre Burger, who suffered a a lumbar stress reaction, ahead of the ODI series against Ireland in early October too was not considered for selection. However, the Proteas trusted the improving fitness of all-rounder Wiaan Mulder, who broke his middle finger in the series against Sri Lanka, but he played in the second Test against Pakistan after the physios gave the green signal. Keshav Maharaj and Tabraiz Shamsi are the specialist spinners, who will be assisted by Aiden Markram's part-time off-spin. South Africa squad: Temba Bavuma (captain), Tony de Zorzi, Marco Jansen, Heinrich Klaasen, Keshav Maharaj, Aiden Markram, David Miller, Wiaan Mulder, Lungi Ngidi, Anrich Nortje, Kagiso Rabada, Ryan Rickelton, Tabraiz Shamsi, Tristan Stubbs, Rassie van der Dussen.

India Open: Spotlight on Satwik-Chirag as jumbo Indian contingent eyes end to two-year title drought

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The contingent is the biggest ever but focus would be on a handful of tried-and-tested names, especially the men's doubles team of Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty, when Indian shuttlers go up against a world-class field in the India Open Super 750 tournament beginning here on Tuesday. Despite the name, Indian success at the tournament hasn't been particularly regular with none from the host nation winning any title in the past two editions. The 21-strong group that will take the court this week would be desperate to change that statistic and make some amends after an ordinary Olympic campaign six months ago. The expectations would be especially high from Satwik and Chirag, who claimed the doubles title in 2022, the same year in which the currently erratic Lakshya Sen notched the men's singles top honour. The tournament will feature 18 of the world's top-20 men's singles players and 14 of the top-20 women's singles shuttlers.

Chirag and Satwik, who are former world number ones, have made a good start to the season by reaching the semifinals of the Malaysia Super 1000 last week. Despite the Paris Games disappointment, they have emerged as India's most reliable performers over the last two years by regularly making the deep end of the draws. They would be expected to do the same in the USD 950,000 event to be held at the KD Jadhav Indoor Stadium here. Satwik and Chirag, semifinalists at the 2024 China Masters, will face Malaysia's Wei Chong Man and Kai Wun Tee in their opening round. While the Indians have shown impressive form, they will be seeking improvement in quick rallies and service variations in a bid to better their runners-up position in the tournament last year. However, the Indian pair will face stiff competition from top names such as China's Olympic silver-medallists Liang Weikeng and Wang Chang. Also there in the field are Paris bronze-medallists Aaron Chia and Soh Wooi Yik of Malaysia,



Denmark's Kim Astrup and Anders Rasmussen, and the Indonesian combination of Fajar Alfian and Muhammad Rian Ardianto. Sindhu back in action Despite an underwhelming 2024, one can never discount two-time Olympic medallist PV Sindhu, who would be back in action after missing the season-opener in Kuala Lumpur due to her wedding. The 29-year-old Hyderabad returned to winning ways, lifting the Syed Modi International title, although it was against a predominantly Indian field. Sindhu will begin her campaign against compatriot Anupama Upadhyaya and is drawn to face

Japan's rising star Tomoka Miyazaki in a potentially intriguing second round. MKiyazaki is a 2022 world junior champion and Sindhu's conqueror at last year's Swiss Open. Sindhu last won this event in 2017. The very exciting but equally inconsistent Lakshya Sen would be aiming to replicate his 2022 success at the event. He can draw confidence from his Syed Modi title win and a third-place finish at the Kings Cup a few days ago. He faces a tough opening test against Chinese left-hander Hong Yang Weng. HS Prannoy, returning after a five-month break following a pre-quarterfinal exit at the Paris Olympics, stumbled in the second round in Malaysia last week. However, the 32-year-old veteran showed signs of his vintage form during the short campaign. He will look to build on that when he faces Chinese Taipei's Li Yang Su in the first round. A victory could set up a showdown with second seed Jonatan Christie of Indonesia. With marquee players like Olympic champions Viktor Axelsen (men) and An Se Young (women), and world No. 1 Shi Yuqi leading the competition, it would be no stroll in the park for the Indians in fray. But being on home turf could prove to be the morale-booster that helps them go over the line in difficult situations. Young names eye glory Some promising youngsters will also be eager to make a mark. Among them is Priyanshu Rajawat, who faces a tough challenge in his opening round against sixth-seeded Japanese Kodai Naraoka. Malvika Bansod will take on third seed Chinese Yue Han, and Aakarshi Kashyap will face eighth-seeded Thai Pornpawee Chochuwong. In women's doubles, India's hopes will rest on fifth-seeded team of Treasa Jolly and Gayatri Gopichand, who will face Japan's Arisa Igarashi and Ayako Sakuramoto in the first round. Meanwhile, Guwahati Masters-winning pair of Tanisha Crasto and Ashwini Ponnappa, will take on the British duo of Chloe Coney and Estelle Van Leeuwen. The Indians are seeded seventh here.