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INSIDE

WORLD 8
MALALA SLAMS AFGHAN TALIBAN FOR 'GENDER APARTHEID' AGAINST WOMEN

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Congress promises ₹8,500 to educated unemployed youth



Congress leader Sachin Pilot with Delhi Congress President Devendra Yadav, Delhi In-charge Qazi Nizamuddin and others during the launch of 'Yuva Udaan Yojana', at DPCC office in New Delhi

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

In the run to lure the voters by offering 'monetary' benefits, Congress on Sunday unveiled the 'Yuva Udaan Yojana,' a scheme promising a highest ever monthly allowance of Rs 8,500 to educated but unemployed youth for one year if they come to power in the national Capital.

The move, designed to address the growing issue of unemployment among educated youth, comes as a big announcement with Congress likely being the first political party in the country to offer such substantial financial support as part of their employment strategy.

Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi is also making his first appearance for campaigning for the party at Seelampur on Monday, ending speculations that there is a rift between the national and state leadership. He will address a 'Jai Bhim-Jai Samvidhan' public meeting

in East Delhi. Congress is vying to come back to power since 2013 when AAP rose to power. This is the third scheme launched by the party ahead of the Delhi Assembly polls. AICC general secretary and former Deputy Chief Minister of Rajasthan Sachin Pilot, at a press conference, said, "It is the government's responsibility to support our young and educated friends living in Delhi. If the youth gets discouraged, then it is not a good thing for the country. Therefore, we have decided that after the formation of Congress government in Delhi, educated and unemployed youth will be given one year apprenticeship and financial assistance of Rs 8,500."

"We will provide financial assistance to youths who can show their skills in a company, factory or organisation. They will get money through these companies. This is not a scheme under which one will get money while sitting at home," Pilot said.

BJP to use flash mobs, street plays to target AAP

SAUMYA SHUKLA ■ NEW DELHI

Street plays, flash mob, musical bands, magic shows and puppet shows are likely to be witnessed by the people of Delhi in the coming days as the BJP is all set to attack AAP chief Arvind Kejriwal on his alleged involvement in different scams, 'Sheeshmahal' and non-deliverance of poll promises using the cultural programmes it will organise in each of the 70 districts ahead of the Delhi Assembly elections. Heightening the election fervour ahead of the Delhi Assembly polls, which are slated to be held on February 5, the Delhi BJP will select on Sunday the final teams who will perform and take the messaging of the party forward to the larger audience. Around 350 teams have



auditioned for street plays, out of which the cultural committee will decide on the 140 teams, which will attack Kejriwal and make an appeal to vote for the BJP candidate of the district.

The plays, to be enacted by a team of five, which includes one girl, narrates the ordeal of how her husband fights with her after getting drunk in a bid to attack the AAP convener, on the alleged excise policy linked money laundering scam.



Jaishankar to attend Trump's inauguration

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar will represent India at the inauguration of Donald Trump as the 47th President of the United States on January 20. The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said on Sunday that Jaishankar will also have meetings with representatives of the incoming Trump administration during his visit to the US. Trump had defeated Vice President Kamala Harris in the presidential election held in November.

Last month, Jaishankar said Trump has had a positive political view of India and it is in a much more advantageous position than many other countries to build "deeper" relations with his administration and take the bilateral ties forward.

"On the invitation of the Trump-Vance Inauguration Committee, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar will represent the Government of India at the swearing-in ceremony of President-Elect Donald J Trump as the 47th President of the United States of America," it said. JD Vance will be the new US Vice President.

Dhaka opposes India's border fencing

PTI ■ DHAKA

Foreign Secretary Md. Jashim Uddin on Sunday expressed Bangladesh's "deep concern" over the recent border tensions during a meeting with Indian High Commissioner Pranay Verma at the Foreign Ministry here. The state-run BSS news agency earlier reported that Verma was "summoned" by the foreign ministry to discuss escalating tensions along the border. However, a press statement issued by the foreign ministry did not use that term.

"Foreign Secretary Ambassador Md. Jashim Uddin today expressed deep concern of 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 foreign ministry said in the statement. Verma entered the foreign ministry around 3:00 pm (local time). His meeting with the foreign secretary lasted about 45 minutes, BSS reported.

"I just met Foreign Secretary to discuss India's commitment to ensuring a crime-free border, effectively addressing challenges of smuggling, movement of criminals and trafficking," Verma told the media after emerging from the meeting.



"We have an understanding with regard to fencing the border for security. BSF and BGB (Border Security Force and Border Guard Bangladesh) have been in communication in this regard. We expect that understandings will be implemented and there will be cooperative approach to combatting crime," he added.

The development came hours after Dhaka alleged that India was trying to construct fences at five locations along the Indo-Bangla border, violating a bilateral agreement.

The foreign secretary "stressed that such activities particularly the unauthorised attempt to construct barbed wire fencing and the related operational actions by BSF, have caused tensions and disturbances along the border," the statement said.

HERE COME THE KITES



Enthusiasts fly kites during the International Kite Festival, in Ahmedabad

Foreign Investors sell ₹22,194 Cr in Indian stocks

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Foreign investors have withdrawn Rs 22,194 crore from Indian equities this month, driven by expectations of a weak earnings season, a steady rise in the US dollar, and concerns over tariff war during Donald Trump's presidency.

This came following an investment of Rs 15,446 crore in the month of December, data with the depositories showed.

Foreign investors have scaled back their investments in Indian equities significantly amid global and domestic headwinds.

"This exodus of foreign money from the Indian markets could be attributed to multitude of factors, such as expectation of yet another weak earning season, concerns over the tariff war under Trump's presidency, slowdown in GDP growth, still high inflation numbers and uncertainty over the commencement of the interest



SKM to hold tractor marches on Republic Day

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Samyukt Kisan Morcha (SKM) on Sunday called for tractor marches across the country on January 26 and demanded that Prime Minister Narendra Modi hold discussions with farmers over their pending demands. The SKM's call comes amid growing concerns over the health of farmer leader Jagjit Singh Dallewal, who has been on an indefinite fast for 48 days.

Dallewal, the convener of SKM (Non-Political), has been on the indefinite hunger strike at the Khanauri border point between Punjab and Haryana since November 26 last year over farmers' various demands including a legal guarantee to Minimum Support Price (MSP) for crops.

In a statement issued here, the SKM also announced that a meeting with SKM (Non-

BCCI names new secretary and treasurer

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Devajit Saikia and Prabhatej Singh Bhatia were on Sunday elected secretary and treasurer, respectively, unopposed at the BCCI Special General Meeting here.

They both were elected unopposed after being the only ones to file nomination for the posts vacated by Jay Shah and Ashish Shelar.

Shah had to leave the secretary's post after becoming the ICC chairman last month while Shelar resigned after taking oath as a cabinet minister in the Maharashtra government.

Saikia hails from Assam and Bhatia from Chhattisgarh. Saikia was performing the additional duties of secretary after Shah took over as ICC chairman on December 1. He was the joint secretary and now that post lies vacant.

"The Two (02) Elective Posts of the Office Bearers - Secretary and Treasurer - were Uncontested, and it was not necessary to conduct a Poll in respect of these Two (02) Posts," stated electoral officer A K Joti in his declaration of results.

Shah, who was felicitated by the BCCI on Saturday night, was also feted at the SGM.

UP gov't's 'No Helmet, No Fuel' policy sparks debate on road safety

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ LUCKNOW

The Uttar Pradesh government's proposed 'no helmet, no fuel' policy is creating ripples across the state. Officials, petrol pump workers, and citizens have come out with contrasting views. Some say helmets are necessary, while others argue that the government should also consider road quality and safety rather than enforcing a new law.

Transport Commissioner Brajesh Narain Singh, in a letter dated January 8, stated, "Most deaths in two-wheeler accidents occur because riders neglect to wear helmets. This policy isn't about punishment; it's about saving lives."

Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath echoed the urgency. "Every year, 25,000 to 26,000 lives are lost in road mishaps in Uttar Pradesh. It's a grim statistic we cannot ignore. Wearing helmets can significantly reduce fatalities."

Sukhdeo Chaudhary shared his daily struggles at a petrol pump in Lucknow's Indira Nagar. "Many commuters get angry when we ask them to wear helmets or refuse to give them fuel. Some shout at us, saying it is their right to buy petrol. But this policy will help us insist firmly."

Manoj Gupta, a pump manager supported the initiative. "We see riders



their helmet on a short trip? While safety is important, such a blanket rule might be harsh for genuine cases."

The Transport Department is working to ensure widespread awareness. Fuel stations across the state have been directed to install signage reading, "No Helmet, No Fuel." Social media campaigns, public notices, and TV advertisements will amplify the message.

"We want people to see helmets as life-saving devices, not just legal requirements," said Singh. "When a helmet can protect your head in an accident, why not make it a habit?"

Prakash Yadav, a biker from Lucknow, shared his personal experience. "Last year, my cousin met with an accident. He was not wearing a helmet and suffered a severe head injury. Since then, I've never stepped out without mine. This policy might save others from similar pain."

The initiative is not new; it was tried in Gautam Buddha Nagar in 2019 but wasn't strictly enforced. This time, officials are determined to ensure compliance across all 75 districts. Regular reviews will be conducted, and habitual offenders may face further penalties.

"Petrol pump workers must report repeated violations," Singh added. "We'll work closely with the police and regional transport offices to monitor the policy's impact."

Kolkata's new speed limits

KOLKATA: West Bengal government has notified new speed limits for vehicles, ranging from 10 km to 50 km per hour depending on school and market areas, across the state to reduce road accidents. The speed limit on all urban and non-urban roads passing through market and residential areas with significant interactions between motor vehicles and people has been restricted to 30 km/hour to keep the risk of fatality within 10 per cent only, they said. In school zones, the same has been

restricted to 25 km/hour. The maximum speed limit in urban areas has been capped at 50 km/hour, following the "global best practices factoring the situation in the country and the state", an official said.

The speed limit for buses has been confined to 20 km/hour, which can be reduced to 10 km/hour in certain pockets of the city. The state adopted a scientific speed management policy, which was prepared after getting the technical guidance of IIT Kharagpur, he said.

speeding off without helmets every day. If denying fuel can make them think twice, it is worth implementing. The government must back us with awareness campaigns to reduce confrontations."

Commuters, however, had mixed reactions. College student Ankit Verma welcomed the policy. "It is high time something like this was enforced. People only wear helmets to avoid fines. If this policy makes them wear it for safety, it is a win."

Renu Mishra, a mother of two from Agra, felt the rule might inconvenience families. "What if someone forgets



cut in India," Himanshu Srivastava, Associate Director, Research, Morningstar Investment Research India, said.

Additionally, record low level of Indian rupee, surge in US bond yields coupled with rich valuation of Indian markets also makes Indian equities relatively unattractive for foreign investors. According to the data, Foreign Portfolio Investors (FPIs) offloaded shares worth Rs 22,194 crore from Indian equities so far this month (till January 10).

FPIs have been sellers on all trading days except January 2. "The single major reason for the relentless selling by the FPIs is the steady rise in the dollar index which is above 109 now. The surge in the 10-year bond yield to above 4.6 per cent is ensuring capital flows from emerging markets like India," V K Vijayakumar, Chief Investment Strategist, Geojit Financial Services, said.

Kolkata, Bengaluru, Pune slowest in traffic globally

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

Three of the world's 10 slowest cities in terms of traffic speeds are in India. The 2024 TomTom Traffic Index has put Kolkata, Bengaluru and Pune among the top five slowest cities in the world. After Barranquilla in Colombia, Kolkata was the second most congested city in the world in 2024, and the most congested in Asia, followed by Garden City Bengaluru slipped to the second spot, Pune rounded up the top three. Last year, Bengaluru was India's most congested city.

Surprisingly Delhi was ranked much lower this time. It ranked 122 in the list. Last year, Delhi was ranked 44th in the world. According to the latest survey by the Netherlands-based location

technology firm TomTom on traffic and congestion on roads, drivers in the city spent an average of 34 minutes and 33 seconds to travel a distance of 10 km. The percentage of congestion is 32. Kolkata was followed closely by Bengaluru, where drivers spent 34 minutes and 10 seconds to cover 10 km. The level of congestion is 38 percent here.

Pune finished third with a travel time of 33 minutes and 22 seconds for the same distance, leaving India with three cities in the global top five. The level of congestion here is 32.

The report says drivers wasted 117 hours in a year in traffic in Kolkata, 110 hours in Bengaluru and 108 hours in Pune due to traffic congestion.

The TomTom, annually evaluates



traffic conditions in major cities worldwide, and this year's report has placed Kolkata, Bengaluru and Pune among the worst for traffic flow. The differences in travel times (or average speeds) across cities

time of 23 minutes for 10 km. Delhi was ranked as the 44th most congested city centre among 387 around the world in 2023 survey.

Till March 31, 2023, Delhi had 79.5 lakh vehicles, of which 20.7 lakh were private cars. As per Delhi Statistical Handbook 2023, the total number of vehicles registered in the capital stood at 1.2 crore, of which 33.8 lakh were private cars.

Hyderabad (31.5 minutes) was the other Indian city in the top 20 globally, taking the 18th spot.

In Asia, Chennai was ranked 31 spot with an average travel time of 301 minutes for 10 km while Mumbai retained 39 spot with an average travel time of 28 minutes for 10 km. Ahmedabad was ranked 43 with an average time travel of 29 minutes for the same. Ernakulam is also in the list at 50 spot with an

average travel time of 28 minutes.

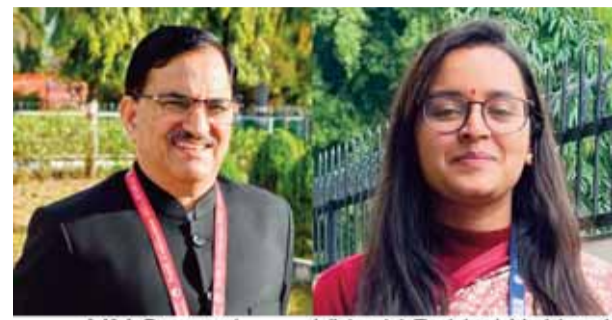
The Tom Tom traffic index revealed that Barranquilla in Colombia ranked as the city with the lowest average speed. Drivers in Barranquilla traveled at an average speed of 10.3 mph, taking 36 minutes to complete a 10 km journey.

Globally, London the first European city retained its spot at 5th position as the most congested city, with an average speed of 14 km/h. Other major cities like Dublin (16 km/h), Milan (17 km/h), Lima (17 km/h), and Toronto (18 km/h) were also reported to have slower average speeds than three cities Kolkata Bengaluru and Pune underscoring the widespread issue of urban traffic congestion.



GUEST COLUMN

Grassroots democracy in action: Understanding the importance of Uttarakhand's Urban Local Body Elections



MM Semwal Vidushi Dobhal Naithani

India has long been evolving governance structures from ancient to colonial to post-independence times. The roots of local self-governance also date back to ancient times and the structure has efficiently evolved to meet the changing needs of the Indian society. While the municipal governance structure during the British colonial era was established to serve the commercial and administrative needs of the colonialists, the post-independence adaptation of local self-governance within the Indian Constitution was undertaken to empower and include grassroots decision-making in the development of the nation.

Infrastructure development, town planning, environmental sustainability, the overall economic and social development of the designated area and the overall well-being of urban residents. ULBs have facilitated direct citizen participation in governance and have thus brought democracy closer to the citizens. The ULBs play a pivotal role in voicing citizens' demands about urban planning, service delivery and other crucial issues impacting the daily quality of life. The bodies also serve as vital training grounds for political leaders to begin their grassroots engagement.

Uttarakhand is gearing up for the ULB elections on January 23. The rate of urbanisation in Uttarakhand is 30.2 per cent which is significant and nears the national average of 31.2 per cent. Although the population is mainly concentrated in towns such as Dehradun, Haridwar and Haldwani, smaller towns and cities have sprung up across the State. Being a predominantly mountain State, most of Uttarakhand's ULBs are located in remote and mountainous areas. The ULB election schedule includes voting in 11 municipal corporations, 43 municipal councils, and 46 Nagar Panchayats. Out of 107 ULBs in Uttarakhand, seven would not go to polls due to either shifting

population or non-availability of delimitation data. In an initiative to encourage greater participation from female voters, 70 pink booths for female voters managed by an all-women staff will be set up in these ULB elections. Women constitute roughly half of the 30 lakh registered voters in the State. Nearly five lakh new urban voters have been added in the last six years. Although reservations for specific seats have sparked debate, they remain instrumental in addressing the electorate's diversity. With less than a fortnight remaining, the citizens must understand the relevance of these elections and the implications of their votes. The ULBs are the first point of grievance redressal for urban citizens. Hence, it becomes essential that a chosen representative is grounded in the realities of the urban body and the daily challenges it faces. It is necessary to recognise that not all governance shortcomings can be blamed on the State and national representatives. The constitution has empowered the citizens with the right to exercise their votes and voice their concerns; a responsibility which must be exercised judiciously.

With the recently concluded 2024 general elections, a concerning voter trend has been observed within the State where national narratives were seen to overshadow local issues. A strong inclination towards the national leadership was evident despite the looming local problems of resource availability, environmental sustainability, land laws and disaster preparedness that had gathered significant resentment from citizen bodies and activists. Additionally, Uttarakhand witnessed lesser voter turnout as compared to other moun-

tain States in the April 2024 elections. Both major parties in the State, the BJP and the Congress, have fielded candidates for the ensuing elections and canvassing has begun under the larger banner and influence of each party's national presence. BJP enjoys

to a clean sweep in all five Lok Sabha seats in the 2024 general elections has also amplified its confidence and strategic positioning in the ULB polls. The recent promises by the Dhama government, election victory in the Kedarnath by-poll and the

regime.

Despite the prominent presence of the BJP and Congress, independent candidates have also shown strong participation, with over 6,000 total nominations filed for various posts. This reflects the altering dynamics of the independent political front slowly taking shape in the State. As local issues get highlighted, many local and independent leaders have also demonstrated enthusiastic participation and support. It would be interesting to observe if the ongoing trend of favoring the regime already in power to facilitate a 'double-engine government' repeats itself in the forthcoming ULB elections. Ideally, the central theme of the elections must revolve around the 18 key functional areas, as mentioned in the 12th schedule. The voters must understand the power and authority of ULBs, which define its overall mandate. Awareness about these is essential to ensure informed voting and effective electoral decisions.

Urbanisation in Uttarakhand has been a reactive process resulting from unchecked migration rather than strategic planning. The city municipalities have been under pressure to cope with the heightened rise in population. This hampers the ability to provide basic facilities and services such as sufficient water, sanitation and waste management. Further, the available infrastructure proves insufficient for the population's growing demands. Overcrowded urban areas and limited resource availability is slowly becoming a grim reality for the citizens of the state. Migration and urbanisation in Uttarakhand share a cyclical relationship. The increasing number

of slums in and around Dehradun and reports of garbage heaps accumulating in public places highlight the urgent need for municipal reforms and enhanced civic engagement. In the Swachh Survekshan Report 2023, Dehradun ULB has been awarded the cleanest city of Uttarakhand but has a national rank of 68. The poor ranking of other ULBs of Uttarakhand is further alarming.

Based on the report published by the National Commission on Population (2020), the population density in Uttarakhand is projected to increase from 189 per sqkm in 2011 to 243 per sqkm by 2036. Further, the percentage of urban population is expected to rise from 31.2 per cent (2011-15) to 40.6 per cent (2031-25). It is worth noting that the major towns, which also correspond to the 11 municipal corporations in the State, have witnessed an increasing concentration of population in the past many years due to consistent migration from the mountains. This trend is expected to continue as more and more residents travel to larger towns for better opportunities.

Migration also impacts the voter turnout. Many voters reside in areas distant from their registered polling station, making it impractical and tedious to travel back to vote. This trend was evident in the 2024 general elections, where districts experiencing heightened migration were among the worst voter count and voting percentage performers. Thus, the growth in number of voters does not always correspond to better representation for the residents of Uttarakhand.

The population density is highly skewed towards the larger or emerging cities, which might not be reflected in the voter lists. Unable to cast their vote, such 'lost voices' undermine the democratic process's ability to be inclusive and reflective of the majority opinion.

The ensuing ULB elections represent a critical opportunity for the citizens of Uttarakhand to shape the future of urban governance and make it more responsive and effective. In addition, the elected representatives will face the daunting task of addressing the complex challenges to urban governance, service delivery and resource management. A holistic approach by local leaders is essential to break the cyclical nature of excessive migration, unplanned urbanisation and consequent resource depletion in urban areas. The more significant challenges faced by Uttarakhand are in no way restricted to the urban areas alone; however, fostering greater accountability and prioritising local concerns would drive ULBs to become instruments of change and promote sustainable development across the State, thus enhancing the quality of life of the residents of Uttarakhand. Active civic engagement in grassroots democracy is the stepping stone toward realising this vision.

(Semwal is head of political science department at HNB Garhwal University, Naithani is a search scholar. Views expressed are personal)

Schedule 12 (Article 243W) Powers, Authorities and Responsibilities of the Municipalities	
1.	Urban planning including town planning.
2.	Regulation of land-use and construction of buildings.
3.	Planning for economic and social development.
4.	Roads and bridges.
5.	Water supply for domestic, industrial and commercial purposes.
6.	Public health, sanitation conservancy and solid waste management.
7.	Fire services.
8.	Urban forestry, protection of the environment and promotion of ecological aspects.
9.	Safeguarding the interests of weaker sections of society, including the handicapped and mentally retarded.
10.	Slum improvement and upgradation.
11.	Urban poverty alleviation.
12.	Provision of urban amenities and facilities such as parks, gardens, playgrounds.
13.	Promotion of cultural, educational and aesthetic aspects.
14.	Burials and burial grounds; cremations, cremation grounds; and electric crematoriums.
15.	Cattle pounds; prevention of cruelty to animals.
16.	Vital statistics including registration of births and deaths.
17.	Public amenities including street lighting, parking lots, bus stops and public conveniences.
18.	Regulation of slaughter houses and tanneries.

significant leverage over its opposition, owing to its majority presence at the national and State level. The party's recent performance, which led

Prime Minister's encouraging address to the State on its 25th foundation day in November 2024 have reinstated voter confidence in the ruling

Multitudes participate in 10-km run to raise voters' awareness

PNS ■ DEHRADUN

A 10-kilometre run on the theme of 'Healthy Voter-Healthy Democracy' was held at the Survey stadium on the directions of chief electoral officer BVRC Purushottam here on Sunday. The additional surveyor general Shyam Vir Singh was the chief guest at the event which saw the participation of more than a 1,000 people including those from the Indian Army, ITBP, Uttarakhand Police, Survey of India and secretariat athletics club along with general citizens. The chief guest along with the additional chief electoral officer Vijay Kumar Jigdande flagged off the participants in various categories at 7 AM. The participants ran from the Survey stadium and passed through the New



Cantt Road to reach reaching the Mahindra Ground before turning back to reach the starting point.

The top three positions were won by Indian Army personnel in group A with

Sachin, Gaurav Bhatt and Anil coming first, second the third respectively. Anant Rawat, Virendra Chowdhary and Kalam Singh came first, second and third respectively in group B while in the college students' group C

Niraj Kumar, Virendra Singh and Pamt Kumar won the first, second and third positions respectively. In the women's category group D, Tanushree Chauhan came first followed by Neha in the second position and Gudia in the third position. Speaking on the occasion, Jigdande said that the purpose of the run was the raise public awareness regarding voting related activities.

This run was held as part of the events being held in view of the National Voters' Day to be held on January 25. The deputy chief electoral officer and nodal officer of the event, Mukta Mishra thanked all the departments which cooperated in the event.

City markets decked up for Lohri & Makar Sankranti celebrations

PNS ■ DEHRADUN

The major markets in the city including Paltan Bazaar, Raja Road and Hanuman Chowk, among others, have been adorned with various items used in the festivities of Lohri and Makar Sankranti. In addition to the market areas, numerous departmental stores are offering special kits for these occasion, providing customers with a convenient all-in-one packaging option. As a result, local residents have flocked the market to complete their shopping for the celebrations.

Notably, in the past, excitement in the major markets was witnessed mainly

scheduled for January 13, followed by Makar Sankranti on January 14.

A street vendor of popcorn and other Lohri items near Hanuman Chowk, Chandan Jha said that he set up a small stall at Hanuman Chowk prior to the week of the Lohri celebration. At his stall, he has been offering fresh and warm popcorn, peanuts and other traditional items such as Revadi, which people typically purchase for Lohri festivities. He further said that he has created a package priced at Rs 300 that includes all the essential items required for the Lohri Pooja. He noted that

Sankranti. The Makar Sankranti kit contains all the necessary ingredients for making kichdi, such as pulses, rice, ghee and spices. In the Lohri kit, he has included items like peanuts, popcorn, Revadi, candles and other traditional products. Both kits are priced at Rs 120 each. There is a growing demand for hampers intended for gifting during the Lohri celebrations, he added.

Numerous departmental stores and markets have been observed offering items for Lohri and Makar Sankranti. In this regard, local resident

Choosing BIS-certified helmets crucial for safety on Doon's mishap-prone roads

HASAN HADI ■ DEHRADUN

Highlighting the risks posed by substandard helmets, the Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) recently directed the district authorities across the country to launch a nationwide awareness campaign, urging the consumers to buy only BIS-certified helmets.

Doonites-ranging from an eminent physician to helmet sellers and buyers this correspondent spoke to-have hailed the move while exhorting the people to strictly adhere to the directive.

Padma Shri recipient orthopaedic surgeon Dr BKS Sanjay lauded the direction. "With the accident spree continuing unabated here,

the people should be doubly cautious to be on the safe side of things. They must make it a rule to purchase helmets after checking them for BIS certification as these conform to the safety standards," he said. However, at the same time, he urged the Centre to lower their prices to make them affordable, given their high cost.

A helmet seller based in the city, Manoj said that they sell both low-quality and high-quality helmets. "The lower range starts at Rs 300 while a good quality helmet costs at least Rs 1,000. Older customers and those with limited budgets often opt for cheaper ones while the younger buyers prefer

higher quality options," he added. Another helmet trader Kabir noted the demand for specific types of helmets. "Most customers choose full-face helmets, but some, especially the women, prefer half-face helmets. Both options come with their qualities. However, some companies produce BIS-certified full-face helmets under Rs 500, but I doubt whether their quality is ideal for safety. For real protection, helmets priced at Rs 1000 and above are better. I must admit though that they are expensive for the common people," he added.

A homemaker, Priya Gupta, who rides a scooter, said that she had bought a

cheap, stylish-looking helmet. "With accidents happening thick and fast here, I decided to spend on a high-quality, certified helmet for my safety," she added.

A young rider from the city Rajiv explained his choice of helmet. He said, "Good-quality helmets are expensive but are crucial for safety. That is why I always opt for a certified one. I am ready to spend more to ensure my safety amidst the risky conditions on the city's roads."

Notably, a customer may visit BIS care app or BIS website to verify whether a helmet manufacturer is licensed by BIS.



for festivals like Rakshabandhan and Deepawali. However, over time, enthusiasm for Lohri and Makar Sankranti has also gained traction among the public and in the marketplace now featuring new products such as hampers, kits and Lohri-themed candles, among others. This year, the celebration of Lohri is

has been a significant demand for this all-in-one packet for Lohri celebration. Similarly, the owner of a departmental store near Prince Chowk, Piyush Negi stated that he has also prepared for the celebrations of Lohri and Makar Sankranti. He has assembled separate kits specifically for Lohri and Makar

Shalu Arora stated that the introduction of new kits for Makar Sankranti and Lohri has elicited the interest of residents like herself this year. She said that she has nearly completed her shopping for both festivals and plans to purchase a few additional items at the last minute.

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7 dead, 19 injured in two mishaps within 24 hours

Six dead after bus plunges 100 metres in Pauri

PNS ■ DEHRADUN

Seven died and 19 injured in two separate road accidents in the State within 24 hours. A bus carrying 28 passengers fell into a gorge in Pauri in which six people died and 16 sustained serious injuries on Sunday. The second mishap occurred in Nainital district. The Pauri senior superintendent of police Lokeshwar Singh informed that five individuals were found dead on the spot while one died during the treatment. Besides this, nine persons were referred to higher centre in Srinagar while the remaining injured persons were admitted to the Pauri district hospital.



He informed that a bus carrying 28 passengers veered off the road and plunged approximately 100 metres into a gorge near Dehalchauri in the Srinagar area of Pauri district at about 4 PM on Sunday. The local police reached the accident spot and the Pauri district control room also alerted the Uttarakhand State Disaster Response Force (SDRF) about the accident after which rescue teams from the Srinagar and Satpuli posts were dispatched to the site. The bus of Garhwal Motor

Owners Union Limited, bearing registration number UK 12PB-0177, was traveling from Pauri to Dehalchauri, Srinagar when the driver reportedly lost control due to which the bus fell into the steep gorge. Local authorities, including SDRF, Pauri police and residents, launched an immediate rescue operation.

They managed to extricate 18 injured passengers from the

wreckage and rushed them to the hospital for treatment. Four bodies were retrieved and later sent for legal procedures. One person reportedly died during the treatment. The deceased have been identified as Sunita (25), Pramila, Priyanshu (17), Nagendra and Sulochana and all were locals. The SSP stated that the SDRF teams also conducted a thorough search of the surrounding area to ensure no other

passengers were trapped or missing. After an extensive operation, no additional victims were found. The police are investigating the matter, Singh said.

Meanwhile, chief minister Pushkar Singh Dhama expressed grief at the deaths in the mishap while adding that the local administration had facilitated necessary treatment of the injured.

One tourist dies, three injured in Nainital mishap

PNS ■ NAINITAL

One person died and three were injured after a car carrying tourists from Bareilly fell down the mountainside between Nanaga n and Beluwakhan on the Nainital-Haldwani highway in the wee hours of Sunday.

According to the police, information was received past 12 AM about a car falling into

a gorgeous. Four injured were carried out of the wreckage about 200 metres down the mountainside. They were taken to the Nainital district hospital where Mauju Khan (26) was declared dead by doctors while three others had sustained serious injuries. All the four were tourists travelling to Nainital when the mishap occurred.

Dehradun administration registers FIRs against UPCL contractors for violations

PNS ■ DEHRADUN

Considering the alleged repeated violations of road cutting regulations in Dehradun by the Uttarakhand Power Corporation Limited (UPCL) contractors, the Dehradun district administration registered cases against them in three police stations late on Saturday. The action came after contractors consistently ignored terms and conditions related to road cutting and restoration, despite multiple warnings and notices, as per Dehradun district magistrate Savin Bansal. He said that the administration has filed FIRs against three contractors and a junior engineer in Rajpur Road, Patelnagar and Nehru Colony police stations following inspections that revealed gross negligence and non-compliance. He informed that the violations included conducting construction work outside the permitted hours of 10 PM to 5 AM, with activities being carried out during the day, causing significant inconvenience to the public. Contractors also reportedly disregarded the approved excavation limits of 100 metres, digging stretches of up to 300-400 metres at once.

According to Bansal, safety measures, such as barricading, were largely absent, leaving open pits and construction debris scattered across roads that endangered public safety. Restoration work, which was supposed to follow strict standards, was also reportedly found to be subpar, leaving the roads in a hazardous condition. The Quick Response Team (QRT) formed by the DM conducted a joint inspection and found that contractors linked to UPCL (ADB) were violating conditions for laying underground electric cables. These violations were observed at several key locations, including the Niranjanpur Mandi Chowk to Bhusa Store stretch, the Dharampur-Rispana route and the Mata Mandir to Railway Crossing area. Bansal said that despite conditional permissions granted for these projects, which included adhering to specific work timings, excavation limits and safety protocols, contractors consistently flouted these norms. He said that the district administration is committed to hold violators accountable and ensure public safety and convenience.

278 people arrested for drunk driving in Dehradun

PNS ■ DEHRADUN

The police have arrested 278 people for drunk driving and apprehended 585 individuals for consuming alcohol in public spaces since January 1 as part of an intensified campaign to promote public safety in Dehradun. The Dehradun senior superintendent of police Ajai Singh said that the police have been running a large-scale crackdown against violations related to alcohol consumption in public and on the roads, with significant results. Over the past 10 days, the police apprehended 585 individuals for drinking in public and brought them to the police station via bus. The police imposed a penalty amounting to Rs 1.87

lakh under the Police Act. These offenders were also issued strict warnings to discourage such behavior in the future, as per Singh. He stated that the police also arrested 278 persons for drunk driving and also seized their respective vehicles to ensure compliance with the law and enhance road safety. The SSP said that the Dehradun Police's bus service played a crucial role in facilitating these operations, allowing for efficient transport of offenders to police stations. He stated that the police are taking appropriate action to curb public nuisances, ensure road safety and maintain law and order.

Snowfall and rain bring temperatures down across State, higher reaches covered in white

Dry weather forecast today, dense fog warning issued for two districts

PNS ■ DEHRADUN/JYOTIRMATH/NAINITAL

Temperatures dropped considerably in various parts of the State with rain in the plains and snowfall in the mountains on Saturday night and Sunday. Various mountainous regions in Uttarkashi, Chamoli, Nainital and other districts witnessed snowfall on the weekend while Dehradun and other areas in the plains and lower altitude mountainous areas witnessed rain. The minimum temperature dropped three degrees below normal to minus one degrees Celsius in Mukteshwar while the maximum temperature in the provisional State capital Dehradun dropped six degrees Celsius below normal to 12.8 degrees Celsius on Sunday while other parts also witnessed a similar drop in temperatures.

has issued a yellow warning (Watch) regarding the possibility of moderate to dense fog likely to occur in Udham Singh Nagar and Haridwar districts. The provisional State capital Uttarakhand is forecast to witness a mainly clear sky on Monday with

fog/mist likely to occur during the morning hours. The maximum and minimum temperatures are likely to be about 19 degrees Celsius and eight degrees Celsius respectively in Dehradun today.

Meanwhile, various high

altitude regions in Chamoli district witnessed snowfall. The winter sports destination Auli was covered in a fresh blanket of white, which has also started attracting tourists. Snowfall began here late on Saturday night and paused after about a foot of

snow on the ground. The snowfall resumed on Sunday afternoon. More than a foot of snow has been reported in Auli in other high altitude areas in this region. Similarly, snowfall was also witnessed in Badrinath with more than two feet of snowfall being reported in the temple township.

Rain and snowfall was also witnessed in various parts of the Kumaon region on the weekend. Nainital witnessed its second snowfall of the season on Sunday. There was comparatively less snowfall in the lower areas of Nainital city though there was more snowfall in the higher mountainous sites in the area. The tourists who arrived here on the weekend

spent a considerable time in the mountains enjoying the snow-clad surroundings. Snowfall started during the wee hours and people were greeted by a blanket of white when they woke up on Sunday morning. The rain and snowfall lasted for a few hours during the morning. Though there was upto five inches of snow in various sites in Nainital, there was more snow in neighbouring locations.

Meanwhile, the maximum and minimum temperatures recorded on Sunday were 12.8 degrees Celsius and 10.2 degrees Celsius respectively in Dehradun, 22.5 degrees Celsius and eight degrees Celsius in Pantnagar, 3.4 degrees Celsius and minus one degrees Celsius in Mukteshwar and 7.7 degrees Celsius 2.3 degrees Celsius in New Tehri.



Winter sports destination Auli in Chamoli district covered in a blanket of white after fresh snowfall on the weekend
Pioneer photo

Natives enthused to reconnect with roots, invest in Uttarakhand Skills & experience of non-resident Uttarakhandis needed to fulfill State's aspirations: CM

PNS ■ DEHRADUN

Non-resident Uttarakhandis expressed their enthusiasm to reconnect with the roots and invest in various sectors in the State during the first Antarrashtriya Pravasi Uttarakhandi Sammelan held here on Sunday. Inaugurating the event, chief minister

Uttarakhandis to adopt some village or locality and develop and protect it in order to resolve the problem of migration. "The State needs your skills, experience and technical knowledge, which is also important for meeting the aspirations of the State," he said. The CM said that

the event, non-resident Uttarakhandis recalled who they had spent their childhood here, adding that there has been much change in the State since then. Stating that in the past they had to go abroad in search of employment, they said that there are ample employment opportu-

and at least a child too.

Various sessions were held during the event to discuss various aspects. During the discussion on scope for investment in manufacturing, energy production and startups, Brosten Group chairman AK Kala from



Pushkar Singh Dhama said that there are considerable investment opportunities in the State which is developing at a brisk pace. There is major investment scope in adventure tourism, power generation, aromatics, agriculture, horticulture, AYUSH and wellness, among other spheres in Uttarakhand. The State government has made various policy and structural reforms to develop Uttarakhand as an investment destination, he said, while adding that strict legal provisions have also been made for a society free from fear and crime. Dhama exhorted the non-resident

Uttarakhand natives across the nation and abroad are known for their honesty and hard working nature which earns them respect.

"Uttarakhand is going to reach a milestone in 2025. This year marks the silver jubilee of the State's foundation and Uttarakhand is also set to host the National Games this year. We are going to implement the Uniform Civil Code this year. Recently, we also started winter tourism which will prove to be a gamechanger for the State's economy," he said.

Sharing their experience at

ities for the youths in the State today. Girish Pant, Anita Sharma, Dev Raturi, Vinod Jethudi, AK Kala and Shailesh Upreti, among others, appreciated the CM and the State government for the initiative, adding that the event had given them an opportunity to connect with their roots and do something for their native land. Collective efforts using their experience, technical knowledge and skills along with the State government can help resolve the problem of migration. They further said that all the non-resident Uttarakhandis should definitely adopt remote villages

Thailand said that after working abroad for 30 years, he is preparing to open a manufacturing unit in India, adding that he will accord priority to Uttarakhand. Founder of Mandala Global from Singapore, Meenakshi Arora Dabral said that she is trying to make products of Uttarakhand's women entrepreneurs available on her e-commerce platform. She also appreciated the House of Himalaya brand prepared by the State government. Other natives settled in various parts of the world also expressed their views and shared their experiences on the occasion.

Youth of Uttarakhand to shape India's future, says Sports minister

PNS ■ DEHRADUN

The Uttarakhand Sports minister Rekha Arya said that youth of the State will shape the future of the country in upcoming years. She stated this during the Youth Day celebrations in Haldwani's Gaulapar Sports Complex on Sunday. The event saw several youth clubs from across the State being honoured with State-Level Youth Awards, while volunteers registered for the National Games were also awarded certificates of appreciation.

The programme commenced with a ceremonial inauguration by chief guest and former chief minister Bhagat Singh Koshyari, MP Ajay Bhatt and Arya. During her address, Arya highlighted the pivotal role

of the volunteers in ensuring the success of the upcoming National Games. She said that this Youth Day celebration coincided with a historic milestone as Uttarakhand enters its 25th year of statehood. She announced that under the leadership of CM Pushkar Singh Dhama, the State will host the 38th National Games in a grand manner to mark the Silver Jubilee celebrations.

She expressed confidence that the performance of Uttarakhand's teams will establish the State as a hub of sports excellence. Drawing inspiration from Swami Vivekananda's famous call to arise, awake, and stop not until the goal is

achieved, Arya urged the youth to imbibe his philosophy and channel their energy towards building a better future. Koshyari also addressed the gathering, stressing the responsibility of youth in making Uttarakhand self-reliant. He appealed to them to steer clear of harmful habits such as drug abuse and to focus on constructive endeavours.

Besides this, the event also marked the launch of

recycled water bottles to be used in the National Games. Bhatt commended the youth for their transformative role in society, stating that every major change in history has been driven by young minds. The event was also attended by Lal Kuan MLA Mohan Singh Bisht, BJP Mandal President Mukesh Belwal and director of Sports and Youth Welfare, Prashant Arya, among others.

FORM G INVITATION FOR EXPRESSION OF INTEREST FOR DELHI MOBILE MATE PRIVATE LIMITED	
(Under sub-regulation (1) of regulation 36A of the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Board of India (Insolvency Resolution Process for Corporate Persons) Regulations, 2016)	
Sl. No.	RELEVANT PARTICULARS
1	Name of the corporate debtor along with PAN & CIN/LLP No. M/s. Delhi Mobile Mate Private Limited (CIN) U51909DL2010PTC201266 (PAN) AADCD4072F
2	Address of the registered office Registered Office: Plot No - 68, IIIRD Floor, Block No. 5 W.E.A Naiwala, Karol Bagh, North Delhi, India, 110005.
3	URL of website N/A
4	Details of place where the majority of fixed assets are located Not Known
5	Installed capacity of main products/ services As per last available balance sheet as on 31st March 2018 Total Revenue - 53,06,71,909/-
6	Quantity and value of main products/ services sold in last financial year As per last available balance sheet as on 31st March 2018 Total Revenue - 53,06,71,909/-
7	Number of employees/ workmen Nil
8	Further details including last available financial statements (with schedules) of two years, lists of creditors are available at URL: 31.03.2018 (Audited) 31.03.2017 (Audited) Details can be sought by prospective resolution applicants via a mail by raising request at email: crip.delhimobilemate@gmail.com
9	Further details including last available financial statements (with schedules) of two years, lists of creditors are available at URL: 31.03.2018 (Audited) 31.03.2017 (Audited) Details can be sought by prospective resolution applicants via a mail by raising request at email: crip.delhimobilemate@gmail.com
10	Last date for receipt of expression of interest 28.01.2025
11	Date of issue of provisional list of prospective resolution applicants 07.02.2025
12	Last date for submission of objections to provisional list 12.02.2025
13	Date of issue of final list of prospective resolution applicants 22.02.2025
14	Date of issue of information memorandum, evaluation matrix and request for resolution plans to prospective resolution applicants. 27.02.2025
15	Last date for submission of resolution plans 29.03.2025
16	Process email id to submit Expression of Interest crip.delhimobilemate@gmail.com

Sd/- Mukesh Kumar Jain
Resolution Professional
Delhi Mobile Mate Private Limited
IBBI Reg. No. - IBBI/IBBI/PA-001/JP-P-01960/2020-2021/13089
Email: crip.delhimobilemate@gmail.com, cfacs19@gmail.com
AFA Validity: 30/06/2025Comm. Address: S-376, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi-110017
Date: 13-01-2025 | Place: Delhi Mobile: +91-9818478173

Modi emphasises youth in achieving Viksit Bharat vision



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi asserted on Sunday that the capabilities of India's young population will power the country's rise to becoming developed. Addressing the Viksit Bharat Young Leaders Dialogue here, he said some people may find the goal of India becoming developed difficult but it is not impossible. No power can stop India from becoming a developed country if the spirit of 'Viksit Bharat' guides its every step, policy and decision, he said, highlighting the strength and numbers of the country's young population. "Big targets have to be set for a country to march forward..."

This is what today's India is doing," Modi said, adding that the country is accomplishing numerous goals in different sectors ahead of time. India has set the target of 20 per cent ethanol blending in petrol by 2030 and will meet the goal before that, he said. The prime minister added that the government alone cannot drive the country forward and told youngsters drawn from across the country that the ownership in 'Viksit Bharat' is not Modi's alone but also of them. Their ideas will be part of the country's policies and give it direction, he said. Achieving ambitious goals requires the active participation and collective effort of every citizen of the nation, he added. The prime minister cited the rise of the USA following its economic

crisis in the 1930s and Singapore's rise from a backward region lacking basic facilities to a major economic power to stress the need for setting big goals and sincerely working towards them. He noted how India became an open defecation-free country, manufactured Covid vaccines and inoculated its population against the virus. Asserting that the 25 years till 2047 are India's golden period (Amrit Kaal), Modi said he has full confidence that the young population will realise the dream of 'Viksit Bharat'. This is the time for a quantum jump, he said. The country also hopes to host the Olympics in the next decade and is working towards it with full dedication, he added. Swami Vivekananda had a lot of faith in

the young generation and said the youth will find solutions to all problems, Modi said. He added that he has absolute faith, "blind faith" in his words. The event was held on the occasion of Swami Vivekananda's birth anniversary, which is observed as the National Youth Festival. Stressing the role of high growth in India's development, Modi recounted how the country's capacity and budget in different fields have risen with the growth of its economy. The budget for infrastructure has grown six times in 10 years, he said. Asserting that the Indian economy is on its way to becoming the third biggest in the world, the prime minister said it will cross USD 10 trillion by the next decade.

Indonesian President set to grace as Republic Day parade chief guest

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto is set to grace the upcoming Republic Day celebration in the national capital as the Chief Guest, people familiar with the matter said on Sunday. It is learnt that Subianto is unlikely to travel to Pakistan immediately after concluding his trip to India after New Delhi raised the issue. Jakarta planned a trip to Pakistan by the Indonesian President after his visit to New Delhi, Pakistan media had reported. India is yet to formally announce this year's Republic Day chief guest. Prime Minister Narendra Modi will hold wide-ranging talks with Subianto during his visit. Every year, India invites world leaders to attend the Republic Day celebration. Last year, French President Emmanuel Macron was the chief guest. Egyptian President Abdel Fattah

El-Sisi graced the occasion in 2023. There was no Republic Day Chief guest in 2021 and 2022 in view of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, then Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro was the chief guest at the Republic Day celebration. In 2019, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa was the chief guest at the Republic Day parade, while in 2018, leaders of all 10 ASEAN countries attended the event. In 2017, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan was the chief guest at the celebration, then French President Francois Hollande graced the occasion in 2016. In 2015, then US President Barack Obama watched the parade. In 2014, ex-Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was the chief guest at the celebration, while Bhutan king Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck attended the parade in 2013. The heads of state and Government who have attended the Republic Day celebrations include Nicolas

Sarkozy, Vladimir Putin, Nelson Mandela, John Major, Mohammed Khatami and Jacques Chirac. The then British Prime Minister John Major had attended the R-Day celebration in 1993, Nelson Mandela participated as the then South African President in 1995, while South Korean President Lee Myung Bak witnessed the parade in 2010. In 2008, Sarkozy participated in the celebrations as French President, while his predecessor Chirac graced the occasion in 1998. Other world leaders who have attended the celebration include Nepal's King Birendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev, who came here in 1999, Iran's then President Mohammed Khatami in 2003, then Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono in 2011, and President of Maldives Maumoon Abdul Gayoom in 1991.

New book reveals inside story of G20 negotiations

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

An hour before the start of the G20 Summit here on September 9, 2023, Prime Minister Narendra Modi asked Sherpa Amitabh Kant the status of the leaders' declaration and when told there were some issues, he asserted he just wanted to see the result - a "consensus" - very soon. Kant immediately went into a huddle with fellow Sherpas and managed to secure the final agreement. These behind-the-scenes happenings find mention in Kant's new book "How India Scaled Mt G20: The Inside Story of the G20 Presidency". India had pulled off a big diplomatic win after the G20 summit adopted a consensus declaration overcoming major differences on the Russia-Ukraine war. Modi made the announcement about a consensus on the 37-page declaration and its subsequent adoption at the start of the second session on the opening day of the two-day summit of the grouping of major developed and developing countries. Kant says the journey from the principles to the final draft of the NDLD (New Delhi G20 Leaders' Declaration) was, however, far from smooth. "The text continued to face constant revisions and objections after 300 hours of negotiations over 250 bilateral meetings. The weight and seriousness of the negotiations were felt by all participants, but the pursuit of a mutually agreeable outcome still seemed far from reach," he writes in the book, published by Rupa.

Center to revive district agrometeorological units to support farmers

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The government wants to establish a permanent framework to continue the work of district agrometeorological units (DAMUs), which had been operating in an ad-hoc manner until their closure last year, Ministry of Earth Sciences Secretary M Ravichandran has said. PTI had reported in August last year that the government intended to revive DAMUs, which provided block-level weather-related information to lakhs of farmers, before their closure last year following recommendations from Niti Aayog. "As part of the pilot project, the Earth Sciences Ministry and the Agriculture Ministry provided weather information to farmers. Agricultural meteorologists in DAMUs analyze how weather conditions will affect crops. Their primary role is to offer advice to farmers. The system functioned well, but it should not remain ad-hoc; it needs to be made permanent," Ravichandran told PTI. He said the government wants to establish a solid framework to carry out this vital work. An official source told PTI that the Earth Sciences Ministry has also written to the Prime Minister's Office about the importance of reviving DAMUs and also voiced concerns related to their closure. Asked whether financial constraints were the main reason for winding up the project, the

source dismissed it as a "misunderstanding". It was earlier reported that the Ministry of Earth Sciences wanted the Agriculture Ministry to bear the expenditure for DAMUs. In August last year, a senior official had told PTI that the government intended to "formalize" DAMUs. "DAMUs were temporary in nature, with staff hired on a per-project basis. The ad-hoc nature of posts affected the forecast quality. There will be a permanent structure in place this time. The manpower will include both permanent and contractual staff," the official had said. In 2015, the government launched the Gramin Krishi Mausam Seva (GMSV) to provide crop and location-specific detailed advisories to farmers, helping them in day-to-day decision-making. Over the years, 130 agromet field units (AMFUs) were set up in agro-climatic zones in the country in collaboration with the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR). Each AMFU caters to four to five districts. In 2018, the government decided to extend the reach of the service by setting up 530 district agromet units on the premises of Krishi Vigyan Kendras (KVK). However, the Covid pandemic impacted the process, and only 199 DAMUs could be set up, each with two contractual employees -- SMS Agromet and Agromet Observer.

In a meeting of the Expenditure Finance Committee held in February 2023, a senior Niti Aayog advisor suggested reevaluating the "necessity of providing staff at each DAMU". The official suggested the MoES may have "centralized units instead of field units as the collection of data is automated". On January 17, 2024, the IMD wrote to all the DAMUs, asking them to wind up their operations by the end of the financial year 2023-24. Several politicians, including Union minister Nitin Gadkari and Congress MP Jairam Ramesh, had opposed the move. Over the last one year, the Maharashtra-based Agrometeorological Units Association has written to the prime minister, members of Parliament, Indian Council of Agricultural Research, Ministry of Earth Sciences, and Agriculture Ministry, requesting their intervention. DAMU employees said lakhs of farmers depended on them for crucial agromet advisories, which have helped increase their resilience against worsening weather and climate impacts, reducing their losses and the claim amount under the Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana. Agriculture in India continues to be vulnerable to weather vagaries despite self-sufficiency in food grain production, and uncertainty in the prediction of those events further add to the uncertainty.

CBI Director hails Interpol's Silver Notice as an effective tool over MLATs

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Terming the recently introduced Interpol 'Silver Notice' a "more effective" tool than the Mutual Legal Assistance Treaties (MLATs) for gathering information on illicit assets parked offshore, CBI Director Praveen Sood has said it was Prime Minister Narendra Modi's idea, which has now been realised. In an exclusive interaction with PTI, he said Prime Minister Modi had proposed in 2015 a system under the Interpol to trace money laundered offshore, and it has now taken shape as the Silver Notice. The Notice, aimed at locating illicit assets laundered across borders, is the newest addition to the Interpol's suite of eight colour-coded Notices and Diffusions, which enable coun-

tries to share alerts and requests for information worldwide. Conventionally, the information on illicit assets is gathered through MLATs which are treaties between two countries whereby they cooperate to provide and obtain formal assistance in the prevention, suppression, investigation, and prosecution of crime. Common complaints under MLAT include requests being transferred from one agency to another or one bank to another. Sometimes difficulties arise in obtaining a response because of a large number of requests. India has MLATs with 45 countries, according to data on the Ministry of Home Affairs website. "From MLAT, the stature has been increased to Interpol notice, which has a higher degree of emphasis than

MLAT. The sanctity of this process has increased; now it is through Interpol notices that are more acceptable to member countries. Possibly more information will come," the CBI chief said. He, however, added that MLATs will continue to be an effective tool as they are easier and country-to-country level than Interpol notices which have a wider reach but are sparsely used. Under the Interpol mechanism, states and central agencies can use the recently introduced Bharatpol to seamlessly send their requests for information through the CBI, which is designated as the National Central Bureau of India for all matters pertaining to the global organisation. Addressing the Global Focal Conference on Asset Recovery

in 2015 hosted by the CBI and Interpol, the Prime Minister had said, "Targeting the proceeds of crime is an important element in this fight against crime. Hence, there is an imperative need to focus our efforts on enhancing international cooperation in the field of Asset Recovery to fight crime, corruption, and terrorism." "The new Interpol Notice could add value to asset tracing investigations and facilitate real-time information sharing in complex cases," Modi had said. The proposal took concrete form during the 2022 Interpol General Assembly hosted by India, where it was adopted as the first resolution. The resolution recommended that an expert working group be established to assess various proposals devoted to exchange-

ing financial information and "tracing and recovery of criminal assets, including the 2015 General Assembly resolution to create a new Interpol notice named Silver Notice." Interpol's 91st General Assembly, held in Vienna in 2023, outlined the development and implementation of the Silver Notice and Diffusion pilot through another resolution. The 2023 resolution tasked the Expert Working Group on Asset Tracing and Recovery, in collaboration with the General Secretariat, with designing the pilot's scope, format, conditions, and safeguard measures. India was part of the expert group, which was led by Italy. A pilot phase of the Silver Notice involving 52 countries and territories was launched on Friday and will run at least until November 2025.

BJP to boost women leadership in party, prepares for 33% quota

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

BJP is likely to have a higher representation of women in its organisational structures, compared to its outgoing committees at various levels from booth upwards, as it prepares for the implementation of the law reserving one-third seats Lok Sabha and state assemblies for women. Sources said in a state like Madhya Pradesh, the BJP may have at least seven to eight women districts presidents in its 62 organisational districts against the none in the outgoing set-up. Similarly, in Bihar, the BJP recently named two women district presidents amid its ongoing nationwide organisational election exercise. Party sources said their national leadership is of the view that it is necessary to groom a crop of women leaders bottom-up so that able candidates are in place when the law reserving one-third of Lok Sabha and assembly seats come into force. "In the absence of genuine women alternatives, dominant male leaders will prop up women linked to their families to fill the quota. The message to us is that we must cultivate



women leaders from booth upwards," a key state BJP leader said. In Madhya Pradesh, considered a model BJP state organisation within the party, efforts have been made to ensure that at least three women are included in 11-member booth committees at most places, he said. Similarly, the party is also continuing with its exercise to make its organisation more representative by incorporating adequate numbers of SCs, backwards and STs, sources added. The party sources noted that basic units of organisational structure, like mandal and district units, are the most fiercely contested, and women have traditionally had an disadvantage in the male-dominated local politics. This is true for every party, as

strong local leaders want to control the areas they come from to pursue their political ambitions, they added. The Bharatiya Janata Party is currently in the middle of its organisational election process in the run up to picking its new national president, who will replace J P Nadda. He has been at the helm since 2020 and is currently a Union minister as well. The process to elect a new national president will begin when organisational elections are over in at least half of the states. Party sources said the process is expected to be over in at least 30 of the around 37 organisational states by the end of this month. The Constitution (One Hundred and Twenty-Eighth Amendment) Bill, better known as the women's reservation bill, was passed by Parliament last year. It reserves for women 33 per cent seats in state assemblies and Lok Sabha, and the provision will come into effect after the census and subsequent delimitation exercise. The government is yet to announce the census, which was last held in 2011, but is tipped to do so sometime later this year.

13,000 trains to operate during Kumbh Mela

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

With crores of pilgrims to converge at Prayagraj during the next one and a half month, the national transporter Indian Railways has pulled up its socks to facilitate a smooth and memorable spiritual journey for people from length and breadth of the country. During the last one month Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw has inaugurated several key initiatives to enhance railways' readiness for the Maha Kumbh 2025 in the Prayagraj region. These measures aim to provide safe, seamless, and technologically advanced services for millions of pilgrims. Some of the key announcements and inaugurations include launch of the Kumbh War Room which is a dedicated War Room at the Railway Board which will operate 24x7, with officials from Operations, Commercial, RPE, Mechanical, Engineering, and Electrical departments monitoring and coordinating activities. A total of 1,176 CCTV cameras have been installed at nine stations in the Prayagraj region to provide live feeds for real-time monitoring viz monitoring structures like platforms, stations. The War Room will facilitate effective coordina-

tion between district authorities and railway officials, ensuring immediate assistance and operational efficiency. Further a multilingual Communication Systems which will have 12-language announcement system inaugurated at Prayagraj, Naini, Cheeki, and Subedarganj stations to assist pilgrims besides the launch of a facilitation booklet in 22 languages, providing essential information for the pilgrims. As part of the Rail Network Enhancements a total of 13,000 trains will operate during the Kumbh period which includes 10,000 regular trains; 3,134 special trains (4.5 times more than the previous Kumbh); 1,869 short-distance trains; 706 long-distance trains; 559 ring trains. Freight trains have been diverted to Dedicated Freight Corridors (DFC) to ensure smooth passenger train operations. Railway officials said an investment of Rs 5,000 crore has been made over the past three years for Kumbh-related projects like for passenger facilities like 48 platforms and 21 Foot Over Bridges (FoBs), 23 permanent holding areas with a combined capacity of over one lakh pilgrims, 554 ticketing counters, including 151 mobile UTS counters. 21 ROB/RUBs to enhance road and rail mobility.

EC defends Model Code of Conduct in polls

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

One of the key reasons cited by the government to push for simultaneous polls has been that frequent imposition of model code disrupts development work and normal public life, but the Election Commission has asserted it is a "vital instrumentality" aimed at providing level playing field in polls. According to the bills brought by the government to implement 'one nation, one election', there is an imperative need for holding simultaneous elections for various reasons including polls becoming expensive and time-consuming. The Constitution amendment bill to implement 'one nation, one election' said the imposition of a Model Code of Conduct in poll-bound parts of the country puts on hold the entire development programmes and causes disruption in normal public life.

It said that frequent poll code imposition also impacts the functioning of services and diverts the man manpower from their core activities to election duties for prolonged periods. But the poll authority is of the view that "it would not be correct to view the application of MCC in terms of disruption as it is a vital instrumentality aimed at providing level playing field to all stakeholders involved in campaign". Responding to a questionnaire in March 2023 by the law commission on simultaneous polls, the EC had said the applicability of the model code depends on the cycle and frequency of elections and rationalisation of the same would, to that extent, curtail the time of MCC. "It has been evolved by the Election Commission in consultation with political parties as a voluntarily code of conduct to be followed by all stakeholders and is an integral to the design of conducting free and fair elections and for credible outcomes," it said.

Maha Kumbh 2025 set to begin with first Snan today

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ LUCKNOW

Prayagraj is a city transformed as it gears up for the grand spectacle of Maha Kumbh 2025, which begins with the first holy dip (Snan) on January 13. The vibrant confluence of faith, culture, and tradition will see millions of devotees, sadhus, and tourists flock to the Sangam—the sacred meeting point of the Ganga, Yamuna, and mythical Saraswati rivers. There are several auspicious days for Snan (holy bathing) and Shahi Snan (royal bathing) during the Maha Kumbh. This year, the Shahi Snan dates are January 14 (Makar Sankranti), January 29 (Mauni Amavasya), and February 3 (Basant Panchami). In addition to these, other important Snan dates are

January 13, February 12, and February 26.

The Shahi Snan is the highlight of the Kumbh, with ascetics from 13 akharas (Hindu monastic orders) leading colourful and elaborate processions to the Sangam. Dressed in saffron robes, adorned with rudraksh malas, and carrying ceremonial tridents, the sadhus march amid chants of "Har Har Mahadev." "Taking the Shahi Snan is a moment of spiritual ecstasy," said Mahant Anand Giri of the Niranjani Akhara. "It signifies the cleansing of the soul and a connection with the divine." The scale of preparations is monumental. Over 4,000 hectares along the riverbanks have been converted into a massive tent city, equipped to accommodate millions. The



area is dotted with 150,000 tents, ranging from basic dormitories to luxurious Swiss cottages, complete with air conditioning and private restrooms. "This is a city within a city," said Karan Kapoor, a project manager overseeing the tent city. "We've ensured clean drinking water, 24/7 electricity, and medical facilities to provide a seamless experience for pilgrims." The energy in the city is infectious. Meera Devi, a 68-year-old pilgrim from Varanasi, said, "I've been saving for years to come here. Just being at the Sangam fills me with peace and hope." Vendors and local businesses are equally excited. Ramesh Gupta, who sells devotional items, said, "Kumbh is the time when our livelihoods thrive. I've stocked special rudraksh beads,

diyas, and Ganga jal containers. People come here not just for faith but to take home a piece of it." Food stalls line the streets, offering hot jalebis, kachoris, and steaming cups of chai. Arti Sharma, a tea seller near the ghats, said, "The pilgrims love my masala chai. During the Kumbh, I sometimes sell over 500 cups a day!" To maintain hygiene, the authorities have set up over 145,000 temporary toilets, alongside an efficient waste disposal system. The ghats, cleaned daily, shimmer under festive lighting, creating a magical ambience. Safety is a top priority. More than 40,000 police personnel, supported by paramilitary forces, have been deployed to manage crowds. Advanced

technology, including AI-enabled surveillance systems and drones, will monitor the movement of people and vehicles. Pontoon bridges—30 in total—have been constructed across the rivers to ensure smooth access to the ghats. "This is not just an event; it's a massive logistical challenge," said Additional Director General of Police Arvind Sharma. "We are confident our arrangements will ensure a safe and secure Kumbh for all." As the first rays of the sun light up the Sangam on January 13, chants of "Har Har Gange" will echo across Prayagraj. For millions, this dip will mark a journey of faith, redemption, and unity—a true testament to the grandeur of India's spiritual legacy.

Bangladeshi migrants obtaining documents illegally in Maharashtra is 'vote jihad part 2', says CM Fadnavis

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ MUMBAI

Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis on Sunday said Bangladeshi migrants seeking birth certificates illegally in the state to obtain voting rights was "vote jihad part 2". Fadnavis, during the November assembly poll campaign, had cited instances of a community voting en masse against the BJP in the Lok Sabha elections held earlier in 2024, and had termed this as "vote jihad". Speaking at the State BJP's convention in Shirdi in Ahilyanagar, Fadnavis said, "Bangladeshi infiltrators are seeking birth certificates in Maharashtra as part of vote jihad part 2. Nearly 100 such cases have been reported in Amravati and Malegaon tehsil in Nashik. These people, many aged around 50 years, are obtaining documents illegally." Not a single infiltrator will be allowed to stay in Maharashtra,



the CM asserted. He said his Government is committed to combating anarchist forces attempting to create caste-based and communal divisions and urged people to stay vigilant and ensure this resolve is strengthened. Reflecting on the BJP's stellar performance in the November assembly polls, he hailed Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Union Home Minister Amit Shah for guiding and instilling confidence among party work-

Fadnavis said the party workers were "Keshav" and Modi was "Madhav", both names of Lord Krishna, in the stupendous victory of the BJP in the assembly polls. Cautioning against complacency after the assembly poll results, Fadnavis said workers must continue to put in concerted efforts for public welfare. Pointing towards the local body polls expected to take place across the state in the next few months, he said, "We must remain ready and united. The PM's mantra of 'ek hain to safe hain' (unity ensures safety) must guide us," he told the gathering. Polls to several civic bodies, including in Mumbai, Thane and Nagpur, are pending since early 2022. He said his government has lined up several schemes for the welfare of all segments of society, including ensuring 52 per cent of Maharashtra's electricity is generated from renewable sources by 2030.

Youth can succeed in realising their dreams based on willpower, says VP Dhankhar

PARVESH SHARMA ■ GURUGRAM

Vice President of India Jagdeep Dhankhar said that youth can succeed in realizing their dreams based on willpower. Referring to economic development and increasing expectations of the people, Dhankhar said that people have tasted development in the last 10 years. "Our India is changing. It has changed so much that people like us could never have imagined. Our India has become an example for the world today. No nation in the world has grown as fast and stable as Bharat in the last decade. Now people's expectations are very high. Those expectations have to be satisfied. You have to think out of the box," he said. While praising the students, he said students like you are going to democratize the economic, industrial, commercial and business landscape of the country. Today, you're taking a huge



leap forward—mark my words, you don't need lineage, you don't need a family name, you don't need family capital, you need an idea, and that idea is not the exclusive domain of anyone," he added. Dhankhar, who was attending the fourth convocation program of Masters Union, a management education institute located in Gurugram Cyber

Park, as the chief guest, said that the youth should believe in themselves. He appealed to the youth and said that they are the most influential stakeholders in governance. "You are the engine of development. If India has to become a developed nation by 2047, then the challenge is very big. We have already become the fifth largest global economy but

income will have to be increased eight times. This is a big challenge. Work has to be done on this," Dhankhar said. While congratulating the youth present in the program for completing the management course, the Vice President said that our country is carrying with it the legacy of a civilization that is about five thousand years old. It is going on.

Naxalism has declined significantly in Maharashtra's Gadchiroli, says Gadkari

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ MUMBAI

Union minister Nitin Gadkari on Sunday said Naxalism has declined significantly in Maharashtra's Gadchiroli, as nearly 5,000 youths have quit the outlawed movement, joined the mainstream and many of them have got employment. In the next five years, Gadchiroli will become the highest revenue-generating district in Maharashtra, he said at the BJP's state-level convention at Shirdi in Ahilyanagar district. Gadkari appealed to the BJP workers to channel the party's electoral success into meaningful societal transformation. The victory in the last year's state assembly polls should lead to the establishment of "surajya" (good governance), he said. Highlighting the progress made in Naxal-affected Gadchiroli, he said there was a time when visiting some areas in the district was difficult even for public representatives. "Today, nearly 5,000 youths have shunned Naxalism and come back to the mainstream. Many have got jobs like drivers, fitters, among others," the senior BJP leader said. Engineering and polytechnic colleges have been established, and garment manufacturing for exports has begun in the district, he said. The area, once



backward, has now generated employment for 10,000 tribal youths, Gadkari said. "In the next five years, Gadchiroli will become the highest revenue-generating district," he added. Gadkari also emphasised the importance of addressing the issues of unemployment, malnutrition and lack of education. "The soul of our party is to create a powerful nation that can guide the world," he said. He highlighted the need for transformation in rural areas and the uplift of labourers and the poor. Drawing inspiration from historical figures, Gadkari said, "It is our responsibility to demonstrate, like Shivaji Maharaj, how to transform the state. Many people become ministers, but not all are remembered. Babasaheb Ambedkar lost a Lok Sabha election, yet his name is renowned globally. Electoral victories alone do not define

greatness." The Union minister criticised those attempting to create communal discord for political gains. "We believe no individual is significant because of their caste, race or faith, but because of the values they uphold," he said. On Maharashtra's contribution to the automobile sector, Gadkari said, "In the next five years, India will become the top country globally in the automobile industry, generating 4.5 crore jobs, with maximum GST collection from Maharashtra in the sector. Most of the companies are based in Maharashtra." He reminded the BJP workers that their responsibility extends beyond defeating the rival Congress. "If we fail to bring transformation, people will question us. Good governance and development must remain our mission," he said.

Only Sanatani shopkeepers in Kumbh please: Sadhus check shopkeepers' Aadhaar Cards

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ PRAYAGRAJ

In a significant move to ensure that only Sanatani Hindus could set up shops in Kumbh Mela, sadhus had taken it upon themselves to scrutinize the credentials of shopkeepers operating within the fairgrounds. Under the leadership of Mahamandaleshwar Computer Baba of Digambar Ani Akhara, a dedicated task force of saints is actively checking Aadhaar cards to verify the identity of vendors. Over the past three days, this initiative has led to the expulsion of 32 shopkeepers who failed to provide valid identification. The Sant Task Force, comprising 1,500 saints, is conducting daily inspections across camps and shops in the Mela area. Shops selling food items, puja materials, fruits, blankets, and tea are being monitored. Saints patrol from 10 a.m. to noon and again from 4 p.m. to 5 p.m., ensuring compliance with their directive. "We want to keep the Kumbh free from individuals who may disrespect or defile its sanctity," said Computer Baba. The Akhil Bharatiya Akhara Parishad, the apex body of Hindu saints, has been vocal about ensuring that the ethos of the Kumbh is upheld," said Mahant Swami Gyananand of Juna Akhara. The Mela area, which hosts stalls for millions of pilgrims, is



a bustling marketplace with vendors offering everything from hot tea to devotional items. However, the saints have expressed concerns over potential misuse of this sacred space by individuals who may not respect its spiritual essence. The task force has been working in coordination with local law enforcement to prevent any disturbances. Police officials have acknowledged the saints' efforts as a means of maintaining order and safeguarding the sanctity of the event. A Safer and Cleaner Kumbh As preparations for the Maha Kumbh 2025 move into full swing, authorities have also ramped up measures to ensure the safety and convenience of devotees. Saints and organizers alike believe that such initiatives will contribute to a more spiritually enriching and harmonious experience for pilgrims.

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NDA to boycott Feb 5 Tamil Nadu bypoll: BJP chief

PNS ■ CHENNAI

BJP-led NDA has decided to boycott the Erode East bypoll scheduled for February 5 and would focus on dethroning the ruling DMK in the hustings next year, the saffron party's state unit said on Sunday. BJP's announcement virtually makes the election a no-contest as main opposition AIADMK and the DMK have already announced boycotting the by-election, necessitated by the death of Congress MLA EVKS Elangovan. DMK has nominated VC Chandrakumar on behalf of its-led bloc, which also has the Congress in the alliance. BJP TN chief K Annamalai said the upcoming election was a "by-election for a by-election," following the bypoll held here in 2022. He recalled there were accusations of the ruling DMK then "confining" people at designated places. The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) faced the DMK violating poll rules due to the "arrogance" of being the ruling party. "The coming 2026 Assembly polls is one meant to remove the DMK (from the ruling saddle) and the NDA is moving towards that target and does not want to allow the DMK to confine people like



cattle once again," he said in a statement. "All the leaders of NDA who desire people's welfare, after detailed consultation, have decided to boycott the Erode East bypoll. Our target is to remove the DMK in the 2026 elections and give the NDA's good governance to people," Annamalai said. The state has been pushed to a "dark period" with no safety for various sections of society and the DMK government was an "anti-people" one where law and order has also failed, the former IPS officer alleged. NDA constituents in the state include Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK). Incidentally, the AIADMK that was a part of the NDA in 2022 had fielded its nominee in that year's bypoll to Erode East seat but lost to Congress' Elangovan, who faced the election following the death of his son and local MLA E Thirumahan Everera.

Australia's youngest female author helps underprivileged kids in Punjab

DEEPAK KUMAR JHA ■ NAWANSHAH (PUNJAB)

Just stepping into her teens, Australia's youngest female author Ashleen Khela of Indian origin who along with her parents and siblings are currently on their annual visit to native Punjab, is doling out warmth in this biting cold to the underprivileged students of the Shaheed Bhagat Singh Nagar District known as Nawanshahr. The finances she raised from the proceeds her two books—17 Stories and Journey Through The Jersey—has been used by Ashleen to donate laptops, cash amounts, meals and

warm track suits to the school children of the locality. The child of millionaire parents Ashleen has been generating her own finances even to publish her works and the use the proceeds for philanthropic works. The family visits India each year to stay connected with their Indian roots. Ashleen wrote her first book at age of 11 for which she became the youngest author in Australia earning her international laurels which was duly covered by The Pioneer in December 2023 and acknowledged by the Indian High Commission there. According to her father

Amarjit Khela, who accompanies her every morning to various schools informed that Ashleen spent Rs 3.5 Lakh rupees for benevolence to the kids and in addition to this she raised so far Australian \$2,000 for Cancer Council of Australia, AUD \$1,000 for Starlight Children Foundation and now aims to raise funds for The National Children's Fund, New Delhi as well by donating some part of the proceeds of her books to Prime minister's Relief Fund. Some of the philanthropic act by this young girl includes Rs 10,000 and three laptops and her authored books to Government High School



Kaulgath (Balachaur) Dist SBS Nagar, Rs 10,000 and two laptops and books to Government Senior Secondary School Simble Mazara SBS Nagar, two laptops and books to High School Kaluwahar and many more schools in the district. Ashleen also donated warm track suits, laptop and her books to Government Elementary School Sajawalpur. Her family informed that Ashleen aims to visit few more schools before she leaves the country after Lohri and donate more laptops and cash to the needy school children. "It makes me immense satisfied and connected to my roots and do something

for the community where my parents originated from. I love my country Australia as I was born there but am equally proud to be of Indian origin," said Ashleen who addressed several school assemblies in the last fortnight and motivated children to do their best in their chosen fields to serve the community through their passion or profession. Within the last one week, since publishing her second book, so far, Ashleen has raised over \$1,000 for UNICEF by selling her second book online. Her buyers come from Australia, USA, Canada, New Zealand, India and

England, informed her parents. "In India she has been honoured by Punjab University, various Arts and cultural Associations of Punjab and Blood Bank NGOs of SBS Nagar while back home in Australia she got laurels in the form of 'Young Citizen of the year' which will be presented to her in association with Australia Day on January 26, 2025 by the Hills Shire Council (Local government)," mentioned an overjoyed Amarjit. As per family, the Second award will be presented to Ashleen by the NSW Government on March 6, 2025.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Rising drug menace

Amit Shah's contention that seven per cent of Indians are into substance abuse is an eye-opener; the Govt must act now

India is grappling with an escalating threat that cuts across social and economic lines: the increasing prevalence of drug abuse. With seven per cent of the population reportedly engaged in narcotics use, the issue has become a pressing concern for policymakers, law enforcement agencies and society at large. Union Home Minister Amit Shah recently underscored the severity of the problem, describing it as a "cancer" that could destroy the nation's future generations. Speaking at the 'Drug Trafficking and National Security' conference, Shah highlighted the government's intensified efforts against the drug menace. In 2024 alone, narcotics worth Rs16,914 crore were seized, a record-breaking figure. Comparing the past two decades, Shah noted that from 2004 to 2014, 3.63 lakh kilograms of drugs were seized, whereas from 2014 to 2024, the figure had risen seven-fold to 24 lakh kilograms. Despite this, the drug menace has only increased with even school going children also becoming drug addicts. The discovery of at least



50 illegal labs across the country underscores this issue. With stringent actions against traditional narcotics, there is a worrying shift towards the production and consumption of synthetic drugs, a trend that demands immediate intervention.

India's geographical location plays a significant role in its vulnerability to drug trafficking. Positioned near the Golden Crescent (Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran) and the Golden Triangle (Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand), the country serves as both a transit and a destination hub for narcotics. Social factors such as unemployment, poverty, and peer pressure further exacerbate the issue, especially among the youth, creating a vicious cycle of addiction and criminality. Since 2019, the Modi government has adopted a multi-pronged strategy to tackle the drug crisis. Enhanced enforcement efforts have led to record-breaking seizures, reflecting improved coordination and action against traffickers. However, the drug menace has only increased. India needs to focus on strengthening its law enforcement framework, ensuring that agencies have access to advanced training, technology and resources to dismantle drug networks. The regulation of precursor chemicals must be tightened to prevent their misuse in synthetic drug production. Rehabilitation facilities must be expanded to provide holistic support to those battling addiction, while nationwide public awareness campaigns should be intensified to foster a culture of prevention. The fight against drugs also requires regional and global cooperation. Neighbouring countries must work together to address cross-border trafficking, share intelligence and coordinate enforcement actions. At the domestic level, fostering collaboration between governments, non-profits and local communities is essential to sustain long-term efforts. The drug menace in India is not merely a law enforcement challenge but a societal crisis that demands collective action. The government must step up the efforts before it becomes a full-blown crisis.

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PICTALK



People buy kites ahead of 'Makar Sankranti' festival, in Amritsar

Pioneering meteorology and AQ management



RAJESH VERMA

IMD has evolved from focusing on weather forecasting to becoming a key player in climate research, disaster management and air quality monitoring

The completion of 150 years of establishment of the India Meteorological Department (IMD) is a matter of great pride for every Indian. The India Meteorological Department (IMD), established in 1875, has played a pioneering role in meteorological and atmospheric studies in India. Initially focused on weather forecasting and seismology, the Department gradually expanded its scope to include climate research, disaster management, and environmental monitoring. IMD was perhaps the first institution in India to start systematic long-term measurement of solar radiation, precipitation chemistry, ozone, and aerosol optical and physical properties.

Recognising the importance of atmospheric composition, IMD became an active partner in global atmospheric environment monitoring and research programs and contributed significantly towards ozone hole, air quality, precipitation chemistry, climate change, solar dimming and brightening research. The Earth's climate system has demonstrably changed since the pre-industrial era. IMD has a key responsibility in understanding the science of climate change and variability as well as adaptation and mitigation strategies. It plays a prominent role in facilitating a broader use of climate information, products and services. IMD has been mandated to operate the national meteorological observing systems; develop and maintain data archives; undertake climate monitoring; and carry out climate diagnostics, climate analysis and climate assessment. All this reliable and authentic data and information collected over 150 years has provided a proper assessment of climate change in India and has also helped in developing policy formulation for adaptation and mitigation measures. The air quality forecast and assessment system helps CAQM and other pollution control authorities in the country to make decisions for air quality management including the implementation of GRAP. The problem associated with air pollution is very complex as



many factors contribute to changes in concentrations of the main pollutants. The major factors are anthropogenic emissions, urbanisation, specific topography, emissions sources, environmental factors and meteorology. The advances in computational resources allowed the use of advanced deterministic chemical transport models, leading to more accurate air quality forecasts, replacing the previous empirical and statistical approach which has some limitations.

The scientists at India Meteorological Department and Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology (IITM), Pune, Ministry of Earth Science jointly developed the advanced Air Quality Early Warning System (AQEWS). The advanced modelling framework consists of a high-resolution fully coupled state-of-the-science Weather Research and Forecasting model coupled with chemistry (commonly known as WRF-Chem), and ingest data from satellites on aerosol optical depth, surface data from air quality monitoring stations across India and high-resolution emissions from various anthropogenic and natural sources including dust and stubble burning, to create more accurate initial conditions using state-of-the-art data assimilation techniques,



THE FIELD OF ENVIRONMENTAL METEOROLOGY HAS WITNESSED TRANSFORMATIVE INNOVATIONS, WITH CUTTING-EDGE TECHNOLOGIES ENABLING PRECISE, REAL-TIME INSIGHTS INTO ATMOSPHERIC DYNAMICS AND AIR QUALITY

to improve forecasts. The chemical data assimilation is further integrated with dynamical downscaling at a 400-meter resolution to provide a very high spatial resolution air quality forecast for the Delhi region. The prediction part of the system consists of two modelling frameworks, one is based on the NCAR atmospheric chemistry transport model (WRF-Chem) and the second one is based on the Finnish Meteorological Institute model SILAM (System for Integrated modelling of Atmospheric composition). The models take into account the latest land use land cover (LULC) change information over Delhi, background aerosols and pollutants, long-range transport of dust from dust storms and particulate matter from stubble burning. The predictions are now available up to 72 hours lead time at 400 meter resolution and 10 days in advance at 10 km resolution for the Delhi region. The advanced warning system provides (a) an air quality forecast at 400 meters for the Delhi/ NCR region, (b) an air quality forecast on primary and secondary stress of Delhi/NCR at 400 meters resolution, (c) an air quality forecast at 10 km resolution for entire South Asian region, (d) real-time observations of air quality over Delhi/NCR region, (e) details about natur-

al aerosols like dust (from dust storms) and particulate matter using different satellite datasets, (f) Near real-time fire information over India, (g) forecast of the contribution of non-local fire emissions. Consistent efforts are required to further improve the model performance. The field of environmental meteorology has witnessed transformative innovations, with cutting-edge technologies enabling precise, real-time insights into atmospheric dynamics and air quality. The accuracy of air quality forecasts is essential for mitigating the health impacts and economic costs of air pollution. IMD and associated institutions are continuously striving for improvement in environment monitoring and air quality prediction. IMD's historical contributions have not only improved the scientific understanding of India's unique atmospheric conditions but have also played a critical role in global efforts to combat air pollution and climate change. Many compliments to the meteorological community for their hard work in making IMD a global leader in the field of weather and climate. (The author is Chairperson of the Commission for Air Quality Management in NCR and Adjoining Areas; Views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

CONGRESS CHALLENGES AAP

Madam — The Election Commission of India has announced the date for polling for 70 assembly seats in Delhi. Though a tough fight between the incumbent AAP and the BJP is on the cards, the Congress has thrown down the gauntlet by fielding strong candidates against the AAP heavyweights like Arvind Kejriwal and Atishi Marlena. Unlike the two previous occasions when it didn't contest assembly elections on a serious note and drew a blank, this time the Congress is leaving no stone unturned to corner the AAP on various issues such as the liquor scam and the Sheeshmahal row. But the Congress' revival plan in Delhi has rattled the already crumbling INDIA bloc. Almost all parties of this bloc have openly thrown their weight behind the AAP. But for the Congress, the biggest shock has come from its oldest and most trusted ally, Lalu Yadav's Rashtriya Janata Dal. After Lalu Yadav backed West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's willingness to lead the Opposition alliance instead of Congress leaders, his son Tejasvi Yadav dropped the bomb on the Congress by saying that the INDI alliance was only for Lok Sabha elections.

Manoj Parashar | Ghaziabad

CEO CRITICISED FOR 90 HOUR PROPOSAL

Madam—L&T Chief has gone a few steps ahead of what Infosys's Narayana Murthy has prescribed and as expected, his suggestion of 90 hours a week and working even on Sundays has stirred up a debate. His remark to justify how long you can stare at your spouse is weird to say the least. Subrahmanyam should have looked at his former boss A N Naik's comment on regretting not spending enough time with his wife and children during his working life and after hanging up his boots, he was repenting it and said he is trying to wash his sins. Ultimately, at the end of the day, it is all about productivity and creating a positive work environment in the organisation and not spending long hours at the office.

Devastating wildfire in LA



In the wildfire that has engulfed Los Angeles in America, at least 11 people have died as the fire destroyed thousands of homes and more than 10,000 buildings, including schools, hospitals and so on. It has forced 180,000 people to evacuate their homes. The true death toll is not known. The fire, coupled with strong winds, has severely degraded air quality by releasing hazardous

smoke posing immediate and long-term risks to public health. The fire has already consumed around 22,000 acres of land. It is also said that climate change had made the grasses and shrubs that are fuelling the Los Angeles fire more vulnerable to the burning. Firefighters have been trying their level best to contain the spread of fire, but only 11 per cent of the fire had been contained to date.

It is estimated that the total damage and economic loss from this wildfire disaster could reach nearly 4 per cent of the annual GDP of the state of California. Heavy rain and a shift of wind direction alone could diminish the present situation. The wildfire in Los Angeles is a warning to other countries across the globe to be more cautious about climate change.

P Victor Selvaraj | Tirunelveli

These types of talks always come from the top, but implementation happens at the bottom, so if he really means what he said, he should walk the talk and work 90 hours a week for a year or two to set an example, and if it helps in improving business performance, then he should expect others to follow suit. In a top-down approach, if these CEOs push their employees beyond a point, it will only result in more burnout, and productivity is bound to suffer, needless to mention that mental and physical health will take a huge toll.

Bal Govind | Noida

MINOR BEHIND SCHOOL BOMB THREATS

Madam — Sending fake bomb threats to more than 23 schools in Delhi by a minor student of class 12 is not only a grave crime but also poses a severe crisis for both society and the administration. Such baseless and deplorable acts create an atmosphere of tension in schools and spread chaos across the entire city. Security agencies are forced to waste their time and resources on non-existent threats, diverting their focus and strength from genuine emergen-

cies. This incident also highlights how excessive examination pressure can heavily impact students mentally. However, this does not justify the right of any student to spread terror in society.

If a student is experiencing mental stress due to exam pressure, they require guidance and proper mental support, not engagement in acts that cause fear and unrest in the community. In such cases, it is the responsibility of both the law and the education system to provide students with the right guidance. They must be taught that false threats are not only harmful to society but also leave an undesirable and severe impact on their personality and future. Despite being a minor, children must understand that their actions do not only affect their own future but also deeply impact the entire society. Education and guidance are the tools that can help in their development into responsible and sensitive citizens.

R K Jain | Barwani

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Showcasing rural India's resilience and vision for Viksit Bharat 2047

From showcasing GI-certified products to championing organic farming, Grameen Bharat Mahotsav 2025 underscored rural India's vital role in nation building

Rural India, often described as the soul of the nation, has been a cornerstone of India's economic and cultural identity. The Grameen Bharat Mahotsav 2025, organised by NABARD and inaugurated by the Prime Minister, illuminated the remarkable strides made by rural communities.

This event brought together policymakers, entrepreneurs, artisans, and thought leaders to celebrate and further the progress of rural India while envisioning a sustainable and inclusive future. Held under the theme 'Building a Resilient Rural India for a Viksit Bharat 2047,' the Mahotsav provided a platform to showcase the diverse achievements of rural India. From GI-certified products and tribal crafts to organic agriculture and women-led entrepreneurship, the festival underscored the untapped economic and cultural potential of rural areas, particularly the North-Eastern region.

In his inaugural address, the Prime Minister emphasised the pivotal role of rural India in achieving a Viksit Bharat



by 2047. He highlighted the government's focus on enhancing rural infrastructure, promoting financial inclusion, and empowering marginalised communities. The Prime Minister's speech set the tone for the event, reinforcing the idea that the path to India's growth lies in the empowerment of its villages. NABARD Chairman, Shaji KV, delivered a compelling address, reflecting on the transformative journey of rural India over the past decade.

He pointed to significant advancements such as improved infrastructure through the Prime Minister Gram Sadak Yojna, wide-

spread electrification, digital connectivity, and the GI tagging of rural products. These initiatives, he stated, have bridged the gap between rural and urban areas, creating opportunities for inclusive economic growth. The Mahotsav also featured dynamic panel discussions that explored critical aspects of rural development. One panel delved into the potential of organic agriculture, discussing how climate-smart practices can address food security, environmental sustainability, and economic empowerment. Highlights included the success of the "GOBAR-Dhan" Yojana, which has already established over 2,300 biogas units, and the expansion of the organic agriculture market, now valued at Rs16,800 crore.

Another panel emphasised the importance of empowering cooperatives, with NABARD's initiatives in digitising over 67,000 cooperative societies playing a transformative role in making banking more accessible and affordable for rural populations. The event wasn't just about discussions and

economic progress—it was also a celebration of India's rich cultural heritage. Vibrant performances brought to life the diverse artistic traditions of rural India.

It provided rural entrepreneurs and artisans with access to broader markets, strengthened partnerships between stakeholders, and emphasised sustainable practices.

The festival also resulted in actionable policy recommendations, including the promotion of digital literacy, enhanced support for organic farming, and initiatives to boost rural infrastructure and healthcare. As the event concluded, it left a resounding message: the future of India lies in the empowerment of its villages. With the collective efforts of organisations like NABARD and the unwavering support of the government, rural India is poised to lead the nation into a brighter, more sustainable future, aligning perfectly with the vision of Viksit Bharat 2047.

(The writer is a development writer; views are personal)



PRABHA GUPTA



FIRST COLUMN

THE CHAINS OF DEPRIVATION

The feeling of deprivation dominates most of us, leaving many of us caught in an endless cycle of unfulfilled desires



AJIT KUMAR BISHNOI

Feeling of deprivation dominates life, one should not be surprised by this statement and this applies to all of us with some exceptions. You have guessed it. These fortunate souls are devotees of God. Let me substantiate what I have stated.

Do you agree that we have many unfulfilled desires; all of us have? Some of these are deep desires; those remain unfulfilled throughout our lives. The first one is to have plenty of money. What is plenty? Yes, it varies from person to person, but don't we change the quantum? I have done it throughout my life. What I had hoped for when I was a child has been exceeded many times over, but I still feel that more is what will really please me. By the way, I am one of those fortunate souls, whose needs have always been fulfilled, barring a few short spans. An extreme example is that of having a cycle and desiring a scooter. Once that is obtained, a car will be nice to have. This goes on till one gets to desire a private jet.

Then, come sexual feelings. From childhood, these feelings are never far away from our thoughts. And these are fanned by what we are exposed to by ads and what we choose to associate with like going on internet. Even children do so and giggle with friends. One may question why this feeling is so widespread. Because the creation can only be sustained by procreation. Even Lord Krishna has allowed this activity when He stated in the Bhagavad-Geeta, "I am passion in beings, according to religious principles," (7.11) But what human beings do not even animals do, i.e. make sex an overpowering urge. Even marriage does not satisfy it, though one feels in childhood that it would. Because sexual acts have a purpose, and cannot be made a burning desire.



The third enemy of us human beings are fearful thoughts. The underlying reason is our being small, very small in the overall context. We are also mostly ignorant, i.e., do not know what is good for us. Our intelligence is mostly flawed. There is spiritual intelligence, which is what the Bhagavad-Geeta is all about. Don't we avoid reading it? Because it will expose how little we know. This feeling of safety can only come from God, because only He can ensure it. Unfortunately, most of us avoid taking shelter of God, even though we know about Him.

Why don't we? Whatever we may say we really don't have much faith in God. Most of us feel that God is superior to us but not someone we must take shelter of, though God is everything. (7.19) Then, spiritual practices are considered utterly boring. Do we feel that they should be enjoyable like watching television? They are 'tapa' (austerities), as they should be. Our deeply embedded emotions like greed, lust and enviousness would not let us take shelter of God. The feeling that we can manage on our own also defeats us, even though we keep failing repeatedly in whatever we wish to achieve.

But everyone is not unintelligent. Many do take shelter of God and would never have second thoughts. Isn't this proof enough that they must be getting rewarded. Yes, God begins to guide and help them. One would know what is really desirable like peace, not unlimited sense enjoyment. God is so kind that He provides what we really need and He protects what is worth protecting. (9.22) God only can extricate us from our suffering caused by our past impious acts. (18.58) The list goes on, but one will only experience them if one gets started.

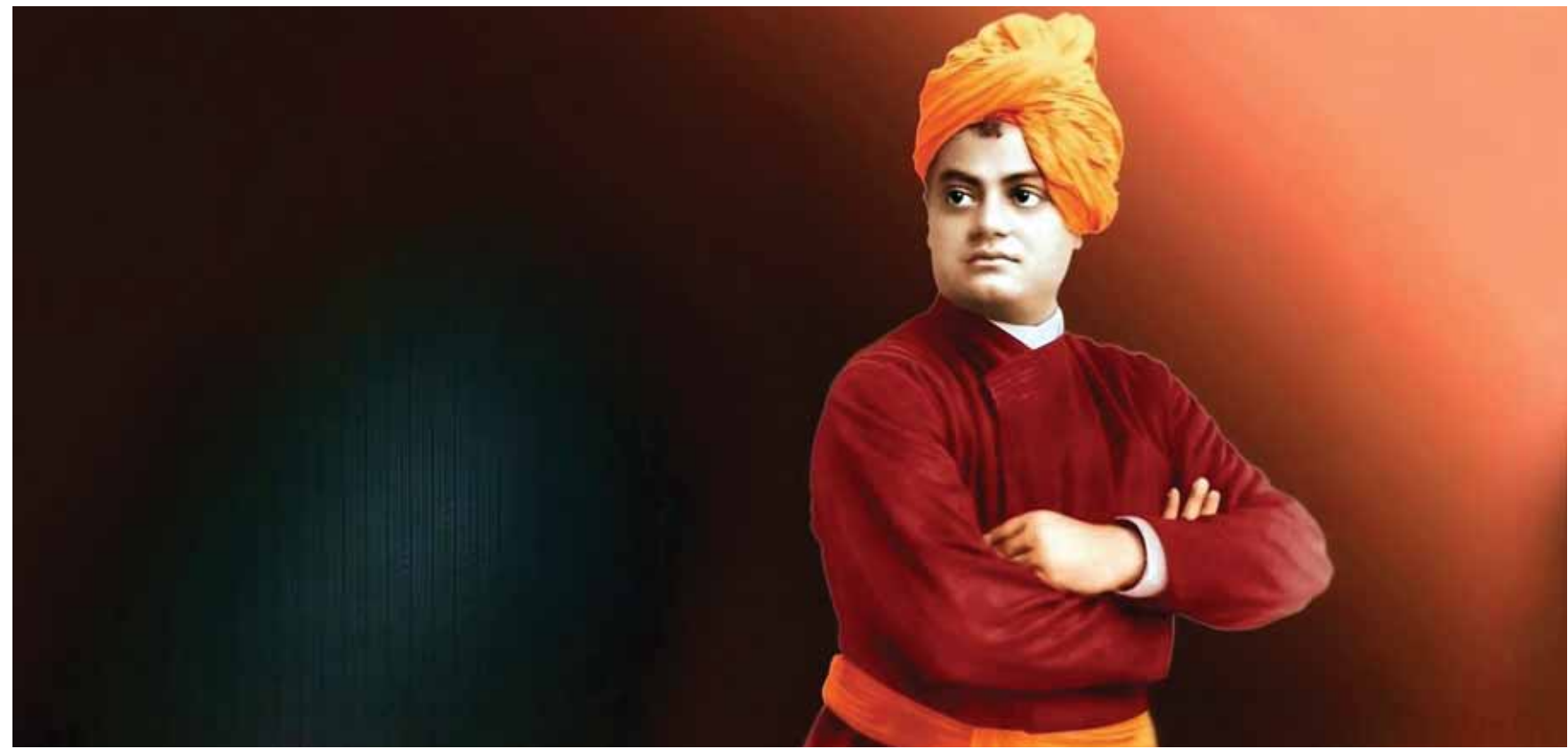
(The writer is a spiritual teacher, views are personal)

Vivekananda: A vision for an inclusive world



AMAL CHANDRA

As we celebrate Swami Vivekananda's birth anniversary, it is crucial to revisit his teachings, not just as historical artefacts but as living ideas relevant for today



Swami Vivekananda, born Narendranath Datta on January 12, 1863, is one of India's most remarkable spiritual leaders and thinkers. His birth anniversary is more than a mere occasion to honour his memory; it is an invitation to reflect on his profound legacy and the enduring relevance of his ideas. While his role in revitalising Hinduism and introducing Indian philosophy to the Western world is well-documented, some aspects of Vivekananda's thought remain less explored yet deeply significant. In a world grappling with numerous social, ethical, and philosophical challenges, his teachings serve as a quintessential guide.

Vivekananda was much more than a spiritual icon; he was a pragmatic philosopher who firmly believed in the application of spiritual principles to practical life. His famous assertion that 'service to humans is service to God' exemplifies his view that spirituality should be lived, not merely theorised. He encouraged people to engage in social service, emphasising that true religion manifests in the form of compassion, kindness and action. This perspective feels especially resonant in our modern times, where there is often a disconnection between spiritual practices and real-world issues. Vivekananda's message is a call to integrate spirituality with daily life, urging individuals to act with empathy and responsibility toward others.

One of the most forward-thinking aspects of Vivekananda's philosophy was his vision of education. He was deeply critical of the colonial education system, which he believed produced clerks rather than thinkers and visionaries. For Vivekananda, education was not merely about accumulating knowledge but about developing the whole person—intellectually, morally and spiritually. He emphasized the need for self-reliance and character-building, which he saw as the true objectives of education. In today's educa-



HE WAS A PATRIOT WHO DEEPLY LOVED INDIA, YET HIS NATIONALISM WAS INCLUSIVE, ROOTED IN THE CULTURAL AND SPIRITUAL WEALTH OF THE NATION RATHER THAN IN AGGRESSION OR EXCLUSION

tional discourse, which increasingly values holistic development and critical thinking, Vivekananda's ideas are strikingly prescient. His approach encourages educators and policymakers to think beyond conventional curricula, fostering environments that nurture creativity, ethics, and personal growth. At a time when women's rights were severely restricted, he advocated for their education and empowerment, highlighting the significant role women could play in shaping society.

He often drew from India's spiritual heritage, pointing to historical examples of women who had achieved great intellectual and spiritual heights. In a world that continues to struggle with gender disparities, Vivekananda's vision offers a timeless reminder of the importance of creating opportunities for all, irrespective of gender. His thoughts encourage us to work towards dismantling barriers and fostering a society where everyone can achieve their potential. Another fascinating aspect of Vivekananda's thought was his balanced approach to nationalism and internationalism.

He was a patriot who deeply loved India, yet his nationalism was inclusive, rooted in the cultural and spiritual wealth of the nation rather than in aggression or exclusion.

His famous speech at the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago in 1893 exemplified his belief in the unity of humanity. In his view, true patriotism did not mean hostility toward others but an appreciation of one's culture while respecting and learning from others. This approach is particu-

larly relevant today, as we navigate the complexities of national pride in a globalised world. Vivekananda's inclusive nationalism provides a framework for fostering pride in one's heritage while promoting global solidarity. Less commonly discussed, yet equally significant, is Vivekananda's respect for science and rational inquiry. Unlike many of his contemporaries who saw religion and science as oppositional forces, Vivekananda believed they could complement each other. He encouraged the cultivation of a scientific temper, advocating for a worldview that embraced both rationality and spirituality.

His open-mindedness toward scientific discoveries and his belief in the power of reason present a balanced perspective that is incredibly relevant in today's age of rapid technological advancement. Vivekananda's stance reminds us that faith and reason need not be in conflict but can coalesce to enrich our understanding of the world. Vivekananda was also a pioneer of interfaith dialogue, advocating for the respect and understanding of all religious traditions. He saw the diversity of faiths not as a barrier but as a testament to the multifaceted nature of truth. His inclusive attitude towards different religions stands as a powerful counter to the sectarian violence and religious intolerance that plague many societies today. Vivekananda's vision of interfaith harmony reminds us of the need for empathy and respect in a world often divided along religious lines.

His approach encourages us to find common ground and to cel-

brate the richness that diverse spiritual traditions bring to humanity. The legacy of Swami Vivekananda is multifaceted.

He was a monk, a philosopher, a nationalist, and a reformer, whose ideas continue to inspire millions worldwide. His teachings invite us to reflect on our personal and collective responsibilities, urging us to work towards a world that is more just, compassionate, and inclusive. Vivekananda's emphasis on the practical application of spiritual principles, disagreement with the imposition of vegetarianism, advocacy for education that nurtures the whole person, progressive views on gender, inclusive nationalism, and respect for both science and interfaith dialogue, all remain remarkably relevant.

His vision offers solutions to many of the challenges we face today, from educational reforms to gender equality, from religious harmony to ethical living. As we celebrate his birth anniversary, it is crucial to revisit Swami Vivekananda's teachings, not just as historical artefacts but as living ideas that can guide us toward a better future. His message is clear: "Arise, awake" - true greatness lies in the ability to apply timeless principles to the needs of the present, to foster a world where humanity can thrive in all its diversity. Swami Vivekananda's life and work remain a beacon, illuminating the path to a world that values compassion, justice, and the collective wellbeing of all its inhabitants.

(The writer is a policy analyst, political commentator, and columnist. Views expressed are personal)

The future of turmeric exports: India's path to securing global market dominance

By adapting to domestic production practices with the changing global demand and fostering a collaborative ecosystem, India can secure its future exports in the global market

For centuries, India has been known as the 'Land of Spices,' producing and exporting a wide variety of products, renowned for their distinctive flavour, aroma and health benefits. One such spice is turmeric, known as the 'Golden Spice of India,' which has spread through trade beyond South Asia to different parts of the world. Today, turmeric is cultivated in many South Asian countries, China, Africa and the Caribbean and has multiple end-uses spanning industries such as food, condiment, dye, nutraceuticals, cosmetics and medicine.

With global demand rising and growing demand for high-quality curcumin for preventive healthcare, sever-



ARPITA MUKHERJEE

al countries, such as Myanmar, Fiji, and Indonesia, are among the top five producers. India continues to be the largest exporter with close to 67 per cent of global exports in the year 2023. While the export value has increased from USD 182.53 million in 2017 to USD 212.65 million in 2023, the share in exports is showing a

slow decline, with new exporting countries like Fiji coming up. Global demand is also shifting towards turmeric, which has high curcumin content and organic varieties. Developed markets like the EU and the USA are emerging as key centres for the consumption of high-quality turmeric that meets stringent sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) and quality standards. The share of the USA in the imports of turmeric increased from 13.80 per cent in 2017 to 18.98 per cent in 2023, making it the first largest importer followed by India. We continue to import significant amounts of turmeric (especially dry), mainly from Vietnam, Indonesia, and Myanmar. Much of our

exports are in raw and powder format, where processing and further product developments are done in markets like the European Union (EU). Within the EU, countries like the Netherlands and Germany have become key exporters along with other countries like the USA. Some reasons for lower value addition in India include the inability to supply more than 10 per cent of the global requirement of turmeric with higher than 5 per cent curcumin, high use of pesticides and insecticides, lack of market knowledge and limited R&D and innovative products. The country must evolve from just a raw turmeric supplier by innovating, ensur-



ing quality, and adopting sustainable and good agricultural practices to maintain India's global dominance and move up the global value chain. Several companies have made strides in this direction by producing curcumin extracts for pharmaceuticals and nutraceuticals. Products like Vicco Turmeric Cream combine turmeric with modern cosmetics, linking Ayurvedic

traditions with contemporary personal care. High-curcumin variants, such as Lakadong turmeric, are gaining international recognition for their medicinal benefits. The number of Geographical Indication (GI) turmeric has increased to six as of December 31, 2024. However, to achieve the Indian Government's objective of making India the global hub for turmeric production and to meet the Ministry of Commerce and Industry's projected target of turmeric exports of USD1 billion by 2030, further action is required. Establishing a National Turmeric Board, announced by the Prime Minister, is one such step towards consolidating and implementing com-

prehensive regulations governing the entire turmeric value chain, imperative to enhance the sector's global competitiveness. Additionally, although the standards of domestically produced turmeric align with international regulations, such as the CODEX, global turmeric users require higher curcumin content, with sustainable farming practices and for that targeted R&D is needed to improve the curcumin content of the produce. Export processes and compliance requirements need to be streamlined and simplified. Signing mutual recognition agreements (MRAs) for standards and organic may help. For example, the MRA for organic products signed

between India and Taiwan in 2024, is a step in the right direction. Similar MRAs need to be signed between India and its key turmeric export destinations like the EU and the USA, which will reduce the cost and time of certifications and testing. By aligning domestic production practices with the changing global demand and fostering a collaborative ecosystem, India can secure its future exports as a reliable and preferred supplier of high-quality turmeric in the global market.

(The writer is professor, at the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations. With inputs from Eshana Mukherjee. Views are personal)

Malala slams Afghan Taliban for 'gender apartheid' against women

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD



Nobel Peace Prize winner Malala Yousafzai on Sunday slammed the Afghan Taliban regime for instituting a system of "gender apartheid" against women by disguising their crimes in the cloak of culture and religion.

"Simply put, the Taliban do not see women as human beings. They cloak their crimes in cultural and religious justification. These policies are a violation of human rights and have no basis in Islamic teachings," she said while speaking on girls' education in Muslim nations on the second and final day of an international conference in Islamabad.

Taliban recaptured power in 2021 by toppling the government of Ashraf Ghani and since then ruled Afghanistan with impunity, by legalising several anti-women policies, including denying them the right to education. The 27-year-old Nobel laureate even questioned the Afghan government on the claim of their introducing Islamic system in the country. "They are violations of human rights, and no cultural or religious excuse can justify them," she said.

She urged Muslim leaders to avoid giving recognition to the Taliban's government in Afghanistan and to demonstrate genuine leadership by standing up against their policies limiting education for women and girls. "Do not legitimize them," she asked the Muslim leaders, as she termed the Taliban regime as "perpetrators of gender apartheid."

She said that an entire generation of girls is being robbed of their future in Afghanistan. "The Taliban have ripped away the right to learn from every Afghan girl and they want to eliminate women and girls from every aspect of public life and erase them from society," she said. Malala also said that 12 million Pakistani girls were out of school, one of the highest numbers in the world, but expressed satisfaction that the conference was taking place here in Pakistan.

She also criticised Israeli actions in Gaza, accusing it of dismantling the region's education system and committing human rights violations. "In Gaza, Israel has decimated the entire education system," she said. "They have bombed all universities, destroyed more than 90% of schools, and indiscriminately attacked civilians sheltering in school buildings..."

She urged international solidarity to support education in conflict zones and end discriminatory practices against women and girls. Malala was shot in the face by the Pakistani Taliban at the age of 15 for opposing them but survived to become a global symbol of resilience and advocacy for girls' education.

She came to Pakistan to attend the two-day summit, which aimed to address challenges in girls' education across Muslim communities and explore international leadership's role in ensuring equal access to education.

Bangladesh's Yunus asks UK to investigate graft scandal of Sheikh Hasina's niece

PTI ■ DHAKA

Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus has called for an investigation into the properties of British minister Tulip Siddiq and her family, indicating that they may have acquired them through unlawful means during her aunt Sheikh Hasina's tenure as Bangladesh premier, reports said on Sunday. In an interview with the Times newspaper, Yunus condemned the use of properties gifted to Siddiq and her family by "allies of her aunt's deposed regime". He demanded the return of the assets to Bangladesh if she is found to have benefited from "plain robbery".

"It's about plain robbery," Yunus said, accusing the previous government of embezzling funds through fraudulent practices that have had long-lasting effects on the country.

Siddiq, a member of Britain's Labour Cabinet, serves as the Economic Secretary to the Treasury and City Minister, responsible for addressing corruption within the UK's financial markets. A day after publishing Yunus' interview, the British newspaper on Sunday carried another report titled "(UK) PM urged to sack Tulip Siddiq after Bangladesh leader's rebuke".

It said the "anti-corruption minister is facing calls to resign after the leader of Bangladesh condemned the use of properties gifted to her and her family by its former regime". According to the Sunday Times, Yunus' comments on the scandal engulfing Siddiq, 42, will add to the pressure on her to resign, though there are suggestions that Downing

Street is already looking for a replacement.

Yunus' intervention came as a Sunday Times investigation found Siddiq spent years living in a Hampstead property bought by an offshore company named in the Panama Papers and connected to two Bangladeshi businessmen. In his interview with the Times, Yunus said it was an "irony" that Siddiq had been accused of corruption.

Yunus referred to a recent official report that found the people connected with the Awami League regime had taken billions of dollars a year out of Bangladesh, with some funds used to buy assets, including properties abroad. "They pointed out how money is stolen, but it's not stealing — when you steal, you hide it. It's a robbery," he said. Asked if it could apply to prop-

erties used by members of Hasina's family in London, Chief Adviser Yunus said, "Absolutely, it's about plain robbery. Nothing else." "If a UK parliament member is involved, definitely it's a big issue... We got used to (the previous regime) taking away everything, so we feel relieved that you're bringing this [issue] to the attention of the world," he said.

Yunus also said that if feasible, the properties bought by the Awami League allies should be returned to Bangladesh. He said his officials aimed to recover cash and assets held overseas but originating from funds in Bangladesh. According to the Sunday Times, the National Crime Agency, Britain's equivalent of the FBI, indicated its willingness to help Bangladesh recover certain assets.

'Give your head a shake!': Canada's former leader Chretien tells Trump

PTI ■ VANCOUVER

President-elect Donald Trump's remarks that Canada should become the 51st state drew condemnation and a patriotic outburst on Saturday from a former Canadian prime minister who offered blunt advice to the incoming US leader — "Give your head a shake!"

Jean Chretien, who was Canada's prime minister from 1993 to 2003, joined a chorus of officials from the northern US neighbour who say Trump's remarks are no longer a joke and may undermine America's closest ally. Canada would never agree to become part of the US, Chretien wrote in an article published in The Globe and Mail newspaper, celebrating his 91st birthday.

He extolled his nation's love of independence and said Trump's remarks amounted to "totally

unacceptable insults and unprecedented threats" to Canadian sovereignty.

"To Donald Trump, from one old guy to another, give your head a shake!" Chretien said. "What could make you think that Canadians would ever give up the best country in the world — and make no mistake that is what we are — to join the United States?"

Trump has tossed expansionist rhetoric not just at Canada but also at other US allies, with arguments that the frontiers of American power need to be extended to the Danish territory of Greenland, and southward to include the Panama Canal.

And while many European leaders have been measured in their response, Canadians have not held back.

"If you think that threatening and insulting us is going to win us over, you really don't know a thing about us," Chretien

wrote in the article. "We may look easy-going, mild-mannered. But make no mistake, we have spine and toughness." The US imports approximately 60 per cent of its crude oil from Canada, which is also the top export destination for 36 US states. Nearly USD 2.7 billion worth of goods and services cross the border each day. Canadian officials have been talking to incoming Trump administration officials about increasing border security in an effort to avoid a sweeping 25 per cent tariff that Trump has threatened to impose on all Canadian products.

When Trump imposed higher tariffs during his first term in office, other countries responded with retaliatory tariffs of their own. Canada announced billions of new duties in 2018 against the US in a tit-for-tat response to new taxes on Canadian steel and aluminium.

Gas station blast kills 15 in Yemen

PTI ■ CAIRO

An explosion at a gas station triggered a massive fire in central Yemen, killing at least 15 people, health officials said on Sunday. The explosion occurred Saturday at the Zaher district in the province of Bayda, the Houthi rebel-run Health Ministry said in a statement. At least 67 others were injured, including 40 in critical condition.

The ministry said rescue teams were searching for those reported missing. It wasn't immediately clear what caused the explosion. Footage circulated online showing a massive fire that sent columns of smoke into the sky and left vehicles charred and burning. Bayda is controlled by Iranian-backed Houthi rebels, who have been at war with Yemen's internationally recognised government for more than a decade. Yemen's civil war began in 2014, when the rebels took control of the capital, Sanaa, and much of the country's north, forcing the government to flee to the south, then to Saudi Arabia.

PTI ■ LOS ANGELES

The death toll from the wildfires ravaging the Los Angeles area rose to 16 as crews battled to cut off the spreading blazes before potentially strong winds return that could push the flames toward some of the city's most famous landmarks.

Five of the deaths were attributed to the Palisades Fire and 11 resulted from the Eaton Fire, the Los Angeles County coroner's office said in a statement Saturday evening. The previous number of confirmed fatalities before Saturday was 11, but officials said they expected that figure to rise as teams with cadaver dogs conduct systematic grid searches in levelled neighbourhoods. Authorities have established a centre where people can report the missing.

There were fears that winds could move the fires toward the J Paul Getty Museum and the University of California, Los Angeles, while new evacuation warnings left more homeowners on edge. By Saturday evening, Cal Fire reported the Palisades, Eaton, Kenneth and Hurst fires had consumed about 62 square miles, an area larger than San Francisco. The Palisades and Eaton fires accounted for 59 square miles.

In a briefing posted online Saturday evening, Michael Traum of the California Office of Emergency Services said 150,000 people in Los Angeles County were under evacuation orders, with more than 700 people taking refuge in nine shelters.

Crews from California and nine other states are part of the ongoing response that includes 1,354 fire engines, 84 aircraft and more than 14,000 personnel, including newly arrived firefighters from Mexico, he said.

With Cal Fire reporting containment of the Palisades Fire at 11% and the Eaton Fire at 15% on Saturday night, the fight is set to continue.

"Weather conditions are still critical and another round of strong winds is expected starting Monday," Traum said. **Fighting to save public and private areas:** A fierce battle

occurred Saturday in Mandeville Canyon, home to Arnold Schwarzenegger and other celebrities not far from the Pacific coast, where swooping helicopters dumped water as the blaze charged downhill. Firefighters on the ground used hoses in an attempt to beat back leaping flames as thick smoke blanketed the chaparral-covered hillside. CalFire Operations Chief Christian Litz said Saturday that a main focus was the Palisades Fire burning in the canyon area, not far from the UCLA campus.

New evacuations were ordered

made progress Friday afternoon on the Eaton Fire north of Pasadena, which has burned more than 7,000 structures, a term that includes homes, apartment buildings, businesses, outbuildings and vehicles. Most evacuation orders for the area were lifted, officials said. No cause has been determined for the largest fires and early estimates indicate the wildfires could be the nation's costliest ever. A preliminary estimate by AccuWeather put the damage and economic losses so far between \$135 billion and \$150 billion.

Overflowing kindness:

back to destroyed homes to sift through rubble for keepsakes. "We have people driving up and around trying to get in just to look. Stay away," Luna said, urging people to abide by curfews.

Officials on Saturday warned the ash can contain lead, arsenic, asbestos and other harmful materials. "If you're kicking that stuff up, you're breathing it in," said Chris Thomas, a spokesman for the unified incident command at the Palisades Fire who warned the material was "toxic". Residents will be allowed to



Friday evening after a flare up on the eastern side of the Palisades Fire.

The National Weather Service warned that strong Santa Ana winds could soon return. Those winds have been largely blamed for turning the wildfires into infernos that levelled entire neighbourhoods around to city where there has been no significant rainfall in more than eight months. The fire also threatened to jump over Interstate 405 and into densely populated areas in the Hollywood Hills and San Fernando Valley.

Historical cost: The fires that began Tuesday just north of downtown LA have burned more than 12,000 structures. Firefighters for the first time

Volunteers overflowed donation centres and some had to be turned away at locations including the Santa Anita Park horse racing track, where people who lost their homes sifted through stacks of donated shirts, blankets and other household goods. Altadena resident Jose Luis Godinez said three homes occupied by more than a dozen of his family members were destroyed. "Everything is gone," he said, speaking in Spanish. "All my family lived in those three houses and now we have nothing."

Officials warn against returning: Los Angeles County Sheriff Robert Luna warned residents against venturing

return with protective gear after damage teams evaluate their properties, Thomas said.

Leadership accused of skimping: LA Mayor Karen Bass faces a critical test of her leadership during the city's greatest crisis in decades, but allegations of leadership failures, political blame and investigations have begun.

Gov Gavin Newsom on Friday ordered state officials to determine why a 117 million-gallon reservoir was out of service and some hydrants had run dry. Los Angeles Fire Chief Kristin Crowley said city leadership failed her department by not providing enough money for firefighting. She also criticised the lack of water.

Rate of HMPV infections in northern China declining

PTI ■ BEIJING

The rate of infections with the flu-like human metapneumovirus (HMPV) in northern China is declining, a health official said Sunday, amid some international concern over a potential pandemic. HMPV, which belongs to the same family as the respiratory syncytial virus, causes flu or cold-like symptoms including fever, cough and nasal congestion. The symptoms often clear up by themselves, though they can cause lower respiratory tract infections among children, older adults and those immunocompromised. "The human metapneumovirus is not a new virus, and has been with humans for at

least several decades," said Wang Liping, a researcher at the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention, during a press briefing by China's National Health Commission. Wang added that the increase in recent years in the number of cases of the virus, first detected in the Netherlands in 2001, is due to better detection methods.

"At present, the rate of positive cases in human metapneumovirus detection is fluctuating, and the rate of positive cases in northern provinces is declining, and the rate of positive cases among patients aged 14 and below has started to decline," she said. Concerns surfaced in recent days over a surge in HMPV

infections in northern China after images circulated online of hospitals overrun with masked patients. The World Health Organisation said it has not received reports of unusual outbreaks in China or elsewhere.

Experts say HMPV is unlike COVID-19 in that it has been around for decades and there is some built-in immunity to it. Most children are infected with the virus by the age of 5. Wang said respiratory diseases currently affecting people in China are caused by known pathogens, and no new infectious diseases have emerged. The number of patients in fever clinics and emergency departments across the country has been rising but is still

generally lower compared to the same period last year, said Gao Xinqiang, deputy director of the Department of Medical Emergency Response of the health commission.

"There is no obvious shortage of medical resources," Gao said. Flu infections across the country are expected to gradually decline in mid-to-late January, said commission spokesperson Hu Qiangqiang. There are no vaccines or drugs available for HMPV. Experts recommend precautions against catching the virus and other respiratory diseases including washing one's hands regularly, avoiding crowds if possible, and wearing a mask in crowded places.

Long wait for those whose homes destroyed in Lebanese war

PTI ■ BEIRUT

Six weeks into a ceasefire that shaltered the war between Israel and Hezbollah, many displaced Lebanese whose homes were destroyed in the fighting want to rebuild — but reconstruction and compensation are slow in coming. Large swaths of southern and eastern Lebanon, as well as Beirut's southern suburbs, lie in ruins, tens of thousands of homes reduced to rubble in Israeli airstrikes.

The World Bank estimated in a report in November — before the ceasefire later that month — that losses to Lebanon's infrastructure amount to some USD 3.4 billion. In the south, residents of dozens of villages along the Lebanon-Israel border can't go back because Israeli soldiers are still there. Under the US-negotiated ceasefire deal, Israeli forces are supposed to with-

draw by January 26 but there are doubts they will. Other terms of the deal are also uncertain — after Hezbollah's withdrawal, the Lebanese army is to step in and dismantle the militants' combat positions in the south. Israeli officials have complained the Lebanese troops are not moving in fast enough — to which they say the Israeli troops need to get out first. Reconstruction prospects — and who will foot the bill — remain unclear. In 2006, after the monthlong Israel-Hezbollah war, Hezbollah financed much of the USD 2.8 billion reconstruction with ally Iran's support.

The Lebanese militant group has said it would do so again and has begun making some payments. But Hezbollah, which is also a powerful political party, has suffered significant losses in this latest war and for its part, Iran is now mired

in a crippling economic crisis. The cash-strapped and long paralysed Lebanese government is in little position to help and international donors may be stretched by the post-war needs in the Gaza Strip and neighbouring Syria.

Many Lebanese say they are waiting for Hezbollah's promised compensation. Others say they received some money from the group — much less than the cost of the damage to their homes. Manal, a 53-year-old mother of four from the southern village of Marjayoun has been displaced with her family for over a year, since Hezbollah began firing rockets into Israel on October 8, 2023, in support of its ally Hamas in Gaza.

Israel responded with shelling and airstrikes in southern Lebanon. In July, Manal's family heard that their home was destroyed. The family has now sought compensation from

Hezbollah. "We haven't received any money yet," said Manal, giving only her first name for fear of reprisals. "Maybe our turn hasn't arrived." On a recent day in southern Beirut, where airstrikes had hit just 100 metres (yards) away from his home, Mohammad watched as an excavator cleared debris, dust swirling in the air. He said his father went to Hezbollah officials and got USD 2,500 — not enough to cover USD 4,000 worth of damage to their home. "Dad took the money and left, thinking it was pointless to argue," said Mohammad, who also gave only his first name for fear of repercussions. He said his uncle was offered only USD 194 for a similarly damaged home.

When the uncle complained, Mohammad said, Hezbollah asked him, "We sacrificed our blood, what did you do in the

war?" Others, however, say Hezbollah has compensated them fairly.

Abdallah Skaiki, whose home — also in southern Beirut — was completely destroyed, said he received USD 14,000 from Qard Al-Hasan, a Hezbollah-linked microfinance institution. Hussein Khairuddin, director of Jihad Binaa, the construction arm of Hezbollah, said the group is doing as much as it can. Its teams have surveyed over 80 per cent of damaged houses across Lebanon, he said.

"We have begun compensating families," he said. "We have also started providing payments for a year's rent and compensations for furniture." Khairuddin said their payments include USD 8,000 for furniture and USD 6,000 for a year's rent for those living in Beirut. Those who are staying elsewhere get USD 4,000 in money for rent.

Blueprints for each house are being prepared, he said, declining to elaborate on reconstruction plans. "We are not waiting for the government," he added. "But of course, we urge the state to act." There is little the government can do.

The World Bank's report from mid-November said Lebanon's infrastructure and economic losses from the war amount to USD 8.5 billion. And that estimate doesn't take into account the last month of the war, Deputy Prime Minister Saadi Chami told The Associated Press. "The government does not have the financial resources for reconstruction," he said bluntly. The World Bank said 99,209 housing units were damaged — and 18 per cent of them were completely destroyed. In southern Beirut suburbs alone, satellite analysis by Lebanon's National Centre for Natural Hazards and Early Warning identified 353 build-

ings completely destroyed and over 6,000 homes damaged. Lebanese officials have appealed to the international community for funding. The government is working with the World Bank to get an updated damage assessment and hopes to set up a multi-donor trust fund.

The World Bank is also exploring an "emergency project for Lebanon", focused on targeted assistance for areas most in need, Chami said, though no concrete plan has yet emerged. "If the World Bank gets involved, it will hopefully encourage the international community to donate money," Chami said. Ali Daamouh, a Hezbollah official, said earlier this month that the group has mobilized 145 reconstruction teams, which include 1,250 engineers, 300 data analysts and hundreds of auditors — many apparently volunteers. The compensations paid so

far have come from "the Iranian people", Daamouh said, without specifying if the money was from Iran's government or private donors.

Jana, a 29-year-old architect, is volunteering with Hezbollah teams to survey the damage to her hometown of Nabatiyeh in southern Lebanon. Much of the city is destroyed, including an Ottoman-era market. Her father's warehouse was hit by airstrikes, and all the medical supplies stored there were consumed by a fire.

Hezbollah officials "told us not to promise people or discuss reconstruction because there is no clear plan or funding for it yet", she told the AP. She did not give her last name because she wasn't authorised to talk about Hezbollah's actions. "They advised us to offer support and show the people that someone genuinely cares about their situation," she added.

North Korean troops in Ukraine gain battlefield experience

PT ■ KYIV

For weeks, Ukrainian troops braced for an unfamiliar enemy: North Korean soldiers sent to bolster Moscow's forces after Ukraine launched a lightning-fast incursion and seized territory in Russia's Kursk region over the summer. Their arrival marked a new and alarming phase in the war. And while initially inexperienced on the battlefield, North Korean troops have adapted quickly — a development that could have far-reaching consequences as they gain combat knowledge in the war against Ukraine. Unlike the Russian troops Ukraine has been battling for nearly three years, Kyiv's forces were uncertain about what to expect from this new adversary, drawn into the war after Moscow and Pyongyang signed an agreement pledging military assistance using "all means" if either were attacked. One Ukrainian soldier who has witnessed North Koreans in battle described them as disciplined and highly methodical, saying they were more profes-

sional than their Russian counterparts. The soldier spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to discuss the sensitive military issue. However, other soldiers, including Ukrainian special forces, have shared battlefield drone footage on the Telegram messaging app mocking their tactics as outdated. Nevertheless, there is consensus among Ukrainian soldiers, military intelligence and others monitoring developments on the ground: While Pyongyang's troops lacked battlefield experience when they arrived, that has been changing quickly. With 1.2 million troops, North Korea's military ranks among the largest standing armies globally. But its post-Korean War foreign engagements have been limited, leaving them inexperienced with modern warfare technologies like drones. "For the first time in decades, the North Korean army is gaining real military experience," said Andrii Yusov, spokesperson for Ukraine's military intelligence agency. "This is a global challenge — not just for

Ukraine and Europe, but for the entire world." **Identifying the presence of North Korean troops:** Despite Ukrainian, US and South Korean assertions that Pyongyang has sent 10,000-12,000 troops to fight alongside Russia in the Kursk border region, Moscow has never publicly acknowledged the North Korean forces. While reports of their presence first emerged in October, Ukrainian troops only confirmed engagement on the ground in December. Analysts say that without the influx of North Korean troops, Russia would have struggled to pursue its strategy of overwhelming Ukraine by throwing large numbers of soldiers into the battle for Kursk. While Moscow's counterattack in Kursk has inflicted thousands of Ukrainian casualties, Kyiv's overstretched forces have managed to hold on to about half of the 984 square kilometers (380 square miles) seized in August, though the situation remains dynamic. Besides the symbolic impact of Ukraine's success capturing Russian territory, control of Kursk could

also be a bargaining chip in any ceasefire negotiations. According to Ukraine's intelligence agency, the North Korean soldiers are operating alongside Russian units, with the latter providing reconnaissance and electronic warfare support. The North Koreans wear Russian military uniforms with fake military IDs in their pockets, according to a report by a Ukrainian military unit that has observed them on the battlefield, and they could easily be mistaken for Russian soldiers. The subterfuge means Moscow and "its representatives at the UN can deny the facts," said Yusov, the Ukrainian military intelligence spokesperson. Among the things proving their presence is that they have been heard speaking Korean with North Korean accents in intercepted communications, Yusov said. He said the North Korean troops are using their own weapons and equipment and have learned to cope with the improvised explosives-laden drones that have become emblematic of the war, first-hand experience even some NATO-member countries don't

have. "This is a new level of threat," Yusov said. "Regional countries must prepare for what this means in the future." **North Koreans gain invaluable experience on the battlefield:** The North Koreans' early missteps were largely caused by inexperience, such as moving in large groups in open terrain, making them easy targets for drones and artillery strikes. According to the Ukrainian military unit's report, the North Korean soldiers were spotted easily as they moved in single-file columns through forest in groups of three, with 3 to 5 metres (yards) between soldiers. On open terrain, they moved in dispersed formations of five to 15 soldiers, making them vulnerable and leading to heavy losses. However, during night operations, their movements were swift and units oriented themselves using red flashlights along routes, the report said. "They're fast, physically well-prepared, and act strictly according to their algorithms," said the Ukrainian soldier who spoke to the AP. "If you drill the same routines for years, to the point where they can be execut-

ed blindfolded, it will yield results." Despite their discipline, their lack of combat experience hindered their effectiveness. The Ukrainian military reported that North Korean troops often sustained heavy losses, with many killed by drones. On Thursday, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy put the number of killed or wounded North Koreans at 4,000, though US estimates are lower, at around 1,200. "Much of their military doctrine and training is based on strategies and experiences from over half a century ago," said Glib Voloskyi, a military analyst with the Ukrainian think tank CBA Initiatives Centre. The large-group formations date to when artillery accuracy was significantly lower, and observing troop movements much more difficult. Today, reconnaissance and so-called first-person view drones, or FPVs, that transmit video allowing soldiers to strike targets in real time have made the battlefield highly transparent, and anyone stepping onto it without cover, let alone moving

in groups, is immediately spotted. "But it is only a matter of time before they acquire the necessary skills to improve their combat effectiveness, which, combined with their discipline and training, could make them a significant military force," Voloskyi said. **No surrender policy means few North Korean POWs:** After weeks of fighting, Ukrainian soldiers have taken only two prisoners of war. In announcing the capture Saturday, Zelenskyy said taking them alive "was not easy" because of efforts to conceal the North Koreans' presence and avoid their interrogation by Ukraine. North Korean soldiers avoid surrendering at all costs, Zelenskyy said. This may stem from North Korean internal propaganda that portrays capture as the ultimate disgrace, analysts said. "To be captured alive is considered a betrayal of the country, the leader and everything they stand for," said Seongmin Lee of the New York-based Human Rights Foundation, who defected from North Korea in 2009. This belief is instilled from a

young age and reinforced throughout military training, he said. "Because of the disgrace associated with the capitulation, heroic soldiers are supposed to save the last of their bullets to kill themselves," Lee said. Lee said he shared photos of dead North Korean soldiers with contacts back home. "Most North Koreans don't even know what is going on," he said. Dorothy Camille Shea, the deputy US ambassador to the UN warned of the dangers posed by the rapidly improving battlefield skills the North Korean troops are gaining fighting in Kursk. North Korea "is significantly benefiting from receiving Russian military equipment, technology and experience, rendering it more capable of waging war against its neighbours," Shea told the 15-member UN Security Council on Wednesday. As an added potential benefit, she said, North Korea "will likely be eager to leverage these improvements to promote weapons sales and military training contracts globally."

Croatia's President Milanovic overwhelming favourite to win re-election in runoff vote

PT ■ ZAGREB (CROATIA)

Croatia's incumbent President Zoran Milanovic was the overwhelming favourite to win reelection as he faced a candidate from the ruling conservative party in a runoff presidential vote on Sunday. The left-leaning Milanovic comfortably won the first round of voting on Dec 29, leaving his main challenger, Dragan Primorac, a forensic scientist who had unsuccessfully run for presidency previously, and six other candidates far behind. The runoff between the top two contenders was necessary because Milanovic fell short of securing 50% of the vote by just 5,000 votes, while Primorac trailed far behind with 19%. The election comes as the European Union and NATO member country of 3.8 million people struggles with biting inflation, corruption scandals and a labor shortage. Milanovic, 58, is an outspoken critic of Western military support for Ukraine in its war against Russia. He is the most

popular politician in Croatia, and is sometimes compared to US President-elect Donald Trump for his combative style of communication with political opponents. Milanovic served as prime minister in the past with a mixed record. He has been a fierce critic of current Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic and the pair have long sparred with each other. Milanovic regularly accuses Plenkovic and his conservative Croatian Democratic Union party of systemic corruption, calling the premier a "serious threat to Croatia's democracy". Plenkovic has sought to portray Sunday's vote as one about Croatia's future in the EU and NATO. He has labelled Milanovic "pro-Russian" and a threat to Croatia's international standing. Primorac echoed this position as he cast his ballot on Sunday. He said the presidential vote was "very important" and "about the future of Croatia, about the future of our homeland, our citizens, and, really, the direction that it would go from here".

Political analyst Viseslav Raos said the increasingly outspoken Milanovic has no motive to "try to please someone or try to control himself". "If there was no cooperation with the prime minister for the first five years (of his presidency), why would it be now?" he added. Though the presidency is largely ceremonial in Croatia, an elected president holds political authority and acts as the supreme military commander. Despite limited powers, many believe the presidential position is key for the political balance of power in a country mainly governed by the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) since gaining independence from Yugoslavia in 1991. During a TV debate ahead of the Sunday vote, Milanovic and Primorac exchanged barbs while exposing deep political differences. Primorac, 59, entered politics in the early 2000s, when he was science and education minister in the HDZ-led government. He unsuccessfully ran for the presidency in 2009, and after that mainly focused on his

academic career including lecturing at universities in the United States, China and in Croatia. Milanovic denied he is pro-Russian but last year blocked the dispatch of five Croatian officers to NATO's mission in Germany called Security Assistance and Training for Ukraine. He also pledged he would never approve sending Croatian soldiers as part of any NATO mission to Ukraine. Plenkovic and his government say there is no such proposal. Milanovic accused Primorac of associating with "mass murderers," referring to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's associates and the war in Gaza. He also claimed that Plenkovic was Primorac's sponsor, and dubbed Primorac "the last communist" — a reference to his membership of the former ruling Communist Party of Yugoslavia in the late 1980s. Primorac meanwhile claimed that Milanovic's only political allies were Bosnian Serb separatist leader Milorad Dodik, Russia's President Vladimir Putin and Hungary's populist leader Viktor Orban.



Visitors pose for a photo on opening day at the Ice Castles, in North Woodstock, N.H. AP/PTI

Germany says sanctions against Syrian war crimes suspects must stay

PT ■ RIYADH

Germany's foreign minister said Sunday that sanctions against Syrian officials responsible for war crimes must remain in place but called for a "smart approach" to provide relief to the Syrian population after last month's overthrow of President Bashar Assad. Annalena Baerbock spoke to reporters after arriving in Saudi Arabia for a conference on Syria's future attended by top European and Middle Eastern diplomats. Germany is one of several countries that imposed sanctions on the Assad government over its brutal crackdown on dissent. Those penalties could hinder Syria's recovery from nearly 14 years of civil war that killed an estimated 500,000 people and displaced half the prewar population of 23 million.

"Sanctions against Assad's henchmen who committed serious crimes during the civil war must remain in place," Baerbock said. "But Germany proposes to take a smart approach to sanctions, providing rapid relief for the Syrian population. Syrians now need a quick dividend from the transition of power." Baerbock announced an additional 50 million euros (\$51.2 million) in German aid for food, emergency shelters and medical care, highlighting the ongoing struggles of millions of Syrians displaced by the war. Last week, the United States eased some of its restrictions on Syria, with the US Treasury issuing a general license, lasting six months, that authorises certain transactions with the Syrian government, including some energy sales and incidental transactions. The US has also dropped a \$10

million bounty it had offered for the capture of Ahmad al-Sharaa, a Syrian rebel leader formerly known as Abu Mohammed al-Golani, whose forces led the ouster of Assad last month. Al-Sharaa was a former senior al-Qaida militant who broke with the group years ago and has pledged an inclusive Syria that respects the rights of religious minorities. The rebels led a lightning insurgency that ousted Assad on Dec 8 and ended his family's decades-long rule. Much of the world severed ties with Assad and imposed sanctions on his government — and its Russian and Iranian allies — over alleged war crimes and the manufacturing of the amphetamine-like stimulant Captagon, which reportedly generated billions of dollars as packages of the little white pills were smuggled across Syria's porous borders.

Toll in Pak mine collapse now 11

PTI ■ KARACHI

The death toll in a coal mine collapse due to a methane gas accumulation and explosion has left 11 workers dead after rescuers recovered seven more dead bodies, an official said. Twelve workers were trapped when the coal mine collapsed in the Sanjdi area, about 40 kilometres from Quetta in the Balochistan province, on Wednesday evening. In three days of rescue work, 11 bodies were recovered until Saturday night with rescue workers still searching for the last worker inside the collapsed structure, Abdullah Shawani, the head of the province's mining department, said. "There are little chances of the last worker surviving for so long in the collapsed mine," Shawani said. "The incident occurred due to a buildup of gas, which caused an explosion and the mine to cave in," Balochistan government spokesperson Shahid Rind said.

Russia forms emergency task force as Kerch Strait oil spill continues to spread

PT ■ MOSCOW

An emergency task force arrived in Russia's southern Krasnodar region on Sunday as an oil spill in the Kerch Strait from two storm-stricken tankers continues to spread a month after it was first detected, officials said. The task force, which includes Emergency Situations Minister Alexander Kurenkov, was set up after Russian President Vladimir Putin on Friday called on authorities to ramp up the response to the spill, calling it "one of the most serious environmental challenges we have faced in recent years". The Emergencies Ministry said Saturday that over 155,000 tons of contaminated sand and soil had been collected since oil spilled out of two tankers during a storm four weeks ago in the Kerch Strait, which separates the Russia-occupied Crimean Peninsula from the Krasnodar region. Russian-installed officials in Ukraine's partially Russian-occupied Zaporizhzhia region said Saturday that the mazut — a heavy, low-quality oil product — had reached the Berdyansk Spit, some 145 km north of the Kerch Strait. It contaminated an area 14 1/2-km long, Moscow-installed Gov Yevgeny Balitsky wrote on Telegram. Russian-appointed officials in Moscow-occupied Crimea announced a regional emergency last weekend after oil was detected on the shores of

Sevastopol, the peninsula's largest city, about 250 km from the Kerch Strait. In response to Putin's call for action, Ukraine's Foreign Ministry spokesman Heorhii Tykhyi accused Russia of "beginning to demonstrate its alleged concern" (only) after the scale of the disaster became too obvious to conceal its terrible consequences. "Russia's practice of first ignoring the problem, then admitting its inability to solve it,

and ultimately leaving the entire Black Sea region alone with the consequences is yet another proof of its international irresponsibility," Tykhyi said Friday. The Kerch Strait is an important global shipping route, providing passage from the inland Sea of Azov to the Black Sea. It has also been a key point of conflict between Russia and Ukraine after Moscow annexed the peninsula in 2014. In 2016, Ukraine took Moscow

to the Permanent Court of Arbitration, where it accused Russia of trying to seize control of the area illegally. In 2021, Russia closed the strait for several months. Mykhailo Podolyak, an adviser to the head of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's office, described the oil spill last month as a "large-scale environmental disaster" and called for additional sanctions on Russian tankers.

Office of the Superintending Engineer
3rd Circle, Public Works Department, Pithoragarh
 Email : sepwdpth@rediffmail.com

Letter No. : 180 / 208C(Yata 'D')-03/2025 Dated : 09/01/2025

Short Term National Competitive E-Tender Notice

The Superintending Engineer, 3rd Circle, Public Works Department, Pithoragarh invites tender through E-Tendering (**Two Bid System**) on behalf of Hon'ble Governor of Uttarakhand for following works. All other information will be available online from date **13-01-2025 at 5.00 PM** onward on <http://www.uktenders.gov.in>

Sl. No.	Name of Work	Earnest Money (in Lac)	Cost of Tender (in Rs.)	Validity of Tender (day)	Period of Completion (months)	Contractor's Category of Registration
1	Installation of crash barriers from Km 21 to 35 of Sukhidhang-Dhura-Reetha sahib Motorway (SH-109) in Tanakpur, District Champawat under Road Safety.	7.36	5000.00 +18% G.S.T.	120	06	Category 'A' and Above for Road works in State Govt./ Govt. of India/ Govt. undertaking.
2	Installation of crash from Km 36 to 50 of Sukhidhang-Dhura-Reethasahib Motorway (SH-109) in Tanakpur area of district Champawat under Road Safety.	7.39	5000.00 +18% G.S.T.	120	06	Category 'A' and Above for Road works in State Govt./ Govt. of India/ Govt. undertaking.
3	Installation of crash barrier in the remaining length from Km 143 to km 158 of Khutani-Bhowali-Dhanachuli-Patlot-Reethasahib-Minar-Dhunaghat-Champawat-Manch-Tamli Motorway (SH-64) in Champawat district under Road Safety.	4.76	5000.00 +18% G.S.T.	120	06	Category 'B' and Above for Road works in State Govt./ Govt. of India/ Govt. undertaking.
4	Installation of crash in the remaining length of Kakarailgate-Thuligadh-Bhairav Mandir Motor road (State Highway-108) and Sukhidhang-Shyamalatal Motor road (State Highway-110) in Tanakpur area of Champawat district under Road Safety.	4.80	5000.00 +18% G.S.T.	120	06	Category 'B' and Above for Road works in State Govt./ Govt. of India/ Govt. undertaking.

Imran's party demands probe into violence cases, ready for talks

PTI ■ OSLAMABAD

Members of the negotiation team of former prime minister Imran Khan's party on Sunday demanded a probe into the May 9, 2023, and November 26, 2024, violence cases following a meeting with the incarcerated leader in the Adiala jail of Pakistan's Rawalpindi. The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) members also expressed readiness to participate in the third round of talks with the government to help ease polit-

ical tensions in the country. While violent protests took place in many cities of the country on May 9 following Khan's arrest, clashes took place between PTI protesters and the police in Islamabad in November last year. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Chief Minister Ali Amin Gandapur, Asad Qaiser, Omar Ayub Khan, Allama Nasir Abbas and Hamid Raza were the key party leaders who met Khan at Adiala Jail for consultation ahead of the third round of meetings with the government.

Speaking to reporters after the meeting, Raza said it was a "detailed meeting in a controlled environment" where the committee members presented their points of view before Khan, who has been in prison since August 2023. "We have a detailed meeting with founder PTI who once again demanded a judicial commission on May 9, 2023, and November 26, 2024, events to unearth the facts so that those responsible can be determined," he said, adding that Khan suggested an impartial

judge should head the commission. Raza said the PTI team would also inform the government that they were ready for the third session of the talks. He admitted that even after so many weeks, no progress has been made in the talks. Raza added that Khan gave a deadline of January 31 for the conclusion of talks, which only he can extend in case of any progress. Talking about the party's demands, he said they would also ask for the release of PTI workers and leaders.

THE PIONEER CLASSIFIEDS

बेदखली सूचना

में, हरिओम शर्मा पुत्र स्व जगमोहन शर्मा निवासी बी-26 गली नो2 राम विहार जोहरी पुर विस्तार दिल्ली 94 अपने पुत्र गिरिधर दत्त शर्मा ऊर्फ विन्की व बहु पुरासना शर्मा को उनके अर्ध ब्यवहार और उनके निर्वहण में ना होने के कारण अपनी समस्त चल और अचल संपत्ति से बेदखल कर अपने संबंध विच्छेद कर दिया है भविष्य में इनके बेटे व बहु के किसी भी कृत्य, अपकृत्य, दीवानी और फौजदारी मुकदमे के लिए हरिओम शर्मा व उनके संबंधी जिम्मेदार नहीं होंगे।
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FinMin to meet heads of banks to review financial inclusion schemes

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Finance Ministry has called a meeting of heads of Public Sector Banks (PSBs) on Wednesday to review progress of various financial inclusion schemes, including Jan Suraksha and Mudra Yojana. The meeting, which would see participation from representatives of private sector banks, is scheduled to be chaired by Financial Services Secretary M Nagaraju.

According to sources, the meeting to be chaired by the Secretary would also discuss and review the progress of various financial inclusion schemes including PM SVANidhi Schemes. The Finance ministry from time to time launched various drives to achieve saturation under Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Jeevan Jyoti Bima Yojana



(PMJJBY) and Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojana (PMSBY). The PMJJBY offers life insurance cover of Rs 2 lakh, in case of death due to any reason, to people in the age group of 18-50 years having a bank or post office account, who give their consent to join or enable auto-debit of premium.

On the other hand, the PMSBY offers insurance cover of Rs 2 lakh for accidental death or total permanent disability and Rs 1 lakh for partial permanent disability to people in the age group of 18-70 years with a bank or post office account, who give their consent to join or enable auto-debit of premium. StandUp India Scheme,

launched on April 5, 2016, with a focus on economic empowerment and job creation, has been extended up to 2025. The scheme aims to encourage all bank branches in extending loans to borrowers belonging to SC, ST and women borrowers in setting up their own greenfield enterprises. Last year, the government approved the continuation of the Prime Minister Street Vendor's AtmaNirbhar Nidhi (PM SVANidhi) Scheme till December 2024. The PM SVANidhi Scheme was launched in June 2020 by the government as a micro-credit facility with an aim to empower street vendors to recover losses incurred as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Through PM SVANidhi, affordable collateral-free loans are given to street vendors.

CII suggests 10-point agenda on ease of biz reforms ahead of Budget

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Ahead of the upcoming Budget, industry body CII on Sunday suggested a 10-point agenda to drive ease of doing business reforms, aimed at reducing compliance burden, simplifying regulatory frameworks, and improving transparency. Among the "urgent policy interventions", the industry body has recommended that all regulatory approvals -- central, state and local levels - must mandatorily be provided only through the National Single Window System. It has also pitched for expediting the process of dispute resolution by improving the capacity of courts and placing greater reliance on alternative dispute resolution (ADR) mechanism. For streamlining environmental compliances, Confederation of Indian



Industry (CII) said, a unified framework could be introduced, which consolidates all requirements into a single document. Emphasising that easy access to land is important to facilitate new or expanding businesses, it said that states may be incentivised to develop an online integrated land authority with an objective to streamline land records, digitise and integrate land records, provide information on disputed land and guide necessary reforms.

To assist industry in land acquisition across nation, the India Industrial Land Bank (IILB), which provides information on land across majority of states, can be evolved into a national-level land bank, with dedicated central budget support, it said. While India has over the last decade remained focused on improving ease of doing business (EoDB), there is a need to maintain the momentum, especially in certain specific areas, the CII

stated. CII Director General Chandrajit Banerjee said, "Simplifying regulatory frameworks, reducing compliance burdens, and enhancing transparency should continue to remain our focus agenda for next several years. Compliances for industry related to various areas such as land, labour, dispute resolution, paying taxes and environment offer a vast scope for reduction, vital for boosting competitiveness, driving economic growth and employment generation." To ensure timely processing of industry applications and delivery of services from the central ministries, an Act, imposing statutory obligation on all public authorities for time-bound delivery of services and redressal of grievances, could be passed, with provision of deemed approval beyond the prescribed timeline, CII suggested.

India's coal import rises two per cent to 182 MT in April-November period

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India's coal import rose by two per cent to 182.02 million tonnes (MT) in the April-November period of the current fiscal year. The country's coal import was at 178.17 MT in the year-ago period, according to data compiled by business-to-business e-commerce company mjunction services Ltd. However, the country's coal import dropped to 19.57 MT in the month of November, over 22.30 MT in the corresponding month of the previous fiscal. "There was a drop in volumes, which was in line with market expectation. Ample availability in the domestic market reduced import demand from consuming sectors such as sponge iron and steel. Also, the



comfortable stock position at power plants resulted in muted demand for imports," mjunction MD and CEO Vinaya Varma said. This trend is likely to continue in the coming months, he said. During April-November 2024, non-coking coal import was at 117.73 MT, lower than 118 MT imported during the same period last year. Coking coal import was at 36.93 MT during April-November period, down against 37.97 MT recorded in the year-ago

period. The government had earlier stressed on augmenting coal production and reducing the imports of dry-fuel. As per the present import policy, coal can be freely imported by the consumers themselves considering their needs, based on their commercial prudence. Coking Coal is being imported by Steel Authority of India Ltd (SAIL) and other steel manufacturing units mainly to bridge the gap between the requirement and indigenous availability and to improve the quality. Coal-based power plants, cement plants, captive power plants, sponge iron plants, industrial consumers and coal traders are importing non-coking coal. Coke is imported mainly by pig-iron manufacturers and iron and steel sector consumers using mini-blast furnaces.

Amnesty Scheme for customs may be announced in Budget 2025-26 to reduce litigation: Experts

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

In a bid to reduce litigation, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman in the upcoming Budget may announce an Amnesty Scheme for customs to foster ease of doing business. "The main asks of the industry would certainly be aligned with the objectives of the government and one objective of the government has been litigation reduction. On that front, having an amnesty scheme for customs especially covering pre-GST legacy taxes like additional duty, special additional duty has been one of the asks of the industry," Price Waterhouse & Co LLP managing director Anurag Sehgal said. The government had in the past announced amnesty schemes for excise and



service tax and even for the income tax but not for customs. There are estimates that over 40,000 cases were pending in various courts and tribunals pertaining to customs duty alone. Another consultancy firm EY India said customs litigations are pending at various forums for a very long time and the same require time and effort to be spent by both the taxpayer and the

government in resolving them. EY India also suggested that a one-time dispute/litigation resolution/settlement scheme should be introduced under the Customs Law to settle and resolve pending disputes. According to Deloitte India partner Mahesh Jaising, the government should end long-drawn litigation to resolve long-standing disputes, alleviate the burdened

judicial pipeline and upgrade the law to keep pace with technological advancements and international best practices. "An amnesty scheme, along the lines of Sab ka Vishwas, will be a welcome decision. The industry has been waiting for such a scheme for years to address pending litigation matters under customs. This will especially help small businesses avoid past disputes and move ahead with a clean slate," Jaising said. Another important wishlist of the industry on customs would be rate rationalization to support the Make in India initiative, Sehgal said. "You have PLI, Phased Manufacturing Programme coming up in many sectors. So rate rationalization would help promote investment in India," he said.

Adani announces ₹65,000 Crore investment in energy, cement

Raipur, Jan 12 (PTI)

Industrialist Gautam Adani on Sunday called on Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Vishnu Deo Sai and announced an investment of Rs 65,000 crore in the Adani Group's energy and cement projects in the state, officials said. Adani met Sai at the latter's official residence in Chhattisgarh capital Raipur, a statement issued by the state's public relations department said. During the meeting, Adani announced a planned investment of Rs 60,000 crore to expand the group's power plants in Raipur, Korba and Raigarh in the state.

Inflation data, Q3 earnings, FII trading key factors to drive markets this week: Analysts

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Investors will take cues from the December quarter corporate earnings, with blue-chips like Infosys, Reliance Industries scheduled to report their results this week, in addition, inflation data and trading activity of foreign investors will also be crucial in dictating market trends, analysts said. Movement of crude oil prices and the dollar index will also be tracked by investors. The strengthening of the US dollar, along with rising US bond yields, impacted investors' confidence last week. "The Indian equity markets are poised for a volatile week ahead, as investors eagerly await the release of Q3 earnings reports from major companies. "Prominent names such as Infosys, Reliance Industries, HCL Technologies, HDFC AMC, HDFC Life Insurance Company, and Axis Bank are set to unveil their financial performance, which is likely to



significantly impact market sentiment," Pravesh Gour, Senior Technical Analyst, Swastika Investment Ltd, said. Adding to the market's dynamic, a tug-of-war between Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) and Domestic Institutional Investors (DIIs) continues to unfold, he said. "India's CPI release on Monday will be a key factor," Siddhartha Khemka, Head - Research, Health Management, Motilal Oswal Financial Services Ltd, said. WPI inflation data is

scheduled to be announced on Tuesday. Last week, the BSE benchmark slumped 1,844.2 points or 2.32 per cent, and the Nifty dropped 573.25 points or 2.38 per cent. "The sharp decline in the market is attributed to multiple factors, including sustained foreign fund outflows, subdued expectations for Q3 earnings, continued weakness in the Indian rupee against the US dollar, and rising US 10-year bond yields. "Additionally, a strengthening

dollar index and a sharp rebound in crude oil prices, raising inflationary concerns, further dampened investor sentiment," Puneet Singhania, Director at Master Trust Group, said. India's industrial production (IIP) growth accelerated to a six-month high of 5.2 per cent year-on-year in November 2024, riding on the increased festive demand and pick up in the manufacturing sector, according to the official data released on Friday. "Looking ahead, corporate earnings will be in the spotlight, with major companies, including IT giants, releasing their Q3 results. Macroeconomic data, such as India's inflation rate will also play a crucial role in shaping market direction. On the global front, updates on the US economy, particularly labour market data and inflation trends, may impact FII flows. A spike in crude oil prices will add inflationary pressure.

Falling rupee puts pressure on Air India's cost structure, says company official

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Falling rupee puts pressure on Air India's cost structure and profitability but the airline has some natural hedge as it can charge more for international flights where tickets are priced in foreign currencies, according to a senior company official. In recent weeks, Indian rupee has been on a decline and touched a record low of 86.04 against the US dollar on January 10. A weak rupee results in higher operational expenses for airlines as most of their costs are in dollars. Air India's Chief Commercial Officer Nipun Aggarwal said the declining rupee definitely poses a challenge to the industry and to Air India, and the situation has to be dealt with by improving productivity and taking other initiatives. "Falling rupee does put pressure on our cost structure because most of our cost is dollarised barring the manpower cost which is in local currency. The more the rupee falls, the more the pressure it puts on our cost structure, on our profitability," he said at a media briefing this week. Air India Group operates 1,168 daily



flights, including 313 services to international destinations. Of those overseas flights, 244 are short haul and 69 are long haul. The group comprises Air India and low-cost carrier Air India Express. Last year, Air India merged Vistara with itself and AIX Connect was integrated with Air India Express. According to Aggarwal, the airline has some natural hedge as it flies international lot more than other airlines. "So, we are able to charge in international currency for international flights and we are able to pass on some of that impact to our customers because we are pricing in dollars or whatever currency is there," he

said. At the same time, Aggarwal noted that not everything is priced in overseas currencies. "Even on international flights, we do have some impact but some of those are mitigated with the hedge we have but it impacts our profitability and puts pressure on the fares in the market". Increasing airfares is not easy as the industry is very competitive and the demand is sensitive to pricing, Aggarwal said, seeking to highlight the low profitability of the airline industry. "We do have to fill the aircraft and if we had so much pricing power, the airline industry's profitability would not be what it is today. This makes it very challenging for us to operate... It (falling rupee) will put pressure on our cost structure, impact profitability and demand," he noted. In December, the International Air Transport Association (IATA) projected global airline industry's net profit at USD 36.6 billion this year for a 3.6 per cent net profit margin. "Average net profit per passenger is expected to be USD 7 (below the USD 7.9 high in 2023 but an improvement from USD 6.4 in 2024)," IATA said in its financial outlook for 2025.

Government partially restores gas supply to IGL, Adani-Total

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The government has increased cheaper gas supply to city gas retailers IGL, Adani-Total, and Mahanagar Gas, restoring a major part of the allocation that was cut in 2024, according to regulatory filings by the companies. The government, in October and November last year, had cut supplies of the so-called APM Gas (low-priced natural gas coming from old fields such as Mumbai High and Bassein fields in the Bay of Bengal) to city gas retailers by as much as 40 per cent in view of limited output. This led to city gas retailers hiking CNG prices by Rs 2-3 per kg and planning more increases as they replaced lost volumes with higher-priced input fuel. The price hike made CNG less attractive when compared to alternate fuels like diesel.

Following this, the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas in a December 31, 2024 order rejigged some allocations of gas produced from below ground and undersea. The ministry ordered a cut in gas supplied to state-owned GAIL and Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) for production of LPG and diverting those volumes to city gas entities. Out of a total 2.55 million standard cubic meters per day of gas usage for LPG production, 1.27 mmscmd (0.637 mmscmd each for GAIL and ONGC) was ordered to be diverted for consumption in the CNG/piped cooking gas segment in January-March quarter, according to the order reviewed by PTI. City gas retailers in regulatory filings said increased volumes of APM gas will start from January 16. "As per the communication



received from GAIL (India) Ltd (the nodal agency for domestic gas allocation), this is to inform that the domestic gas allocations to IGL have been revised upwards by 31 per cent with effect from January 16, 2025, increasing the share of domestic gas in the CNG segment from 37 per cent to 51 per cent," Indraprastha Gas Ltd (IGL) said in a filing.

The company has also tied-up additional volumes of imported LNG at "competitive prices", with one of the major suppliers (around 1.0 million standard cubic meters per day). "The above revision and signing of additional volumes shall have a positive impact on profitability of the company," IGL, which retails CNG to automobiles and piped

cooking gas to households in the national capital and adjoining cities, said. Adani-Total Gas Ltd, the CNG retailers in cities in Gujarat and elsewhere, said "the allocation of APM gas has been revised upwards by 20 per cent effective January 16, 2025." "This upward revision will have a positive impact on the company and will help in stabilizing the retail prices to end-consumers," it added. Mahanagar Gas Ltd, the firm that retails CNG in Mumbai and other cities, said its allocation of the domestic gas at APM price has been increased by 26 per cent, thus increasing allocation for CNG from 37 per cent to 51 per cent. GAIL and ONGC will have to use either higher-priced gas produced from new fields or rely on imported liquefied natural gas (LNG) to volumes lost to city gas retailers.

The LPG they make is supplied to fuel retailers like Indian Oil Corporation (IOC) for sale to households as domestic cooking gas LPG in cylinders. The government subsidises domestic cooking gas LPG and hence the higher cost of production is likely to be borne by it. In two allocation cuts, the government had reduced supplies of domestically produced gas to city gas retailers by 5-5.25 mmscmd. Half of this is being immediately restored and more will come once the gas from Ramnadh field and new wells flows. Natural gas pumped from below the ground and from under the seabed from sites ranging from the Arabian Sea to the Bay of Bengal within India is the raw material that is turned into CNG for sale to automobiles and piped cooking gas to households.

INBRIEF

SWACHHATA DIDIS EARNED MORE THAN ONE CRORE 37 LAKH RUPEES BY SELLING GARBAGE

RAIGARH: Municipal Corporation Raigarh is continuously progressing from waste to wealth. Swachhata didis have earned more than one crore 37 lakh rupees so far by selling dry garbage collected from door-to-door garbage collection, which includes sacks, plastic items, tin-iron items, bottles, newspapers, i.e. garbage coming out of houses. Apart from the monthly salary, Swachhata didis are getting additional profit of two to ten thousand rupees by selling dry garbage collected from door-to-door.

USA DELEGATES VISITED GURU NANAK DEV UNIVERSITY

AMRITSAR: Guru Nanak Dev University hosted a distinguished delegation from the United States, in a significant step towards fostering international academic collaboration. The delegation represents various Historically significant Colleges, Universities, and Minority-Serving Institutions from the U.S., focusing on urban sustainability issues in India. GNDU Vice-Chancellor Prof. Dr. Karmjeet Singh shared his views regarding Amritsar as a temporal seat of Sikhism and Sikhism as a religion emphasizing peace, Coexistence, Sustainability by giving due importance to environment.



Developed Jammu Kashmir for Developed India



Inauguration of 6.4 km long **Sonamarg Tunnel** with an investment of over ₹2700 crore

BENEFITS OF THE PROJECTS



All weather connectivity between Srinagar and Ladakh, simplifying life for millions of people



1.5 hour journey can now be completed in just 40 minutes, saving time, fuel and logistics costs



Promoting all season tourism with safe connectivity to Sonamarg and other destinations and opening up opportunities for local businesses like hotels, transportation and restaurants



Enhanced market access for local agricultural produce, like saffron, apples, walnuts, cherries, Kahwa, etc



Improved availability of essential items and access to better healthcare services for local residents



Improved connectivity will attract investment, create new employment opportunities and stimulate economic growth



Seamless access to border areas in all seasons, thereby enhancing national security



Along with the 6.4 km long tunnel, the project includes a 6 km long approach road and a 4 km long crawler lane dedicated to the movement of heavy vehicles

by

Narendra Modi
Prime Minister

Monday, Date: 13th January, 2025 | Time: 11:30 AM
Venue: Village Shutkadi, (Sonamarg), Distt. Ganderbal, Jammu & Kashmir

in the august presence of

Nitin Gadkari

Union Minister for Road Transport & Highways

Dr. Jitendra Singh

Union Minister of State
(Independent Charge)

Ajay Tamta

Union MoS for Road
Transport & Highways

Harsh Malhotra

Union MoS for Corporate Affairs and
Road Transport & Highways

Manoj Sinha

Lt. Governor,
U.T. of Jammu & Kashmir

Omar Abdullah

Chief Minister,
U.T. of Jammu & Kashmir

Surinder Kumar Choudhary

Dy. Chief Minister,
U.T. of Jammu & Kashmir

Sunil Sharma

Leader of Opposition,
J&K Legislative Assembly

Aga Syed Ruhullah Mehdi

Member of Parliament, Lok Sabha, Srinagar

Gulam Ali

Member of Parliament, Rajya Sabha